

# **Understanding experiences of minority beliefs on online communication platforms**

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# Ofcom Foreword

This report is a stand-alone research project into the attitudes and experiences of those who hold minority beliefs in relation to health protection, climate change and the Russia/Ukraine conflict. The term ‘minority beliefs’ refers to views not widely held by the UK general population, and includes a wider category of beliefs than other more specific terms such as disinformation or misinformation. The research provides a detailed understanding of the ways in which these minority beliefs develop, spread and impact those who hold them, and demonstrates the importance of underlying knowledge and skills, as well as behaviour, in media literacy.

We commissioned this research both to increase our own understanding of how and why people develop minority beliefs in an online context, and to share these insights more widely. We also wanted to explore the relationship between types of media literacy and the formation of such beliefs. We took a participant-led approach to the exploration of media literacy, and discussed skills, knowledge, and behaviours as they arose during the research.

In addition to our statutory duties in the Communications Act 2003 to promote and research media literacy, we are about to become the regulator for online safety in the UK. Under this new regime, Ofcom will be required to establish an advisory committee on disinformation and misinformation, which advise Ofcom about how providers should deal with disinformation and misinformation, and about the exercise of Ofcom’s new transparency and media literacy powers in relation to such content. In addition, our additional media literacy duties under the Online Safety Act will include references to helping the public understand the nature and impact of disinformation and misinformation.

*Some of the quotes and views discussed in this report might be considered offensive by some. Any views shared in the report are the views of the participants and not those of Ipsos or Ofcom. Where views expressed by participants are counter to reliable evidence on a particular issue, this is noted in the footnotes.*

# Summary of findings

Ofcom commissioned Ipsos to explore the role of online communications platforms in how minority beliefs are formed, maintained and communicated, and the role played by aspects of media literacy.<sup>1</sup> This project involved 35 face-to-face interviews with people who hold minority beliefs on one or more of three key topics: climate change, the Russia/Ukraine conflict and health protection. The insights from the project are summarised below.

'Minority beliefs' refers to the views on important topics (in this report, about the three topics listed above) that are not widely held by the UK general population.<sup>2</sup> This term is inclusive of a wider category of minority beliefs than other more specific terms such as mis/disinformation and was chosen to enable potential participants to feel more comfortable about identifying their own beliefs, rather than using other terms related to these issues such as mis/disinformation. As the phrase does not make a judgment about people's beliefs it enabled potential participants to identify themselves as someone with a minority belief in a way that other terms may not have.

There was a great deal of difference across the participants in this study. This was reflected in a range of ways, including the degree to which their beliefs were more central or peripheral to their lives, the way participants engaged with online communications platforms and traditional news sources, and the perceived importance and impacts that their minority beliefs had on their lives. The participants represented a broad spectrum of attitudes, motivations and behaviours, and there were few, if any, distinguishing differences by demographic characteristics.

**Note: Some of the quotes in this report represent views that some might consider offensive. Any views shared in this report are the views of participants and not of Ipsos or Ofcom.**

## Self-perception

Participants in this research were aware of how the wider population may perceive them due to their minority beliefs and many stressed that they did not consider their views to be extreme. They referred to needing personal resilience to hold views that were counter to the beliefs of much of the population. Some considered they had a marginalised status which was a source of concern and even anger, translating into a sense of being an underdog in the debate.

While some participants were emphatic in their views, it was much more common for participants to not consider their views to be particularly clear or fixed. Often participants had a questioning stance that challenged narratives they felt to be mainstream but did not necessarily involve them taking a firm position on an alternative view.

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<sup>1</sup> Online communication platforms' is the broad term we will use to cover platforms that can be used: to send messages, chat or make voice or video calls; watch/upload content on video-sharing platforms; for social media; for live streaming or to view/share content

<sup>2</sup> For this project, we used two approaches to screen participants for minority beliefs: firstly we asked them to self-identify how similar their beliefs on each of the three topics are to other people in the UK; secondly we asked them to indicate their agreement with a statement about the topic that is deemed factual based on reputable sources such as the NHS, IPCC and UN. For more detail, please see 'Sample and recruitment'.

## Journey of minority beliefs

### Triggers and motivation

We found that there was no single way in which participants were introduced to and became more involved with minority beliefs. Many participants reported that their first introduction to minority beliefs was not through online communications platforms. Instead, they were often introduced to these beliefs through people they knew in face-to-face situations. We found that online communications platforms were often used by participants to gather further information following their introduction to these beliefs. The height of the COVID-19 pandemic was often a backdrop to people starting or developing their minority beliefs.

### Sharing strategies

Participants made subtle and nuanced decisions concerning content, audience and potential impacts when considering how and with whom they shared information. Much of the time, participants only shared information on online communications platforms to friends and family, rather than with a wider public audience. This was both due to concerns about potential backlash and concerns about recipients' possible sensitivities. Humour was often mentioned as a factor that would increase likelihood to share content.

### Impacts

Some negative impacts after sharing minority beliefs were apparent in the form of relationship challenges with spouses and partners but also wider family, friends and workplace colleagues. However, participants mentioned these less frequently and viewed them as less important than the perceived benefit of a sense of empowerment and insight gained from sharing the belief.

## Factors contributing to use of online communications platforms

There was a desire among participants to discuss and debate the minority beliefs they held on online communications platforms, but also a sense they wanted to take an active role in the way they learned about and understood the world. This often involved seeking out the opportunity to connect with other people, whether online or in the 'real world'. Participants often referenced online communications platforms as part of the process of exploring and developing their understanding of minority beliefs.

A common perspective among participants was that traditional media sources do not properly reflect a range of views on a variety of subjects and are selective and biased in the evidence they present on a given issue.<sup>3</sup> This was a common justification for using online communications platforms to counter these perceived shortcomings of traditional media and, in the process, explore minority beliefs.

Participants reflected on the way that the infrastructure of online communications platforms shaped their interactions. One of the themes identified was that participants moved from public online

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<sup>3</sup> This report uses the terms traditional media sources and traditional news sources to refer to established print, broadcast and digital media and news outlets, which are primarily those mass media institutions that dominated prior to the information age (e.g. BBC, Sky, newspapers, commercial radio etc). There is not a universally agreed definition of traditional media sources and these are sometimes also known as legacy media, [old media](#) or mainstream media, as opposed to 'new media' which tends to include social media platforms, among other technologies. Where participants' quotes mention 'mainstream media' or other terminology, their choice of word/s has been retained.

communications platforms to private messaging groups: they considered that the former increasingly closed discussion around their minority beliefs.

Participants also talked about the role of online communications platforms in discussing their minority beliefs: they were sometimes concerned that their posts might prompt negative reactions and, as such, they tended to be cautious about posting.

## Media literacy

A key focus of the research was the way that participants assessed and explored information, and how this influenced conclusions about their minority beliefs. Our intention was not to assess our participants on their degree of media literacy, but to explore how and whether they used media literacy skills. Though we did not ask about any one skill in particular, participants described using one or more the following approaches to assess and explore information, which indicated elements of critical understanding in some areas:

- **Media navigation:** Participants often appeared to be slightly guarded and cautious about the complexity of the information environment and stressed the importance of managing it carefully.
- **Critical of evidence:** Several participants questioned the basis on which evidence was considered valid. This included challenging orthodox positions, arguing that evidence is often not quite as straightforward as is claimed.
- **Critical analysis:** Participants often took care to assess information based on factors, including which platform or site they had found it on, who was communicating it, and the tone and style of the content.

