

# UK public engagement with politics, information and news

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Full Fact

# Full Fact is the UK's independent factchecking charity.

## About this paper


Misinformation and disinformation cause real harm to people's lives, health, finances and to democracy. We need good evidence on how to tackle it. This briefing is part of a research programme set up by Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact to find that evidence and make it useful.

In this briefing, Full Fact's Research Manager **Amy Sippitt** looks at what we know about UK public engagement with news, information and politics. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to Bobby Duffy for his comments.

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# Overview

- A majority of people in the UK say they follow the news at least every week. A minority say they discuss government and politics at least a few times a week.
- TV is still the dominant source of news but less so for younger people, where internet is the most dominant for 16-24 year olds.
- A majority of people vote and are engaged in politics but dissatisfaction with government seems to be intensifying.
- There are trusted experts and trusted sources of information in the UK. There is also significant distrust of politicians, journalists, and news on social media.

## Frequency of news access

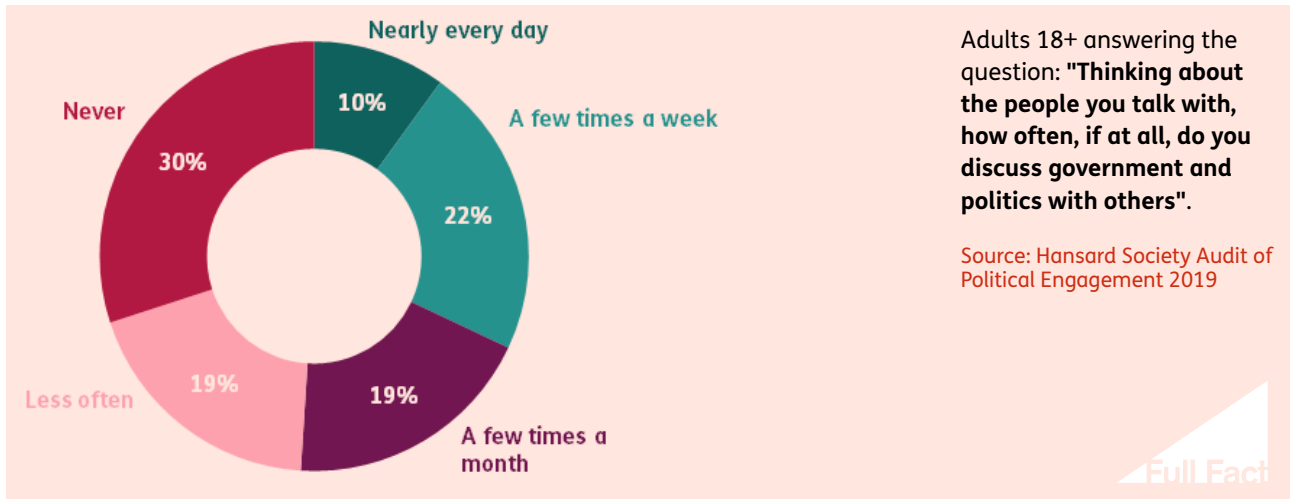
Most adults say they access the news every day, be it via television, radio, newspapers, or online. The **Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report** [↗](#) finds an estimated 30% of adults are what they call “news lovers”—people who say they access the news several times a day and say they are very or extremely interested in the news. About 53% are “daily briefers”—people who tend to say they access the news at least every day and with moderate levels of interest in the news.<sup>1</sup>

The remaining 17% are “casual users”—people who consume news around once a day or less, and who tend to be less interested in the news.

Other sources give slightly different figures. To compile its news consumption data, **Edelman's Trust Barometer** [↗](#) asks individuals **how frequently they consume news** [↗](#) produced by major news organisations or publications at the original source, or how often they consume it from it being shared by others or seen on social media. They identified about 63% who do at least one of these every week, and 37% who consume news less than weekly.

