

# Young people's conceptions of political information: insights into information experiences and implications for intervention

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**Purpose:** This paper explores young people's conceptions of political information. The study sought to identify what political information sources young people encounter, how they construe these sources and the messages they communicate, and how the information experiences of young people may be better understood to inform information literacy interventions to support the development of political agency.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Using personal construct theory as a conceptual framework, repertory grid interviews were used to explore the different ways in which 23 young people aged 14-15 from a town in northern England conceive of political information and how they evaluate its quality and authority.

**Findings:** The study identified the sources of information young people engage with for finding and receiving what they understand as political information. The results from the repertory grid interviews indicated that young people use a wide range of sources of political information to become informed about politics and the world around them. These sources of information include family, friends, teachers, television news, newspapers, radio shows, comedy shows, social media and community meetings. Participants were aware that they passively encounter information sources as well as actively engage in debate and discussion with other sources. Some participants had difficulty critically evaluating the political information sources they encounter. The nature of young people's experiences of political information varied greatly. The degree of complexity in the experiences of political information varied not only between participants but was also dependent on their particular relationship with the information sources under scrutiny.

**Research limitations/implications:** The paper has implications for personal construct analysis as a research approach broadly, from the point of view of its use within library and information science research. It is the first study to apply the personal construct approach to the study of young people's political information use and to consider implications for information literacy support that would have been difficult to access using other approaches.

**Practical implications:** The paper provides insight into an understudied area; that of young people's conceptions of political information. This insight may be used to inform the improvement of political information provision and information literacy support for young people.

**Social implications:** A deeper understanding of the different ways in which young people identify, engage with and use information for political purposes may contribute to a clearer understanding of young people's information needs, ideally leading to improved political education and a strengthened democratic process.

**Originality/value:** The paper explores a relatively under-researched area of library and information science research, and does so using a relatively under-used method in the domain. Insights into the

perceived characteristics of different sources of political information are novel and contribute to the development of information behavior and information literacy fields in terms of information for empowerment and democracy.

**Paper type:** Research paper

**Keywords:** information behaviour; information literacy; misinformation; political information; political participation; young people.

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## **Introduction**

To be able to participate effectively in political processes, including elections, referendums and participatory policy-making at the local level, citizens need to be able to develop informed perspectives and make judgements consistent with their views, based on the information they encounter from a wide range of sources. While the importance of informed decision-making is universal, particular emphasis has been given recently to young people, with research moving away from presenting young people as apathetic to a more complex exploration of how young people define and participate in politics (Vromen et al., 2015). However, little is known about how young people are exposed to, understand and use political information in the context of their varied interactions with political life. Where research does exist, it often takes a deficit approach, framing young people as lacking effective information skills (Whitworth, 2009; Rieh and Hilligoss, 2008; Johnson and Kaye, 2000).

As part of a wider study, this paper presents an insight into the different ways young people construe political information sources, including the ways in which they may assess, judge or evaluate the information they encounter, which we achieve through using the repertory grid technique to interview young people and explicitly explore their perceptions of political information sources. The study focuses on identifying the range of political information sources from the perspective of the young people themselves, where ‘political’ and ‘information’ are determined by the individual, and gaining deep insights into the ways they construe these sources.

An insight into young people’s political information experiences is of value to support informed decision-making and encourage participation in civic life. Gaining an understanding of how young people understand and evaluate political information is important, because youth disengagement from political processes, as well as young people’s ability to critically evaluate information, have significant implications for the health and functioning of democratic society.

The issues of young people’s political engagement and information use are complex and levels of political participation are not easily measured. Many studies identify deficits in young people’s political knowledge and engagement, as well as their information skills (Whitworth, 2009; Rieh and Hilligoss, 2008; Johnson and Kaye, 2000). This has significant implications when it comes to the ability of young people to access and interpret political information to allow them to make informed decisions with regards to their roles as active citizens, but may not be representative of the whole picture, given that studies make assumptions about how young people conceive of ‘politics’ as a concept, and how young people understand and use information to develop knowledge.