However, application of critical analysis was not always deployed consistently as participants also used habits or 'mental shortcuts' that could undermine these skills when it came to the content they saw on online communications platforms:

- **Availability or absence of alternative evidence:** Participants considered the accuracy of different types of evidence to support a conclusion. For example, eye-witness testimony and video footage that appears on online communications platforms was often considered to offer telling insights that were not so readily available elsewhere.
- **Crowd-sourcing:** Participants described relying on other users (such as examining comments) to help assess the validity of information they saw online.

# Introduction

## Background

This research was commissioned by Ofcom to better understand people's experiences of minority beliefs in the UK. This included exploring the role of online communications platforms in the adoption, maintenance and sharing of these beliefs, and the relationship between these beliefs and the extent of participants' media literacy. Ofcom defines media literacy as "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts".<sup>4</sup>

'Minority beliefs' and 'minority views' are used interchangeably through this report. The terms refer to views on important topics that are not widely held by the UK general population. These beliefs are sometimes labelled using terms like misinformation, disinformation or conspiracy theories. We have chosen not to use these terms as the purpose of this research is not to arbitrate the truth or make a judgement on intent. Furthermore, these terms can be used in a negative, weaponised way – or alternatively as a 'label of pride' – and therefore we have avoided using them in our reporting or in any part of the research process. It is often difficult to get individuals to participate openly and fully in this kind of research when it is labelled as "disinformation" or "conspiracy theory" research, and this is another reason why we have avoided using these terms during this work. The sample and recruitment section (below) explains further how minority beliefs were identified and how participants were recruited.

For the purposes of this research, we have examined minority beliefs relating to three main topics that are of interest to UK government and policy makers: climate change, health protection and the Russia/Ukraine conflict.

The report explores the ways that people form and share minority beliefs on the specified topics, the role of online communications platforms in participants' exploration of these topics, the strategies they use to assess evidence related to the topics, and the potential impact that holding minority beliefs can have.

We have included quotes and case studies in this report to bring the stories of individual participants to life. In these cases, identifiable information has been removed and pseudonyms used to protect participants' identity.

**Some of the quotes and case studies in this report represent views that some might consider offensive. Any views shared in this report are the views of participants and not of Ipsos or Ofcom. Where the report refers to online communication platforms by name, this is because these were direct examples given by participants about their own experiences and opinions. Nothing in the report referring to any specific online communication platform should be taken as reflecting Ipsos or Ofcom's views. Where the report names individuals in case studies, these are not the names of individuals involved in the research but false names to protect their identity.**

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<sup>4</sup> Further, [Ofcom advocates that being media literate is beneficial](#) and important to enabling citizens to have healthy lives, to enabling them to connect positively with others, to access information and critically form and express opinions.

## Summary of objectives

Ofcom's goal in commissioning this research was to explore attitudes to, and experiences of, people who hold minority views in the UK. The specific objectives were to:

- Explore whether/how people engage with online content related to their beliefs
- Explore the reasons for this behaviour, and how this might differ across contexts and groups
- Explore the range of behaviours that might take place outside of a social media setting
- Compare and contrast the attitudes and experiences of different people / groups
- Explore the impact of holding minority beliefs on individuals and groups
- Explore how media literacy and the holding of minority beliefs intersect

## Methodology

### Approach

We undertook 35 90-minute face-to-face in-depth interviews across the UK through which we explored the three topics of climate change, the Russia/Ukraine conflict and health protection. This research used topical issues as a vehicle to explore the practical role that online communications platforms have in the way minority beliefs are formed, shared and maintained in the UK.

In advance of the interview, participants also completed a 7-day diary of the information they saw both generally, and on two of the three topics identified. These diaries were completed either using the app *Indeemo* or through a paper version, depending on participant preference.<sup>5</sup> *Indeemo* allowed participants to upload text, photos and videos about their online communications platform use and screen records to help provide insights into behaviours pre-interview, without relying on participant recall concerning their online behaviour.

Fieldwork took place between Thursday 2 March and Wednesday 5 April 2023.

### Sample and recruitment

In response to the sensitive nature of the topics covered, a careful recruitment and sampling approach was developed. This combined an explicit measure of self-identification as having a minority belief alongside asking respondents the extent to which they agreed with a statement about each topic. These statements were agreed between Ipsos and Ofcom through consideration of reputable sources such as the National Health Service, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the United Nations.

A recruitment screener was designed to ensure we captured participants who held a minority belief on at least one of the topics and had seen user-generated content in relation to the topic(s).

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<sup>5</sup> *Indeemo*: <https://indeemo.com/>. Although this information was used for analysis purposes (and to support the interview itself), the outputs are not included in this report to ensure no identifiable information about participants is included.

Our sample was developed to ensure we had representation of specific subgroups of interest: older people, people who spoke English as a second language, those with low confidence in using the internet, and those with low trust in government. This was because Ofcom had identified that these groups may be more vulnerable to minority beliefs but have not been well represented in past research on this topic.<sup>6</sup> Although quotas were included to ensure representation of people that did not trust government sources of information and were not confident as internet users, the actual number of those with low confidence in using the internet was lower than other groups in the sample. The sample was designed to represent a spread of key demographic characteristics: geographic distribution, gender, age, social grade and ethnicity.

To identify those with a minority belief on any of the three subjects, potential respondents were firstly asked to self-identify as having different views to the majority on the topic. This was done using a four-point scale ranging from 'broadly similar to most people' to 'totally different to most people' (and 'don't know'). Those who self-identified their views as being totally or very different to most people in the UK were considered to hold a minority belief.

Second, the screener asked potential participants to rate the extent to which they believed a statement relating to each topic to be true, using a 10-point scale (where 10 meant they believed the statement was completely true, and 0 meant they believed it was completely untrue). The statements included in the screener were based on information from fact-checking sites and other reliable sources of information. The statement for each topic was:

- **Health protection:** Vaccinations are generally safe.<sup>7</sup>
- **Climate change:** Human activity is contributing to climate change, which, if it continues at the current rate, is likely to be disastrous for human civilisation.<sup>8</sup>
- **Russia/Ukraine conflict:** Ukraine is a sovereign state which is being invaded.<sup>9</sup>

Those scoring 0-4 on the scale were included in the sample. We also asked participants for a brief account of their views, allowing for further confirmation that their views reflected what might be considered minority beliefs concerning the three themes.

All participants met the screener criteria for at least one of these topics, which are specified where participants are quoted in this report. In some cases, participants passed the screener criteria for minority beliefs on more than one topic. In these cases, we have specified more than one topic in their quote attribution. In other cases, participants may not have passed our screener for a specific topic but still discussed possible minority beliefs on that topic in their interview.

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<sup>6</sup> Ofcom Media Literacy Research, Ofcom Media Literacy Research, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/publications>

<sup>7</sup> NHS, 'Why vaccination is safe and important', <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/why-vaccination-is-safe-and-important/>

<sup>8</sup> IPCC, 'Climate change: a threat to human wellbeing and health of the planet. Taking action now can secure our future' <https://www.ipcc.ch/2022/02/28/pr-wgii-ar6/>

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, 'UN General Assembly calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine' <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133847>

To ensure that people were engaging with information concerning their minority beliefs via online communications platforms (rather than from other sources such as traditional news sources) and were coming across minority beliefs about the topic, respondents were also screened to ensure:

- They had seen people online expressing views like their own on the topic on which they had minority beliefs;
- They read information, media or watched news or news discussions online on websites, through social media or WhatsApp at least a few times a month;
- They were not checking sources all or most of the time or using fact-checking sites.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this report, we have referenced differences between subgroups and topics where possible. Where there were no notable differences, this has not been mentioned.