If you ask people how often they discuss “government and politics” specifically, only 32% say they do this at least a few times a week (Hansard Society, 2019).

1. Data obtained from the Reuters Institute, to include respondents excluded from the main results due to consuming news less than once a month (111). This data is not comparable to the figures referenced in Chequeado's briefing on Audiences in Argentina, published as part of this programme of work.



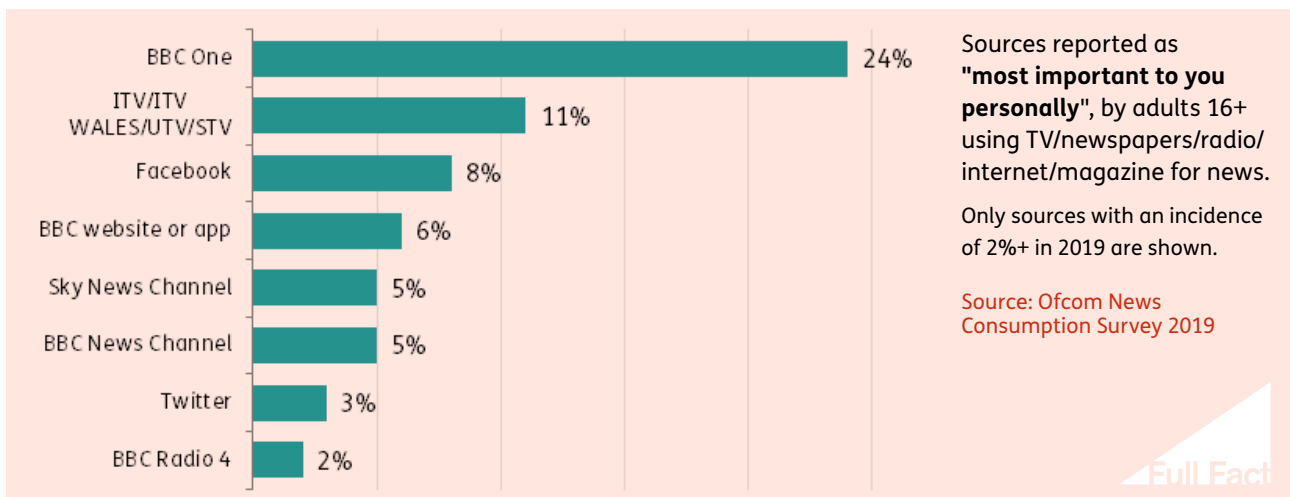
## Platforms used for news

TV is the most-used platform for news [📺](#) nowadays, used by 75% of UK adults, followed by the internet (66%), radio (43%) and printed newspapers (38%) (Ofcom, 2019a). But this is age dependent, with the internet being the most popular platform among 16-24 year olds (83%) and also by ethnic minority groups (82%). TV usage is also down from 79% in 2018.