Consideration of the role of library and information practitioners in supporting political information use is perhaps at its most relevant within a political information landscape of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012, Weeks, 2015), disinformation (Kates 1998), propaganda (Herman and Chomsky, 1994) and bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005), all of which are issues of particular relevance in the

discourse around the ‘fake news’ phenomenon (Hunt, 2016). School libraries do offer support to students around information evaluation to some extent, but a gap in provision has been identified (Harlan, 2016; Smith, 2016). Work towards improving how school libraries support media and information literacy in relation to current events, news reporting and political issues has been drawn to particular attention in light of recent and widespread public discourse around ‘fake news’ (Johnson, 2016; Tiffany, 2016).

Research following the outcomes of recent political events, including the Referendum on the United Kingdom European Union membership and the US Presidential Election, both held in 2016, indicates that individuals’ political participation and decision-making takes place in a complex set of circumstances with many cognitive and affective variables at play.

By identifying these information sources and ways of understanding them, this paper contributes to the understanding of how young people engage with political information and how interventions can be effectively developed to support political information literacy. We explore the different ways in which young people perceive sources of political information, how they interact with these sources and the extent to which their interaction with these information sources is critical and influences their attitudes and decisions when it comes to making political decisions and participating in public life. Through a deeper understanding of how people interact with the information they encounter, we may better understand the outcomes of political processes, many of which have come as a surprise to political establishments as well as the general public. With a deeper understanding of how people relate to information about political subjects, the library and information profession may be better equipped to develop educational approaches to support the development of political knowledge and agency.

This is the first of a series of papers sharing the findings from a mixed methods study exploring young people’s experiences of political information. The findings presented here report on the analysis of the data collected through repertory grid interviews, which serve as a broad thematic overview of the different ways young people construe political information. This initial analysis, using a novel, modified approach to PCT utilising thematic and iterative method of analysis, serves as a stepping-stone to the development of deeper and structured phenomenographic analysis of the interview data, alongside additional focus group data, which will be presented in a later paper. Later papers will explore more specifically what contribution librarianship could make to young people’s political agency through critical approaches to information literacy.

### ***Young people’s political participation***

It has been suggested that contemporary political participation by young people is limited, the forms of participation they are willing to engage in, the knowledge they are applying to decision-making scenarios, and their general faith and belief in politicians and political parties, or more broadly, the democratic system as it currently functions as a whole (Keating, 2015). The degree of the problem is open to debate, but it is generally accepted that the political participation of young people is important for present and future democratic society (Lasswell, 1936). Regardless of whether or not levels of participation and engagement are lower than they have been in previous generations, it remains important that young people are provided with the means to become politically knowledgeable and make informed decisions about the world around them.

Young people cannot be viewed as a hegemonic group with the same political attitudes and behaviours, just as adults cannot. Research has demonstrated that many young people are not politically apathetic, and do in fact participate in political activities, especially when the concept of ‘political’ is taken in its broadest sense (Clarke, 1996, p.61). Despite the flaws in the democratic system as it stands, it is still of benefit to encourage young people to develop political interest and knowledge and to participate in a wide range of political activities, both formal and non-formal, which

can enable people to become aware of these problems and seek to change them. Education is one method of facilitating the increased political knowledge and interest that can inspire such active political engagement.

Furthermore, access to political information and the support to gain knowledge and meaning from it is a vital aspect of democracy. It is therefore perhaps more important, for the purpose of research into young people's active and meaningful political participation, for research to focus on how young people develop knowledge, the sources they use and how this relates to their political attitudes and intentions to participate. The relationship between political knowledge and attitudes is complex and not based on purely rational systems of thought; therefore, any development of critical information literacy theory must consider this. By allowing young people the space to define 'political information' for themselves, and adopting PCT as an empirical approach, our research is well placed to explore this interplay between new knowledge and pre-existing conceptions.