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<sup>10</sup> As we were interested in interviewing people who would see and believe unreliable information, we deliberately screened out those who always fact-check information and use fact-checking sites.

## Section 1: Self perception

Social identity, or the way people think they are viewed by others, is an important consideration for this research. It not only shapes behaviour but also has implications for the way that people engage with one another. Participants had often thought about the way that their minority beliefs contributed to how they were seen by others.

### Taking a questioning position

While some participants were clear about their beliefs relating to the topics we were asking about, many suggested that their views were in flux and reported questioning their beliefs, both independently and in social situations. They often sought to consider challenges, dispute facts, and explore issues rather than only promoting their determined position on the topic.

*I don't think it makes sense and I'm going to stick to that. I'm always up for debate and, ... I'm not stubborn in that sense but, you know, you're going to need facts to change it, something to actually convince me but Covid didn't have that. **Male, Minority belief: Health protection, 24***

*I'm not sure that I've really got a very, very clear opinion. I'm just saying that this is not as clear cut as it might seem. One country has invaded another. This goes back a long way and there's a lot of politics involved. **Male, 57, Minority belief: Russia/Ukraine conflict***

*I'll be honest, I don't know if I'm right in my opinion, but I respect other people's opinion and, you know, when I comment or when I discuss it with my family, we're not about saying, 'You're right, you're wrong.' We share the opinion. We sometimes don't have the same opinion. **Female, 42, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict & Health protection***

### Rejection of an extreme identity

Many participants were aware of the way their views meant they were perceived differently. There was a concern about being considered extreme as, for many participants, the location of the centre ground was contested, and they did not consider themselves as the outliers. They wanted to present themselves as open to debate and hearing multiple discussions:

*I'm trying to take this information which was really extreme and then I had other people and the news and the media feeding me this. And I just wanted to, and I kept saying to my husband, 'I just want an open discussion on TV or somewhere to voice my concerns without feeling that I'm this terrible person and I think I'm going to die.' But I didn't think I was going to die with that, I just had reservations for whatever reasons. **Female, 51, Minority belief: Health protection***

## Resistant to pressure

Many participants reported that they had experienced pressure to change their beliefs and associated behaviours:

*Some of my brothers and sisters got vaccinated and they all regret it. We slag them for it, like, it's a bit of banter but they've done it because of the pressure, ... which we thought was pretty pathetic. It's, like, 'Just do it if you think you need it. Don't do it because of pressure and people just dictate, "You should do this," for yourself.'* **Male, 24, Minority belief: Health protection**

Participants typically described themselves as quite resilient, maintaining their questioning stance even when lots of people around them disagreed.

## Vulnerability

Some participants acknowledged that they were potentially vulnerable to a slippery slope of more extreme views. This concern reflects how participants often did not see themselves as holding extreme views and, as a result, they were willing to consider engagement to have a more rounded understanding of issues.

*I've got this, kind of, leaning towards that, not sympathy towards Russia, but that empathy slightly towards what they were trying to achieve, if I went down it and got in a bubble, I'd be posting maybe, or in a group. You know, I think it's too easy to go down that route and get in a group and, before you know it, you're in a little bubble and spouting rubbish amongst people.* **Male, 51, Minority belief: Russia/Ukraine conflict**

## Intellectual intuition

Several participants referenced a sense of personal intuition for whether information could be relied on. It was not uncommon for many people to rely on their 'gut instinct' about whether something 'feels' right:

*I try and use common sense. A lot of times, I put my hands up and like, I don't know if that's right or wrong and then sometimes I'll just read something and think, that just doesn't sound right to me, you know? I'm not saying it's not right but I would just be sceptical. Like, I wouldn't be certain thinking that's right, you know?* **Male, 24, Minority belief: Health protection**

Gut instinct is not something particular to our participants: there is a large body of evidence that suggests we all use this when we engage with the world. However, the prevalence of this among participants was notable.

For example, the following case study shows a participant who says his interest in research and aptitude for critical assessment means that he trusts his intuition when it comes to assessing the reliability of information he sees.



## Case study: Greg

**Background:** 36-year-old man. Very confident internet user with not much trust in government sources of information.

**Minority beliefs:** Health protection

**Origins of minority beliefs:** Greg's medical history is his main reason for being sceptical about health protection measures, including vaccines. He doesn't have a firm view against all vaccines, but he is particularly sceptical of the COVID-19 vaccine. He describes a pivotal moment when a friend who was a doctor told him he didn't need to have vaccines.

**Role of online communications platforms in their views:** Although his views on health protection didn't start with online communications platforms, these have played a role in providing Greg with information that supports his views. He is particularly interested in content that has apparent scientific or academic credentials, or documentaries that appear professional.

**How information is shared:** Greg tends not to share things on social media or elsewhere as he doesn't want to be seen to be forcing things on people or get into arguments. But he does occasionally share things if it relates to potential danger or if it was something factual.

**How they assess reliability of information:** Greg says that he doesn't scrutinise evidence or credentials as he is able instead to rely on his own intuition about whether something is factual because of his academic background.

**Impact of minority beliefs:** His minority beliefs on health protection may have contributed to the breakdown of a previous relationship. He felt his partner was pressuring him to get the vaccine.

*"I would sort of make my own mind up as to whether it's reliable. [...] I don't scrutinise people too much. You go on the superficial value of what's presented to you and how it's presented".*

## Section 2: Journey of minority beliefs

In this section, we map out the way people began and navigated their interaction with minority beliefs. This covers the initial triggers that initiate the engagement, an exploration of how information spreads and the resulting impact that this has.

### 2.1 Triggers and motivation

It was not always possible for participants to identify when or how they first engaged with their minority beliefs. For some, their interests and orientation to the topic appears not to have had a specific starting point, while others were able to point to particular events or periods in their life when they started to engage with minority beliefs.