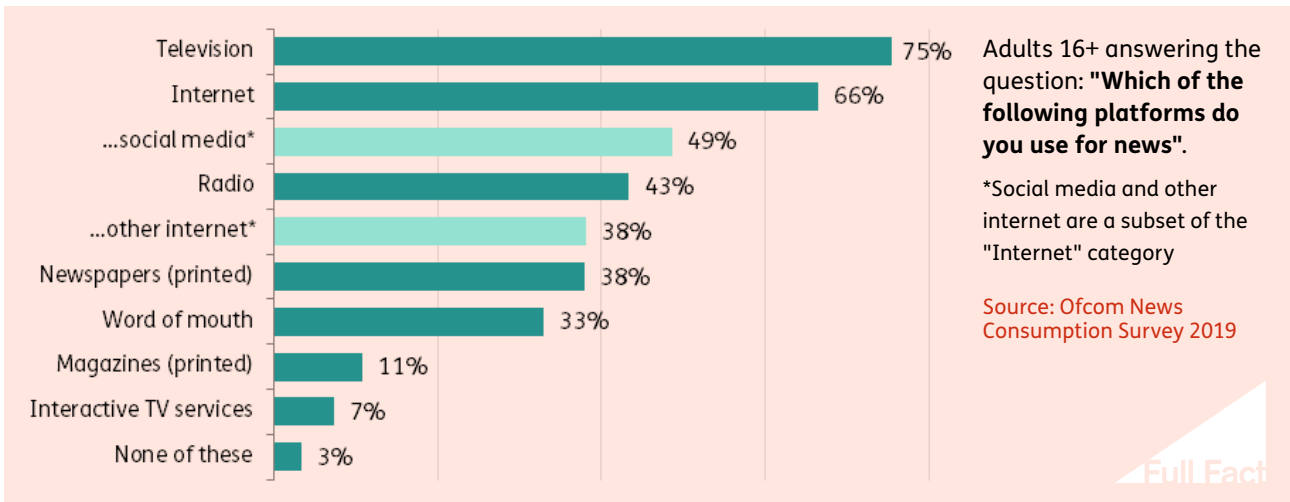
TV is the only source where higher and lower socio-economic groups are just as likely to get their news. Higher socio-economic groups have a higher usage of internet, radio and newspapers.

Most people tend to use a mixture. 14% of adults say they use all four main platforms for news (TV, radio, newspapers and the internet), while 10% only say the TV, and 13% only say the internet.

The BBC dominates news consumption, with BBC One the source most commonly mentioned as people's most important news source.

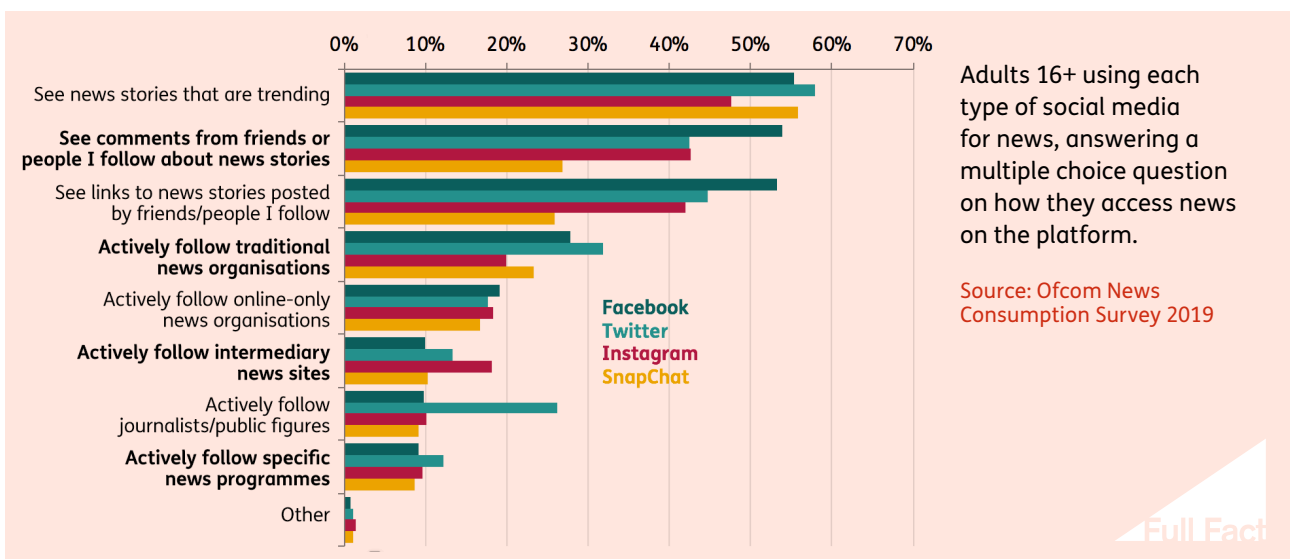


When it comes to news accessed via the internet, people mention news on social media most often—reflected in Facebook coming just above the BBC website/app for online news use.