### ***Young people's information use***

Related to the information sources people encounter are the ways in which they conceive of the nature of the information sources and the information they communicate. This paper focuses on the ways in which young people construe political information sources. Although it is a relatively underexplored area, some studies have focused on young people's information use and the limitations that may be encountered. For example, Taylor (2012) explored how young people determine the validity of information gathered online in a longitudinal study over five weeks. Using quantitative analysis, he found that young people "proceed erratically through the information search process making limited attempt to evaluate the quality or validity of the information gathered". The participants did not consider the verification of information sources to be important, which he suggests indicates a non-critical view of online information sources. He backs up his findings with suggestions that the prevailing educational view is that students have incomplete cognitive thinking skills, which creates difficulty in discerning valid and invalid information.

Demos (Bartlett and Miller, 2011) conducted research into young people's "digital fluency". They found that many young people do not take care to discern the quality of the information they encounter online, and often struggle to find the information they need and instead settle on the first thing they find. Concern was also raised about their lack of fact checking and inability to "recognise bias and propaganda". The report expressed concern about young people's tendencies to rely on inaccurate information which "they should probably discard" and described how the outcome of this lack of information literacy is that young people are "vulnerable to the pitfalls and rabbit holes of ignorance, falsehoods, cons and scams" and that "inaccurate content, online misinformation and conspiracy theories...are appearing in the classroom" (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). Research within library and information studies has also identified a deficit of critical thinking and critical literacy skills in some young people (Taylor, 2012; Cody, 2006; Oberman, 1991), as well as a lack of information literacy skills (Rieh and Hilligoss, 2008), which may be key to effective democratic engagement (Garner, 2006; Kapitzke, 2001; 2003).

### ***Defining political information***

The term 'political information' can be interpreted in different ways, and is often used synonymously with other terms such as 'political knowledge', 'civic literacy' and 'citizen competence'. Political information can be interpreted as knowledge about how the political system works, knowledge of the current political debate and everyday politics, and/or knowledge of political actors and their ideological differences (Grönlund 2007). In the context of this study, we follow the distinction between information and knowledge whereby 'political information' refers to data relating to political issues, rather than the ability to make accurate predictions (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998, p.24). People

encounter multiple sources of political information, only some of which will be of a format that is considered 'mainstream' or normative. It is important when exploring people's use of political information to be aware of the breadth of information sources and to explore what people do with the information they encounter (Coombs and Cutbirth, 1998), and to be aware of the political nature of distinctions between 'formal' and 'informal' sources of political information and assumptions about what sources and genres of information can be considered valid. During the interviews, we encouraged participants to define 'political information' as they saw fit, providing broad prompts where necessary. No forms of 'political information' were discounted in data collection or analysis.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study modifies the Personal Construct Theory (PCT) approach, which is a psychological theory developed by George Kelly (1955). It originated in clinical psychology as an approach to treatment, but has been used in a number of disciplines including marketing, human resources and education. The premise of PCT is that people devise conceptual templates to interpret, anticipate and respond to events and situations, and can be used to identify the different ways in which people construe or conceive of experiences. The terms *construe* and *conceive* are used interchangeably to communicate the notion of "placing an interpretation" (Kelly, 1955, p.50). Through exploring personal constructs, we explore how people interpret political information from their own perspective. The fundamental premise of PCT is that people's unique psychological processes are channelled by how they anticipate and predict events, based on theories and stereotypes that are developed throughout life. These theories, or ways of understanding reality and the things we put our attention to, including information sources, are described as *personal constructs*; these personal constructs are different for different people. We applied elements of PCT within the theoretical approach for this study because the research phenomenon was, although necessarily open to interpretation by participants, an identifiable 'object', in keeping with the nature of PCT methodologies (Kuhlthau, 2016).