#### Introduction through people they knew

Across all three topics, participants were often introduced to minority beliefs through people that they knew, such as through friends, family and colleagues:

*I actually learnt most of my points about it or most of the stuff about it during debates with other people...it was face-to-face. **Male, 24, Minority belief: Health protection***

*I tend to reach out to friends of mine who I know do a lot of research and I'll just send them a message, 'Bro, what's your opinion on this?' Because I know that they're sitting there and they're very balanced. **Male, 40, Minority belief: Health protection***

#### Life events

Some participants reported difficult experiences that appeared to have either triggered or reinforced their investment and engagement in minority beliefs. This was frequently related to a health concern that they felt had not been properly resolved by the healthcare they had received, motivating them to search for alternative solutions:

*I had Crohn's disease, if you know Crohn's disease, I had some immune disorders some time ago, but I have my own path just to figure out how to change my lifestyle. [...] When I went to the doctors, they told me it was chronic. You can live like that and die like that. You can't come out from it. And I didn't believe that actually. **Male, 43, Minority belief: Health protection***

#### Role of the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants often referred to the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic as a time of feeling personal fear and anxiety and cited it as the point they began to explore, or enhanced their exploration of, minority beliefs online:

*Especially during COVID. I had a fear, like most people, and I watched the stats daily, and the death tolls and there was a real sense of fear at the time. And I did go down that rabbit hole of quite obsessive, not obsessive, but reading it and the fear was there. So I suppose I increased it then. **Female, 51, Minority belief: Health protection***

The COVID-19 pandemic forms the backdrop to the way many participants first engaged with minority beliefs, including topics beyond health protection. For some of the older participants we spoke to, feeling lonely and isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have sparked their exploration of online communications platforms. Anxiety and concern related to the decision about whether they should get vaccinated also led to participants talking to others and exploring the topic online. They were seeking support and wanting to feel more informed about ways to mitigate their concerns related to COVID-19, leading them to explore a range of views that were often counter to the guidance offered by public health bodies:

*It all...started off over COVID because there was the whole debate, 'Should I get vaccinated? Should I not get vaccinated?' Then this friend, who was completely anti-vax, started saying, 'I'm worried about you. Don't get vaccinated. Here are some sites about it. Here's some evidence about it. You know it's causing cancers.' From that it kind of grew. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change**<sup>11</sup>*

In some cases, the COVID-19 pandemic was an initial starting point to discovering information online that supports minority beliefs on a range of other topics such as climate change and the Russia/Ukraine conflict.

## Online communication platforms

Among our participants, it was not common for the first introduction to minority beliefs to occur via online communications platforms outside of pre-existing personal networks. We found that these platforms typically offered a means for participants to gather information after they were introduced to these beliefs, rather than acting as a starting point. However, it is worth reiterating that participants were not always able to pinpoint when they first became aware of their beliefs. It is possible that personal introductions, life events and the COVID-19 pandemic may have been more salient and therefore more memorable than being exposed via online communications platforms. For more detail on factors contributing to the use of online communication platforms, please see Section 3.

## 2.2 Sharing strategies

We found that the way participants shared their beliefs was complex and nuanced. People often carefully considered how to share information, and who to share it with. This meant considering whether to share beliefs with others in-person or via online communication platforms, as well as considering when to engage with public or private platforms.

### Deciding who to share with and how to share

Participants often took care regarding who they were communicating their beliefs with, anticipating what might be welcomed or when not to communicate their views. It was not unusual for them to reflect on the

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<sup>11</sup> The minority belief referenced under quotations relates to the minority belief the participant was recruited for. Although the research was designed to consider three topics equally, in practice health protection, and in particular the COVID-19 vaccination, was a dominant topic for a lot of participants.

way their minority beliefs were likely to arouse an unwelcome response from others. As such, some were concerned about how to manage what could be quite a complex and highly charged situation:

*Within my work, I had a client that contacted me. He is quite an anti-vaxxer, but I have to be very careful with what I agree and say with him, because I don't want to get into conversation with him about it. I just keep my opinion to myself, and I go, 'Oh yes, yes, yes.'* **Male, 36, Minority belief: Health protection**

*You have to find the right people to engage with because generally...something that could be deemed as negative, that can put people down because we know mental health is everywhere nowadays, so I try not to send too much.* **Male, 35, Minority belief: Health protection**

## Moving between sharing in-person and via online communications platforms

We found a dynamic two-way relationship between online communications platforms and in-person contact. Our participants often shared information they found on online communications platforms with friends, families or colleagues in-person, but also moved from in-person conversations to finding information online and online communication platforms. This suggests, as with communication about all topics, participants do not experience a strict divide between in-person and digital communication about minority beliefs:

*I like to have that information to hand [from online communications platforms] so I can have a conversation with somebody and ... discuss something a bit more in depth. And get something out of the discussion, draw something out of somebody else ...some of the lads have gone away ...and looked ...and ... they were surprised.* **Male, 56, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict & Health protection**

*I've had several women, friends, family that have told me they've had all the vaccines and it's messed with their periods. ... I did a bit of Googling to see how true could this be. I came across a lot of mums' forums ...where people have had a conversation. And a lot of people came out and said, 'I've had the same problem.'* **Female, 31, Minority belief: Health protection**

Sharing via more public online communication platforms was also often done in a careful way to avoid a negative reaction, either because participants feared a backlash from other users or were wary of sanctions by the platform itself. Several participants talked about preferring to have conversations in-person rather than online because they allowed for a more nuanced and respectful discussion, and reduced the fear that their views might be taken in bad faith.

*I don't really post anything now. Before I didn't post anything on my Instagram because I knew that you'd just have, like, a whole load of people bombarding you.* **Female, 31, Minority belief: Health protection**

*I guess having conversations in person makes a difference because, literally, it's just open. [On online communications platforms I am] having to think about what I've written or who's going to see, who's the audience, whereas if I'm having conversations offline, it's most likely going to be with a friend or family member, who I can just be myself with. ... I can just be my most authentic, and that's it.* **Female, 40, Minority belief: Health protection**

These examples illustrate the way that there is a nuanced set of interactions between people in both offline and online settings.

## From public to private

Several participants noted that information on the topics of interest to them was often not available on public online communications platforms. They often assumed that these had been removed due to the company's moderation policies:

*I have managed to find a few other groups as well on Facebook but they're not quite as easy to find. I think they get shut down. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change***

For some participants this meant that they moved to private messaging apps to locate and engage on the topic in more depth:

*Well, I know I can't find very much on the likes of Facebook. The only time that I really ever see anything is maybe through the likes of Telegram or a friend of mine sharing something, you know, or actually going and physically going into the Internet and searching for it but I couldn't really ever find much on Facebook. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change***

It is also important to remember that information sharing is sometimes done in real life. There were examples of campaigners engaging with the public in person. Participants were also often sharing directly and in-person within their circle of friends and family.

## Humour

Participants frequently mentioned the use of humour and memes to share ideas about their minority beliefs. Often this was a way of bonding with others and seemed to act as encouragement to share on online communications platforms to get a positive response. However, it also provided an accessible way to explore topics that they might otherwise not have engaged with:

*Most of the stuff on Telegram I would read and laugh at it myself but there's some things where you think, hold on a minute, there might be something here. That's why I basically would prefer to use Telegram instead of mainstream media, like Google and different things like that.<sup>12</sup> **Male, 46, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict, Health protection & Climate change***

In some cases, humour provided a stronger impetus for participants to both read or watch information about these topics on online communications platforms, but also share with others due to the feelings of pleasure and camaraderie:

*Some days you see funny stuff and it's, 'Oh, repost, repost,' and I've got people on my feed that are literally, like, 'I can't wait for you to post,' it just brings them up and lifts them up and stuff. **Female, 40, Minority belief: Health protection***

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<sup>12</sup> Here, and in other quotes where participants have used the terms 'mainstream' media or news, the participant's original wording has been retained. Outside of quotes, the report uses the terms traditional media sources or traditional news sources.

## 2.3 Impacts

Establishing the impact of any one belief on certain outcomes is difficult: they will be the result of a wide variety of factors. Nevertheless, in discussion with participants, we were able to identify a range of possible impacts, both negative and positive.