But news consumption on social media, and online generally, might be higher than reported as people are thought to under-estimate their own news consumption online. Ofcom (2018) says that many people tend to associate the term 'news' with traditional sources like newspapers and TV. So it's also helpful to consider social media access more generally. This is still lower than TV use—for example, 62% of UK adults have a Facebook account, and 43% use WhatsApp (Ofcom, 2019b).

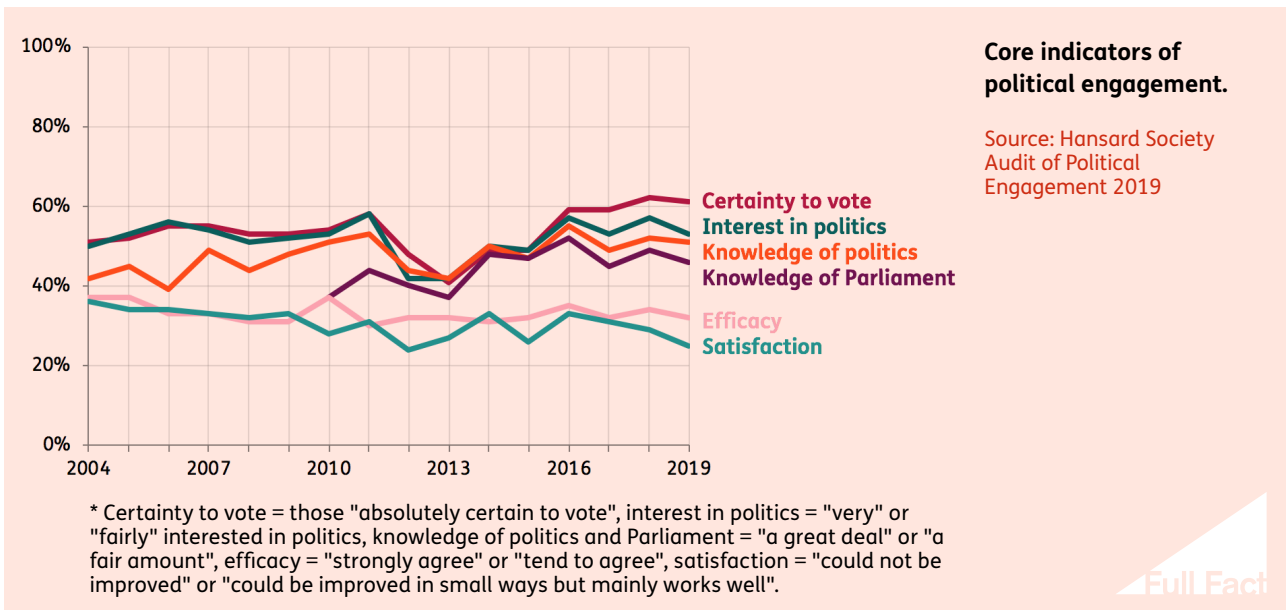
Of those who do say they get news from social media, the most common way is by seeing news stories that are trending.



## Political engagement

This year's **Audit of Political Engagement** [🔗](#), conducted by the Hansard Society, concluded that the survey "generally dispels the notion that the public are apathetic about politics". Public interest in and self-reported knowledge of politics has been slightly above average in the past few years, compared to historic levels.

However, satisfaction with the system of governing has been declining over the longer-term, and among those who are disengaged, their feelings have intensified.