The study explored different concepts of a particular kind of information - political information - and how different perceptions and ways of construing the sources of this kind of information were influenced by and influenced young people's sense of political agency and critical information literacy abilities. Rather than collecting and analysing the data following a fixed theoretical framework constructed of information behaviour or information literacy theory, we used the PCT approach to allow participants' perspectives to guide the production and analysis of the data. It was not appropriate to conduct a full PCT approach, as the research was not therapeutic in nature. Rather, we use PCT as part of a mixed-methods, phenomenological study, where PCT is applied on a "nomothetic level" to add depth and rigour to the analysis (see Fisher and Savage, 1999, p.2 and Kalekin-Fishman 1993; 2003). Through the discussion of the findings we draw parallels with relevant information behaviour and information literacy theory, as well as theories from other disciplines, to identify pertinent theoretical explanations for the young people's political information constructs and potential ways in which to develop effective information literacy interventions to support political agency.

The study takes an explicitly political stance, both rejecting the notion of neutrality in line with critical conceptions of library and information science (Cope, 2017, p.5) and viewing information literacy as a central part of learning with the potential to effect social change (Bruce, 2004). Such views of information literacy research and practice are inherently and unavoidably political (Andersen, 2006; Pawley, 2003; Whitworth, 2014). It is necessary to make these approaches and aims explicit, rather than to claim a neutrality that does not and cannot exist in work of this kind.

## Methodology

In this study, we used repertory grid (RG) interviews to explore what sources of political information the participants encounter and the different ways in which they conceive of them, through the eyes of people in their lived situations. The RG technique derived from personal construct theory (PCT) as a means of eliciting different ways of understanding phenomena from individuals, and served as an effective and appropriate way of exploring an identifiable ‘object’ - political information - at the same time as allowing the phenomenon to be open to interpretation and defined by participants.

RGs have been successfully applied in several previous LIS studies and is a powerful way of exploring the qualitatively different ways in which people in both similar and different demographic groups construe particular phenomena, including library collections (Birdi, 2011), library space (Potthoff et al., 2000), information seeking (Kuhlthau, 1993) and search engines (McKnight, 2000). The approach is particularly effective for exploring how individuals understand information sources (McKnight, 2000) and has previously been used specifically to explore the phenomenon of political construing (Fransella and Bannister, 1967). As a data collection method it helps reduce interviewer bias (Crudge and Johnson, 2007), and also enables a participant-led approach for producing relevant measures (Ibid), which is particularly beneficial when exploring political information, a concept that is (as previously discussed) open to interpretation. It is also identified as a powerful way of eliciting complex conceptions and themes without placing a heavy cognitive burden on the participant (Ibid), which was of particular benefit when working with participants aged 14-15 who had previously not been required to interrogate their experiences of political information, and in many cases, their political views.

The RG method is a technique used to elicit both “the conceptual content embodied in an individual’s mental model and the relationships which exist among these concepts” (Latta and Swigger, 1992) - or, how people think about things and make connections between them. A strength of the method is that the researcher is able to explore an individual’s construct system in the context of a particular situation or environment, rather than in terms of an absolute truth (Birdi, 2011, p.277). There are a variety of ways to use the repertory grid technique, but repertory grid interviews usually take the following format:

1. The definition of a set of elements;
2. The eliciting of a set of constructs to differentiate between those elements; and
3. The relating of the elements to the constructs (Fransella et al., 2004, pp.68-70).

The use of the repertory grid technique places the participant as the authority about themselves and their understandings; it enables the realm of discourse to be chosen by the participant through their choice of elements and expression of their perceptions through their own choice of constructs (Jankowicz, 2004, p.13). The respondent provides not only the responses to questions, but also creates the conceptual framework through the process of giving the topics of discussion and relationships between them. This supported the overall ethos of the study, which was to enable young people’s perceptions of political information to be voiced, regardless of whether mainstream discourse would view them as valid or not.