### Personal relationships

Several people mentioned that holding their minority beliefs had created relationship challenges, typically with their spouse but also with their family or friends:

*She's the complete opposite of me. We, sort of, bump heads when it comes to this topic, you know, so, I generally don't speak about it, it's just here for my own. **Male, 46, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict, Health protection & Climate change***

*Me and my mum didn't speak for, like, 6 months because of it, so I just was, yes, everyone's entitled to their opinion. That's literally the line. I was, like, 'Everyone's entitled to their opinion.' **Female, 40, Minority belief: Health protection***

In parallel with relationship challenges, a number also reported on the way that their engagement with minority beliefs had resulted in a new friendship group and sense of community with like-minded people:

*There's other people out there that think the same as me. So that's like been empowering. Some people I know in person, some people in this other world. So it's empowering. **Female, 49, Minority belief: Health protection***

The following case study shows an example of a participant whose minority beliefs on health protection seemed to simultaneously isolate him from some friends, whilst driving a closer connection with a person who shared similar views:



### Case study: Robert

**Background:** 35-year-old man. Very confident internet user with not much trust in government sources of information.

**Minority beliefs:** Health protection

**Origins of minority beliefs:** Robert describes himself as someone who has always liked to do his own research and form his own opinions on topics, ever since being at school. He doesn't like to feel that he is following what other people are doing or doing something only because other people are. This led him to search out alternative information when the COVID-19 pandemic began. But it is not only COVID-19 where he has different views about health protection, he sees and shares information about a range of alternative forms of medicine.

**Role of online communications platforms in their views:** Robert does a lot of searching on YouTube for information about health including COVID-19 in particular. He also receives user-generated content from TikTok and other places via friends who share his views on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or over text messages. Robert describes himself as a visual learner, and therefore prefers video-based content to text-based.

**How information is shared:** Robert enjoys debating and describes himself as a sharer. He does hold back from sharing with some people and in more public platforms as he is conscious that some can perceive his views negatively. As a result, he tends to rely on sharing through more private platforms with friends with similar views. He has some like-minded friends who he will share a lot with. He also makes use of humour and meme content to articulate and share views with others on the topic of vaccines among other things.

**How they assess reliability of information:** There is no single source that Robert deems more reliable than others – the key for him is that it is important to look at a range of different sources. If they all say the same thing then he will feel confident that it's right, otherwise he will make up his own mind.

**Impact of minority beliefs:** Robert's views on vaccinations had an impact on him socially as he found people were leaving him out of social events, he felt it was because he had not had a COVID-19 vaccination. On the other hand, his views seem to have brought him much closer with those friends who share the same opinion as him.

*"[I used YouTube] so I could see different sides of the debate and find more resources. Fair enough it's not the best place to find information but it's nice to see the documentaries on things, people behind all these top people giving us information, so looking at all the for and against arguments, if you like. So it's good to see that side. Sometimes I might not understand things in text so that's where I go to YouTube because I'm more a visual learner."*

## Professional relationships

Some made references to the impact of their minority beliefs on workplace relationships, especially when it came to health protection and the COVID-19 vaccine. Whilst we had no examples of people losing their job because of their views, several talked about feeling under pressure, having difficult conversations at work, or feeling the need to self-censor to avoid negative repercussions:

*I think, at work, there were, like, 1 or 2 occasions where people made it very clear that, you know, they thought I should have had [the COVID vaccine], and who am I to be around them without having it? [...] So yes, I had 1 or 2 sticky situations there. **Female, 40, Minority belief: Health protection***

In some cases, participants described moderating what they shared at work. In others, participants managed to navigate tricky work situations with no clear negative impacts without moderating what they shared.

## Emotional responses

Despite some participants not seeing themselves as extreme in their views, several reported negative emotions resulting from how they believed their minority beliefs positioned them in society. Some participants saw themselves as marginalised because of their beliefs. Regardless of the truth of this assessment, they were often unhappy with their status and there was a sense of anger at being seen this way.

*What they do is, any time that there is ever any news about it, it's always, you know, to make people look like they're crazy, and climate-deniers, rather than have a representative discussion. I mean, even if you ever tune into any of these current affairs programmes about climate change, well, sorry, I ... they never have alternative points of view, any time there's an alternative point of view, it's always, like, 'They're crazy. They're conspiracy theorists and they're crazy.' It's not, like, 'Here's an alternative point of view,' you know, it's always put across like they're a bit crazy. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change***

In contrast, some participants referenced the way that engaging with minority beliefs via online communications platforms gave them a sense of empowerment and a rewarding experience. This included a sense that they were helping others, and online communications platforms were mentioned as being instrumental in facilitating this.

## Societal impacts

Some participants would often share their concerns about vaccination with others, potentially widening the pool of people that are not vaccinated:

*... if I saw some scientific evidence saying that the booster jabs are coming with X, Y, Z side-effects, I would make sure that I would share it with my colleagues, friends, family, who are taking the booster jabs. ... I would only share if I find the information useful myself, and I think that other people could benefit as well. **Male, 38, Minority belief: Health protection***

We did not identify any explicit examples of participants successfully persuading others to avoid vaccines or other health protection measures. However, there were examples of participants mentioning friends or family questioning the impact of vaccines they received, where the participant may have had a role in prompting this:

*70% of the staff in my ward never got it [...] It's a big thing, a lot of us sat and spoke about it. **Female, 34, Minority belief: Health protection***

## Section 3: Factors contributing to use of online communications platforms

The participants in this study often used online communications platforms as a means of exploring or developing their minority beliefs. They used them for various purposes: to actively participate in their own learning about these topics, to interact with others, or to create a form of community. The perception that traditional media sources could not be trusted to report fully or fairly represent legitimate minority beliefs was also a consideration, as online communications platforms were seen to offer a better range of views.

### Desire to be an active participant

Participants frequently mentioned the importance of not being passive when learning about the world and wanted to take control of their own learning. This included using internet searches, talking to other people in their communities (such as friends, family members and colleagues) and making use of online communications platforms:

*I use the Internet as a tool and not necessarily more as a leisure thing, if that makes sense. I guess it's one of those things I don't switch off. I'm quite into, sort of, researching and understanding things and learning things* **Male, 25, Minority beliefs: Health protection & Climate change**

*A lot of my research when COVID happened was all on WhatsApp, Twitter<sup>13</sup>, it was everywhere, it was constant. But WhatsApp was my key zone.* **Male, 40, Minority belief: Health protection**

Across the three different themes, participants tended to be inquisitive and curious with a desire for research, questioning and deliberation. They often claimed to seek an impartial and balanced view of the world by exploring a range of different sources. This seemed to be particularly true of participants for whom English was a second language as they were looking at content in a range of languages and from family and friends in both the UK and abroad:

*By going to different news outlets on the same subject but from different regions. So I will watch our local UK news. Then I like to go Al Jazeera, I'll go CNN, or Fox, just to hear from 3, 4, but then I'll also look at WhatsApp groups because if it's a big subject, there are people from all around the world dropping opinions.* **Male, 40, Minority belief: Health protection**

In some cases, participants mentioned using online communications platforms as research tools to find what they perceived as unbiased or wide-ranging content on a range of topics. A theme we noted is that using these platforms gave participants the sense that they were active participants in their own learning, which they preferred compared to what they perceived to be passive learning from journalistic sources.

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<sup>13</sup> While Twitter has changed its name to X, we use "Twitter" throughout this report to accurately capture what participants told us about their experiences.