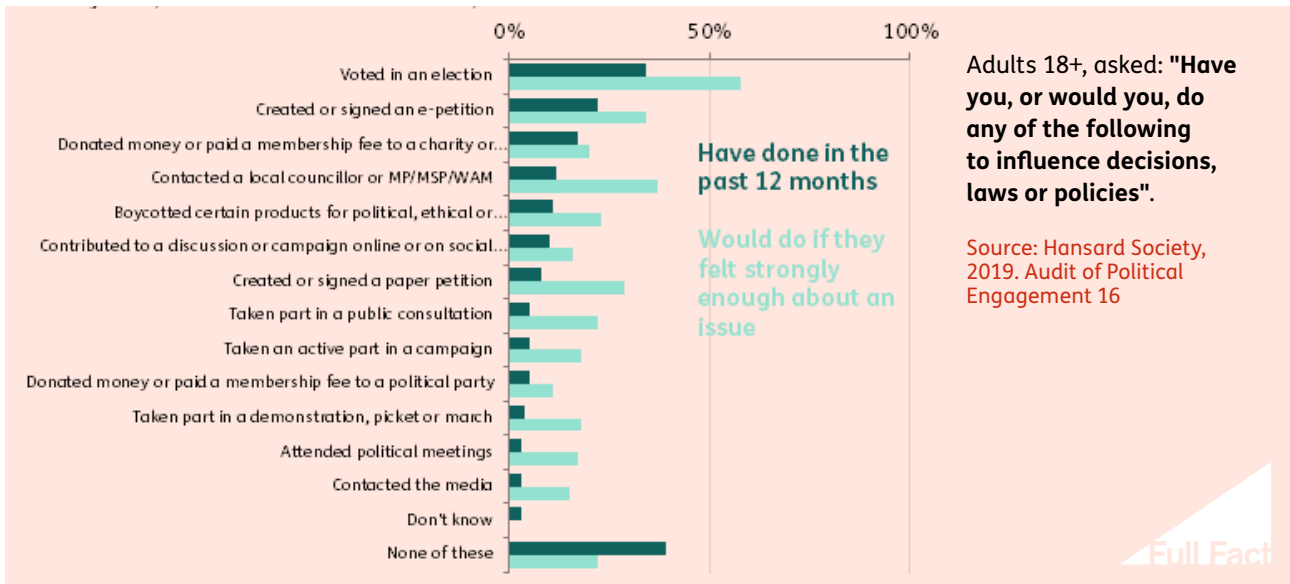


There are still significant demographic differences in political engagement too. For example, men are more likely to say they are interested in politics, as are people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and people from White backgrounds.

34% of the UK public consider themselves a 'very' or 'fairly' strong supporter of a political party. This varies significantly by socio-economic group, with 45% of those in the AB group who say this, compared to 22% in the C2 group, and 28% in the DE group.

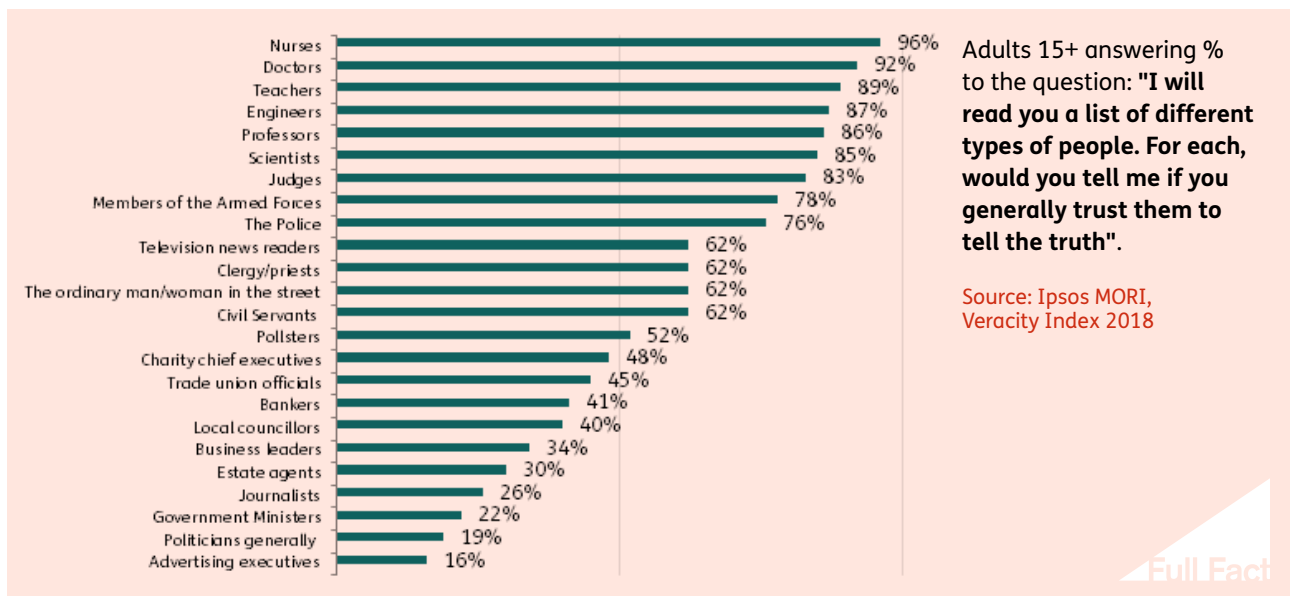
When it comes to political activities, most people don't engage in political activities beyond voting. 39% of people had done none of the Hansard Society's main political activities in the past year.