In keeping with this participatory ethos, with the traditional triadic RG model being adapted to use diads, as young people reported these were easier to understand. The laddering up technique yielded much in-depth data for analysis. Its exploratory nature provides an opportunity for the researcher to ask which part of the construct the participant prefers, and why, when the constructs are elicited. This allowed us to explore the participants’ conceptions of political information in ways that were meaningful to the participants and provided a clear and comprehensible structure for the participants, who quickly adopted the mode of discussion and were able to discuss their conceptions in significant

depth. This was particularly positive given the potential personal nature of the topics under discussion.

### ***Research ethics***

The data collection was carried out in line with ESRC guidelines, with an emphasis on the importance of the full informed consent and voluntary involvement of participants, confidentiality and anonymity, and the avoidance of harm (Economic and Social Research Council, 2012, p.3). The research approach and all research methods and consent forms were approved by the ethics committee of the university department. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent was sought from participants and their parents/guardians.

### **Data collection**

Participants in the study were Year 10 students (aged 14-15) in a school in South Yorkshire, England. Data was not collected on the specific social background of the students, but the school overall is socially mixed with students from lower and middle socioeconomic status backgrounds. 23 participants (10 boys and 13 girls, all identifying as white and British) took part in the repertory grid interviews. The size of the sample allowed us to generate data with considerable depth and richness which, through the application of PCT, can generate new conceptual insights.

Interviews took place during the school day, in a classroom in which only the participant and interviewer were present. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and the sources of information and rankings were recorded in pre-designed templates (see Appendix A). We conducted four pilot interviews of between half an hour and an hour and a half. This allowed for the testing of different lengths of interviews for both the amount of data collected and the most appropriate duration of interview for the participants, as well as to trial the interview method and make adjustments as necessary. Following the pilot interviews, we conducted 23 full repertory grid interviews.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences and understanding of political information to reveal their beliefs, values and experiences. The timing of this research did not align with any significant local or national political events, and the interviews focused on identifying types of information sources used by participants and understanding how they view and judge them, rather than looking at a process of information use. Nevertheless, some participants did discuss specific political issues and events, and explicitly talked about how their exposure to information informed their attitudes towards these.

The nature of the repertory grid method places emphasis on the identification of participants' relationship with the phenomenon under consideration, as well as on description rather than explanation of the phenomenon. We asked participants to describe in their own words the sources of political information they encounter, and what characteristics they think of as significant. The structure of the interviews were determined and led by the elements elicited by the participants themselves, with minimal prompting. The questions asked were open-ended. We asked participants to provide eight to ten places, people, or things from which they get political information. Two of these information sources were picked, and participants were asked to compare and contrast them, in any ways they could think of. We repeated this process as many times as possible within the time available or until each source had been paired with all other sources, whichever occurred first. Where prompts were required, we asked participants to think about which of the two sources they preferred and why, what was different about them in terms of their format, how they get the information from them, and what they thought about the information that is provided. During the unstructured

components of the interview, we made efforts to ensure that we did not introduce ideas into the interview if the participant had not already raised them.

As the participant described the similarities and differences between the pairs of information sources, the interviewer noted these comparisons (or constructs) down (e.g. “more biased” and “less biased”). For the next stage, the participants were asked to identify which of the constructs they preferred, because this was not always obvious (e.g. “more information” and “less information”). Finally, participants were asked to rank each of the information sources along each of the constructs (e.g. “on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is less biased and 10 is more biased, how biased do you think BBC News is?”). The process of eliciting elements and constructs and then comparing and ranking them required a system of constant clarification and elaboration, which ensured that the meaning being construed was that of the participant and that their meaning had been understood. We gave participants the opportunity to discuss each of the constructs elicited.