The following case study shows one participant who was already sceptical about what she was seeing via traditional media sources about the Russia/Ukraine conflict before seeking out more information through online communications platforms:



## Case study: Caroline

**Background:** 66-year-old woman. Fairly confident internet user with no trust in government sources of information.

**Minority belief:** Russia/Ukraine conflict

**Origins of minority beliefs:** Caroline articulates her views about the conflict as wanting to have a balance to the dominant narrative in the UK, believing that there has been an ‘airbrushing’ of Zelenskyy and an alleged Nazi influence in Ukraine. She does not articulate her views as an outright rejection of the majority perspective, or as sympathy with the Russian state, but rather an anti-war perspective. She doesn’t necessarily have a strong or certain view, although she does express some views that reflect pro-Russian state narratives about the conflict such as that NATO is the true aggressor, or the Russian state is responding to Nazi influence in Ukraine.

**Role of online communications platforms in their views:** Because she didn’t see what she felt to be a balanced view on the traditional news sources she watches, Caroline deliberately researched more information to support her pre-existing perception that there was more to the conflict than being portrayed to her. As such she did a Google search and also looked at posts that friends on Facebook shared from other countries which helped to solidify existing views.

**How information is shared:** Although she does share content about other political or contentious issues, Caroline tends not to share information she sees about Ukraine on her public profile. She prefers to look at things for her own information as she has previously shared things and then been told they were fake. She also finds that interacting with people through more public online communications platforms can be much more fraught than in-person.

**How they assess reliability of information:** Caroline doesn’t use any particular strategies to assess reliability of information she sees. She doesn’t differentiate between journalistic and user-generated content in terms of how reliable she would find it to be. She is also somewhat sceptical of fact-checking websites as she feels they are sometimes used by governments to shut down criticism.

**Impact of minority beliefs:** Because she tends not to share her views on Ukraine with others, they haven’t had a direct impact on her relationships. There also doesn’t appear to be a particular psychological impact on Caroline from holding these views, which may be because she doesn’t hold them particularly strongly and because they fit with her wider worldview.

*“In terms of sharing something, ...I tend to be really careful because there's nothing worse than putting out something and then someone saying, 'Well you're wrong.' And then providing the reasons why you're wrong, so I tend to be very careful about posting things I'm not sure about.”*

## Desire for interaction

Part of the perceived value of online communications platforms was the way participants were able to engage with other people and have discussions and debates. These were often considered to be instructive and helpful, allowing them to develop their own thoughts as well as challenge their existing beliefs:

*I really like Reddit, you find some interesting people with interesting theories and conflicting views. So I guess that is just a more non biased platform. I guess there's some forums that are directly pointing towards being open, you know you can go in there to be devil's advocate. **Male, 27, Minority beliefs: Health protection & Climate change***

*We always have debates, I love debates so that's why I try and see everything before I enter that debate. **Male, 35, Minority belief: Health protection***

Engaging with online communications platforms also provided participants the opportunity to connect with other people. Participants believed that this could offer new perspectives than they may not get from traditional media sources:

*Instagram is primarily, like, a hobby, but Twitter is to look at discussions, to see, 'I'm thinking this,' 'Oh, there's 50,000 people thinking like me.' **Female, 46, Minority belief: Health protection***

Not all participants sought to explore multiple perspectives. Many simply held their minority beliefs alongside a range of other views they had about life and did not want to explore or engage with others.

## Trust in traditional media sources

There was a spectrum of reported usage of traditional media sources across our sample, with some consuming their news from this kind of source almost exclusively while others were much more sceptical of this content. Older participants tended to be more trusting than younger ones of traditional media sources:

*I know the BBC's not 100% perfect, but if the news comes on, or anything comes onto BBC, I would more likely trust it than not trust it. **Male, 79, Minority belief: Health protection***

*I grew up quite naïve to think whatever you see on the news or whatever you read in the paper is 100% true, but no it's not, probably not even 5% of what you see on the news is true because they're only portraying what they want to portray. And it's made me more aware of who you can trust. And depending on the situation, like, who can be trusted and who's a reliable source? **Female, 31, Minority belief: Health protection***

Participants frequently suggested that a large amount of world events are simply not reported on by traditional media sources. They often suggested that a more comprehensive view of current affairs is available via online communications platforms. These views were fairly widespread among participants, who highlighted the importance of getting a balanced view by engaging with online communications platforms in the interests of 'opening eyes to different possibilities'.

The following case study is of a participant who uses a wide range of platforms to get what he perceives as a more balanced view of the Russia/Ukraine conflict than what he sees on traditional media sources:



### Case study: Akshay

**Background:** 19-year-old man. A very confident internet user with a great deal of trust in government sources of information.

**Minority beliefs:** Russia/Ukraine conflict

**Origins of minority beliefs:** Akshay describes his views as mostly coming from watching the news although he does also come across footage of the conflict on Twitter, including content claiming to show the Russian state's side of the conflict.

**Role of online communications platforms in their views:** Akshay uses a range of different sources to unwind, share with others and find out news. As well as traditional media sources, he goes on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. He also uses Reddit as a research tool and Telegram to discuss certain topics that he doesn't feel able to on more open forums. Across these platforms he sees information about the Russia/Ukraine conflict but also a lot of other topics.

**How information is shared:** Whilst he does have accounts on Twitter and TikTok where he posts, he doesn't post about Russia/Ukraine as he sees it as quite a negative topic and he likes to post humorous

and entertaining things. Instead, he will show directly to friends some of the videos he sees. He prefers to speak in person about topics like the Russia/Ukraine conflict.

**How they assess reliability of information:** If something is coming from multiple different sources, and especially from accounts he has learned to trust over time, then he will tend to think it's reliable. He also finds that unreliable information tends to come from obscure accounts and, once he scrolls through their feed, he can tell if it's unreliable.

**Impact of minority beliefs:** There isn't a clear impact on Akshay from his minority beliefs, mostly because he doesn't tend to post or share things with people who don't already have a similar view to him. Some of the other topics he follows may have isolated him slightly from peers, for example he follows Andrew Tate and has found that girlfriends aren't approving.

*"I think some people just have private groups, it's more influencers who use [Telegram] to post the content that they can't post online I think because obviously like the internet's really sensitive right now, you can't really post crude stuff so I think people just post it on there."*

## The dynamic nature of online communications platforms

Participants observed several ways that the dynamic nature of online communications platforms shaped the content they saw: that personalisation shaped what was served to them, reflecting their interests. The subsequent engaging nature of online communications platforms led to some participants unintentionally spending more time consuming content than they had intended:

*Whatever algorithm it uses, it knows what videos you're watching more and it brings up similar videos. So, if I sat in my bed at night time and watched something, I could find, 'Oh my God, an hour's gone past and I've just watched videos about home interiors, kitchen trends.' Or it could be anything. **Male, 36, Minority belief: Health protection***

## How online communications platforms are used across topics

Online communications platforms were used to access information on all three topics, but there were subtle differences in the motivations for their use.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a highly charged time for many participants as they felt their beliefs and preferences were out of step with the wider population, and they were unhappy with public health mandates they perceived to border on coercion. Whilst there was little indication that online communications platforms played a direct and pivotal role in the initiation of their frustration, participants described using these platforms to express their frustration and share what they saw as 'suppressed' information with others.