When asked if they would do any of the activities if they felt strongly enough about the issue, this year, a significant minority (22%), said they wouldn't be prepared to do any of the activities. That's up from 12% last year.




## Information consumption and trust

There are trusted experts and trusted sources of information in the UK. Ipsos MORI’s annual survey on trust finds academic experts - scientists and Professors - are generally trusted to tell the truth (Ipsos MORI, 2018). However, at the other end of the spectrum journalists, government ministers, politicians generally and advertising executives are least trusted. We’ve written more about these trends in [our briefing on Political trust in the UK](#).



When it comes to official information sources, the UK’s official statistics are generally trusted to be accurate, with 69% of the British public saying they trust the statistics produced by the Office for National


Statistics (and 19% who were unsure or answered ‘don’t know’), and 63% believing they are generally accurate (Morgan and Cant, 2019).

Asking specifically about misinformation, the majority of the UK public thinks it is frequent and a problem. 69% of people in the UK said they came across “**news or information that you believe misrepresent reality or is even false** ” at least once a week in 2018, and 84% agreed it is a problem (Eurobarometer, 2018).

People trust the news they consume more than news in general. When asked if they agreed with the statement “I think you can trust most news most of the time”, 40% of the public agree, 34% disagree, and 26% say they neither agree nor disagree (Newman et al., 2019). When given the statement “I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time”, 51% agree, 24% disagree and 26% said they neither agree nor disagree. Trust in individual news brands is often higher—trust is highest for specific public service broadcasters and lower for tabloids and digital-born news brands, with BBC News the most trusted news organisation in the UK (Newman et al., 2019).

The lowest levels of trust are for social media where only 10% agree they can trust news most of the time, and 63% disagree. People also feel that social media does a worse job than news media at “helping me distinguish fact from fiction” – with only 18% agreeing social media does this, and 44% disagreeing, compared to 41% who agreed news media did this, and 19% disagreeing (Newman et al., 2017).

However, most of us think we’re good at identifying misinformation ourselves. 79% of the UK public say they are ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ confident “that you are able to identify news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false” (Eurobarometer, 2018). 18% say they are ‘not very’ or ‘not at all confident’, lower than the average of 26% in the EU28.

But we think other people don’t do a good job. In a separate survey, 64% agreed with the statement “**the average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumour or falsehoods** ” (Edelman, 2018).

Similarly, when asked about specific checks used to check if information is accurate, Ofcom (2019b) found that while a majority of internet users understand that not all information they find online is truthful, 10% say they don’t think about whether the factual information they find online is truthful. When asked what checks they make on content online, 18% of social media users said they wouldn’t make any checks on the trustworthiness of a news article on social media. ■



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