## **Data analysis**

Sound recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed alongside the textual repertory grids, focusing on the various ways in which participants described their conceptions of the information sources and identifying the variation among them. Despite the numerical nature of the ranking stage of the repertory grid, in-depth quantitative analysis is not always required, particularly as recommended as a way of attempting to statistically compare perceptions between individuals (Jankowicz, 2004, p.196). In this study, basic descriptive statistical analysis and a more qualitative approach was taken, to provide a broad overview of potentially significant themes, and to contribute to a depth of understanding about participants’ conceptions of political information sources, and the relationship between their conceptions regarding the sources and their critical understanding of political information. We undertook four key stages of personal construct analysis:

1. Eyeball analysis: summarising the main points and content of note from individual interviews. This helped to provide a basic understanding of participants’ conceptions of political information.
2. Content analysis of individual grids: frequency count of elements (e.g. television, mother, Google) and constructs (e.g. “it talks about important things” vs. “it talks about unimportant things”), and element and construct categorisation. This helped to identify general trends in constructs and elements based on the theory that participants will provide more constructs within topics about which they have more experience. These were grouped by theme within a coding structure (Appendix B).
3. Structural analysis of individual grids: identification of relationships between elements and constructs in individual grids to identify possible conceptions. This enabled us to identify how the sources of political information were experienced in different ways by the participants, and general trends relating to the different sources, thereby guiding the qualitative analysis based on the most noteworthy similarities and differences between elements and constructs and the individual participants.
4. Comparative content analysis of grids: identification of commonalities between elements and their associated constructs across grids.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Given the qualitative research approach and large sample size for research of this nature, it is not possible to present the research findings in full. It should be noted, however, that PCT places equal weighting on all constructs and acknowledges them as valid aspects of the experience of the phenomenon. This section therefore presents the findings with the most relevance to library and

information practice, particularly information literacy support. They provide insight into young people's experiences of political information and offer opportunities for intervention to support more meaningful and critical engagement with political information sources.

Although there is no fixed definition of information literacy, two key elements relate to the evaluation of information based on perceived characteristics of the sources and the information they communicate (Webber and Johnston, 2000, p.383). Two of the categories develop from the personal construct analysis (labelled 2 and 3 in Appendix B) most closely resemble ways of understanding information literacy. Additionally, a third category (labelled Category 5) relates to the affective responses of the participants to the information sources, and has relevance to information literacy because it provides insights into information evaluation and judgement that are not widely supported by traditional methods of information literacy provision (Schroeder and Cahoy, 2010), despite their presence in information behaviour research for a number of years (Savolainen, 2014).

### ***Constructs evaluating the quality of the information***

This category specifically focuses on ways in which the participants described their evaluation of the 'quality' of the information being communicated, through which the general 'goodness' of the sources and preference for its use was communicated. The characteristics they identified as helping them decide whether information was good or bad quality included the amount of information, its perceived truth, currency, clarity, relevance and accuracy. The majority of participants provided at least two or three constructs within this category, out of an average of 23 constructs per participant.

The rankings of the elements along these constructs and their comments in relation to information quality indicate that it is an important factor in their use of political information. This contradicts previous suggestions that information quality is not a high priority for young people (e.g. Gross and Latham, 2009), and is supported by more recent research on young people's preparation for voting in the Scottish Independence Referendum (Baxter et al., 2015). For participants in the present study, the quality of information was viewed as an important aspect of deciding whether to use it to make decisions or form opinions. Participants used different words to express their conceptions about what, from an information literacy perspective, can be understood generally as the *trustworthiness* of information, in that the information being communicated is the accurate 'truth'. This coding category includes all constructs through which participants expressed whether or not they thought sources were reliable, including explicit use of the word "reliable", but also includes terms such as "biased" and "likely to twist the story" when they were used by the participant to convey a sense of reliability. Despite many participants using evaluative words and discussing their concerns around the authority and quality of information, the participants often used inaccurate words to describe the aspect of information evaluation they were talking about. This indicates a possible shortfall in critical evaluation skills, similar to the findings of previous studies in which despite participants' indication of awareness of methods of evaluation, a lack of evaluation of sources was identified Becker (2003) and Pickard et al. (2014).