Participants with minority beliefs on climate change often questioned the reliability of scientific evidence on traditional media sources and looked to online communications platforms to find alternative information. Some found alternative 'experts' on these platforms, which they believed challenged the science-based consensus portrayed in traditional media sources:

*It's become more broader. I'm reading a lot of things [on online communications platforms] that just make a lot of sense. You know, I'm reading things where it's really opened my mind, especially when it comes to climate change, ... I mean, a lot of scientists now are actually saying that it's not man-made. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change***

Finally, with regards to the Russia/Ukraine conflict, participants were more likely to mention that they accessed online communications platforms because they considered their views were not represented

by the media. Some also thought online communications platforms gave them access to 'inside information' that meant they saw the Russia/Ukraine conflict in a different way to others:

*I can't go into it, there's a lot more to it and all I'm saying is, some of the news ... is not quite what you're seeing on mainstream media. **Male, 56, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict & Health protection***

## Section 4: Media literacy

Ofcom defines media literacy as ‘the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts’. This includes the skills, knowledge and understanding people need to make full use of the opportunities presented both by traditional and new communications services. Media literacy helps people to manage content and communications and protect themselves and their families from the potential risks associated with engaging with all forms of media.

Media literacy is an important component in the way that people engage with media, particularly online, yet application of media literacy skills can vary. Ofcom were keen to explore the extent to which media literate behaviours and the holding of minority beliefs intersected.

Critical understanding is an important aspect of media literacy: the ability to understand how and why information is provided, and for what purpose. Critical understanding is particularly relevant to this research, given the extent and nature of the information that participants were seeking and consuming.

While participants displayed elements of media literate behaviours and attitudes in some aspects of their activity, in other areas these were not present.

### Media navigation

Participants often appeared to be quite guarded and cautious about the complexity of the information environment and often stressed the importance of managing it carefully. A frequently-expressed concern was a perceived lack of balance in traditional news sources. Participants felt that to understand an issue properly they needed to access online communications platforms to explore ‘both sides’ of the debate:

*There can be a real mismatch of information out there, I think. And if you're not careful, you do get... sucked into one particular approach. **Male, 65, Minority belief: Climate change***

*[I look at] websites from other countries, then translated, that kind of thing. I've done that with a couple of Russian ones, for instance. I just want to know perspectives. [Through traditional media sources] we get a perspective of what everyone thinks in this country, and what people in Ukraine overall are thinking. **Male, 57, Minority belief: Russia/Ukraine conflict***

### Critical of evidence

Several participants questioned what is considered valid evidence. This included challenging the evidence underpinning commonly-held positions in traditional media sources. There were also comments about the need for ‘facts’ and the importance of these being established. Participants often expressed that what traditional media sources present as facts have been shaped by a perceived bias, which they felt means there is a legitimate basis for challenge:

*You should believe in facts, and we're not given any facts. Like I say, if it was an accident, or it was a plane crash, that's fact, that's happened, but we don't really have facts. I think there's just too much*

*uncertainty. We have no evidence that says that this is fact. There's no evidence at all that says [climate change] is fact, or man-made. **Male, 44, Minority belief: Climate change***<sup>14</sup>

Some participants felt that the health guidance offered by the government and media was misleading. An example of this was a perceived lack of logic relating to the COVID-19 vaccination, where some people still caught COVID-19 and transmitted it to others after vaccination:

*You've seen all throughout it didn't actually do anything in terms of people who got the vaccine, weren't immune, and still gave COVID to other people. It's like, I don't think vaccines are meant to do that, you know. But no one seemed to use any common sense, so maybe I'm just the crazy one. **Male, 24, Minority belief: Health protection***<sup>15</sup>

## Critical analysis

Participants reflected on how they make distinctions about the accuracy of different pieces of information. Some considered where the information came from, who was communicating it and why, and the tone and style of the content.

*If the post is just saying something extreme, and there is no referral to any of the studies, or any of the findings, any of the scientific proof, then I would not trust that. Good article writers, they always back their writings up by referring to literature, or they are referring to some scientific findings. And, I am always sceptical in terms of what I see. **Male, 38, Minority belief: Health protection***

*We've got ... in our community ... WhatsApp aunties, because they will just spread crap. It'll be, like, something stupid, or with the COVID rates or something like that, there were people constantly sending, each family member was sending crap to the others, and my mother-in-law, she'll be, 'See, look at this.' I'm, like, 'Don't believe what you see.' **Female, 31, Minority belief: Health protection***

We found that older participants were less likely to analyse sources critically, although they were also less likely to be accessing online communications platforms exclusively for content related to their minority beliefs.

## Availability or absence of alternative evidence

However, critical analysis was not always deployed widely and consistently by the participants to the information they saw on online communications platforms. For example, some participants said they sought out video footage or apparent 'first hand accounts' as they felt this would be more reliable than evidence mediated via journalists or scientists.

This availability of eye-witness testimony and video footage on online communications platforms had a particular power for many of the participants. If this type of footage and testimony was not also present in more traditional news sources, then it can make participants question the processes that determine what is or is not reported by traditional media:

<sup>14</sup> Ipsos note: There is evidence that almost all the long-term warming seen since 1850 can be explained by greenhouse gas emissions and other human activities, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-why-scientists-think-100-of-global-warming-is-due-to-humans/>

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos note: In the case of COVID vaccination, there is greater protection for the population, but individual cases of illness can still occur, <https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o867>

*There was nothing on mainstream TV, they weren't reporting any of it. .... I recognised the places ... Nobody on the mainstream media was reporting it but it was all over. **Male, 56, Minority beliefs: Russia/Ukraine conflict & Health protection***

Participants frequently suspected that the absence of reporting among traditional media sources of what they considered a serious incident, based on evidence found on online communications platforms, reflected a bias and disposition for 'guiding you to one conclusion' in traditional media sources. For others, the absence of information or lack of representation of certain points of view on traditional news sources was considered as evidence that information was being suppressed or views censored.

*You never see where someone had a reaction to the COVID vaccine and died. Very, very rarely you ever saw it, because we weren't allowed to see that. We were never allowed to see, because that would have been seen as scaremongering. That's not scaremongering. It's giving people facts. Lots of people did die from being vaccinated. God knows what it means down the line in term of fertility, and the future generation. **Male, 44, Climate change***

Participants often displayed potential media literacy skills in some instances, but application was not always consistent as they also used habits or 'mental shortcuts' that could undermine those skills when it came to the content they saw on online communications platforms.

For example, the following case study is of a participant who demonstrated critical understanding and interrogation of credentials in some areas, whilst also making assumptions about the reliability of alleged 'first hand accounts':



## Case study: Tristan

**Background:** 30-year-old man. Very confident internet user with not much trust in government sources of information.

**Minority beliefs:** Health protection, climate change and the Russia/Ukraine conflict

**Origins of minority beliefs:** He has a strong self-perception as someone with different viewpoints than others, going so far as to describe himself as a 'conspiracy theorist'. He describes having his mind opened through watching videos as a teenager on a range of topics.

**Role of online communications platforms in their views:** Uses YouTube to watch podcasts about a range of topics that interest him – he likes this more 'light-entertainment format' for learning about different viewpoints on these topics. He also uses Reddit and Twitter to research information about his minority beliefs, although he sees these as more intense than YouTube and putting him at risk of a 'rabbit hole'. He has some like-minded friends that he shares things with on WhatsApp.

**How information is shared:** Has shared information in the past both on online communications platforms and in person. He describes actively gathering opinions and information from different places and then explains his views. However, he is less likely to share things now as he doesn't want to repeat the 'rabbit holes' he has previously gone down.

**How they assess reliability of information:** He uses cues as to whether the person sharing is reliable based on their academic credentials or the sources they've quoted. He says he doesn't just believe something at first sight and likes to look at a range of sources on a topic. Tristan finds video content, especially alleged first-hand accounts, more reliable than journalistic media or reportage as it is something he can see with his own eyes.

**Impact of minority beliefs:** Tristan's minority beliefs and the content he has seen and shared have impacted him both emotionally and interpersonally. He describes feeling angry and frustrated by the things he sees, and these emotions are often what drives him to want to share them with others. Sharing these views has at times impacted his relationships with others, especially concerning COVID-19 as he has had family members and colleagues be angry with him for the views he shared. However, he says that his closest family have come to accept his views as part of who he is. He also holds back from becoming what he calls an 'activist' on these topics as he has a family and job that he wants to focus his energy on.

*“Sometimes being a conspiracy theorist and going onto these sites and looking at any of them, I think if you dive into them too much it can lead to a depression.”<sup>16</sup>*

## Crowd-sourcing

Participants sometimes described relying on other users to help assess the validity of information they saw online. Several described looking at comments on YouTube or Reddit to help them discern whether the information shown was correct.

*Moderator: How would you say you assess the validity or reliability of the information you see on Reddit and YouTube?<sup>17</sup> Participant: Reddit, confirmation in comments. **Male, 25, Health protection & Climate change***

*I just look at the comments, which way it's going, the same direction and which way is different. If you've got, like, say, 100 people going to believe in that, see that news is true, then you've got 50 people saying it's not true, I kind of go, like, obviously, with 100 people. **Female, 32, Health Protection***



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<sup>16</sup> Whilst we do not use the term 'conspiracy theorist' or 'conspiracy theory' in this report, we have kept this reference as the participant used this term to refer to themselves.

<sup>17</sup> YouTube and Reddit have been specified by the moderator here as the participant had previously mentioned finding information on health protection and climate change on these platforms.

## Ofcom Afterword

This research provides insight into how minority beliefs in three important areas are formed and spread. It also considers the impact of holding those beliefs, and demonstrates the importance and interplay of media literacy knowledge, skills and behaviour.

Interestingly, the starting point for minority beliefs was often reported to be conversations or events that happened outside of online communications platforms. The desire for discussion and debate often led participants online, with the move from public online communications platforms to private messaging groups being seen as a way to guard against any potential backlash. Participants reported exercising caution in relation to posting on online communications platforms, with humour being seen as a 'more acceptable' way to share content.

Our approach started with people and their experiences, enabling us to explore the degree to which media literacy skills were being utilised. What is clearly brought out by this research is the interdependence between media literacy behaviours, skills and knowledge, and that it is only when all three are present and applied to different types of information sources that we might consider an individual to be displaying full media literacy.

Some of the behaviours observed in this research involved using a wide range of media outlets, taking a critical approach and assessing sources. Such types of behaviour could be described as media literate. However, these participants did not apply these behaviours consistently – for example they might assess the trustworthiness of some sources by checking the comments section, or by relying on their 'gut feel' without pausing to consider their own biases.

Such types of behaviour may be of use as components in a wider series of measures to decide whether something is trustworthy, but when used in isolation or foregrounded above other measures, they are unlikely to be sufficient. Similarly, the belief that eye-witness testimony and video footage was by definition true compared to more analytic or reported analysis, does not indicate a media literate perspective, even though some participants felt they were being critically aware through such attitudes.

Overall, we note that there was an uneven understanding about the motivations of online actors and the commercial drivers of platforms, and less apparent knowledge of the mechanisms of how more mainstream news media operate.

The research reminds us of the complexity of opinion-formation, and how it develops as a result of a range of factors. It reminds us of the need for a holistic and nuanced understanding of media literacy.

As such, the research complements our current wider Making Sense of Media Activities. Our [Making Sense of Media Annual Plan 2023-24](#) is focused on the 'only Ofcom can do' elements of media literacy in the UK – as our contribution to addressing the UK's online media literacy challenges. To learn more about our media literacy programme, including our research priorities please join the [Making Sense of Media network](#).

# Appendix

## Sample frame

The below table details the sample achieved among the 35 respondents we spoke to:

| Category  | Group                         | Number of participants in sample |
|-----------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Geography | London and South-East England | 12                               |
|           | East Midlands                 | 4                                |
|           | North England                 | 4                                |
|           | Scotland                      | 4                                |
|           | Wales                         | 4                                |
|           | Northern Ireland              | 4                                |
|           | South-West England            | 3                                |
|           | Gender                        | Male                             |
|           | Female                        | 16                               |
| Age       | 18-34                         | 8                                |
|           | 35-49                         | 15                               |
|           | 50-64                         | 5                                |
|           | 65-74                         | 4                                |
|           | 75+                           | 3                                |

|  |                         |    |
|--|-------------------------|----|
| Social grade <sup>18</sup>                 | ABC1                    | 25 |
|  | C2DE                    | 10 |
| Ethnicity                                  | White British           | 18 |
|  | Asian                   | 6  |
|  | Black                   | 5  |
|  | Russian/White Russian   | 2  |
|  | Other                   | 4  |
| First language                             | English or Welsh        | 23 |
|  | Other                   | 12 |
| Confidence in internet usage               | Not low                 | 33 |
|  | Low                     | 2  |
| Trust in government sources of information | Not low                 | 11 |
|  | Low                     | 24 |
| Minority belief/s                          | Health protection       | 26 |
|  | Climate change          | 14 |
|  | Russia/Ukraine conflict | 11 |

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<sup>18</sup> Socio-economic grades: ABC1 includes A (higher managerial, administrative or professional), B (intermediate managerial, administrative or professional), c (supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional). C2DE includes: C2 (skilled manual workers), D (semi and unskilled manual workers), E (state pensioners, casual or lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only).

## Methodological considerations

There are several methodological considerations that influenced both the design and interpretation of this study. First, there was no comparison or control sample so we are not comparing the findings in this audience to the overall population or suggesting that any of the findings noted in this report are necessarily unique to this population.

Second, the screener questionnaire and discussion guide were amended slightly to ensure we were speaking to people about content they saw online expressing views similar to their own about the topic on which they had minority beliefs. This was due to the first few interviews appearing to have minimal reference to online communications platforms with regards to their minority beliefs. This means that the first six interviews were conducted using a slightly different screener and discussion guide, although this did not substantively impact the comparability of interviews.

Thirdly, there was underrepresentation of some groups in the sample, limiting our ability to understand the differential experiences of these groups. 75+ year olds were a group of interest but proved very challenging to recruit due to either not passing the requirement of seeing people online expressing views similar to their own, or not being willing to take part in the information diary prior to interview. Due to the fieldwork being face-to-face, we needed to cluster interviews which also resulted in under-representation of those living in rural areas. There were also challenges recruiting those with low confidence in using the internet as they were much less likely to be seeing user-generated content on these topics online, and as such were much less likely to pass the screener.

Finally, although the research was designed to consider three topics equally, in practice health protection, and in particular the COVID-19 vaccination, was a dominant topic for a lot of participants. As a result, much more of our data concerned this topic than either the Russia/Ukraine conflict or climate change.