The most frequently elicited construct group in this category was the amount of information each source provided, with 51 constructs in total from 19 of the 23 participants relating to the amount of information available from different sources. Several participants provided constructs describing how much information they construed sources as providing and then ranked each element along this construct. From this process it is possible to make the generalised observation that on average, participants ranked *Google Search*, teachers, newspapers, internet news sources and television news relatively highly in terms of the amount of information they provide. The radio, other television shows, billboards and Facebook were ranked lower in terms of the amount of information provided, and family members, school lessons, and other social media sources were ranked lowest on average in terms of the amount of information provided. The participants most frequently judged the *quality* of

information in relation to the *amount* of information provided, and viewed quantity as a proxy for validity and truth. This corresponds to the findings of Shenton and Dixon (2004) who observed that quantity was often preferred over quality in young people's assessments of information.

One participant (P16) discussed the issue of speed as a manifestation of convenience, which was considered by the participant to be a measure of the quality of the information. P16 ranked online sources most highly in relation to how quickly information could be retrieved or received, with television documentaries and Snapchat (a video and photo app) ranked lowest. People (parents, grandparents, sister) were ranked with mid-range scores, alongside *The Daily Mail* newspaper. Sources that were considered to be easy to acquire and use tended to be ranked more highly along other constructs and participants identified a preference for these sources. This may relate to the principle of least effort (Shenton and Dixon, 2004) and a general preference for speedy delivery of information (Nicholas and Herman, 2009, p.89).

A number of participants reported preferring sources of information that provided visual and audio content as well as or instead of textual information (P4, P23, P26, P31, P32). This preference was not always related to the *ease* with which they felt they were able to access, understand or relate to the information. Sometimes it related to the depth of information they said they encountered from the different information sources by virtue of the format it comes in, for example in audio-visual rather than text-based format. The way in which information is presented has implications for not only its accessibility and usability (Nicholas and Herman, 2009, pp.98-99), but also in the context of political information, how keen individuals are to engage with it based on how they interpret its quality and authority based on the packaging it comes in.

A notable absence from the constructs relating to the evaluation of the quality of political information was a critical dimension focusing on *how* information could be established as true, reliable, or valid. In the majority of interviews, when asked how information could be evaluated for truth and accuracy, participants were uncertain, and many suggested that these characteristics were self-evident. Participants often conflated the notions of truth and opinion, both of which were described as "facts" by several participants. When asked how information could be evaluated for these characteristics and about critical thinking/information skills, participants were uncertain, which echoes findings from previous studies (Gross and Latham, 2009). In contrast to studies exploring young people's interpretations of online information relating to school subjects, where young people were quick to assume that if something on the internet is true (Kafai and Bates, 1997), a number of participants expressed a deep mistrust of political information encountered online and reported that they would not trust online information outright.

To remedy this, participants said they would seek information sources that provided multiple perspectives, to avoid just getting "one person's point of view" (P7). Sources that provided what participants perceived as "balanced" reporting tended to be ranked highly within the repertory grids, reflecting the positive light in which participants viewed them and supporting their assertions that they viewed the presentation of multiple viewpoints as a measure of information quality. In contrast, participants rarely discussed cross-checking information across multiple sources, a concern about digital fluency raised in previous studies (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). The use of a multiplicity of viewpoints as a heuristic for information quality, through the presentation of balance in news reporting, raises questions about the implications of false equivalence reporting in journalism and its impact on people's information behaviour and decision-making. When compounded with information behaviour phenomena such as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), selective information seeking (Case, 2012) and information avoidance (Neben, 2015), the presentation of perspectives where one side is evidence-based and the other is based on limited or no evidence has implications for information evaluation and political decision-making of all forms. Media outlets present false equivalences in an effort to appear impartial and unbiased (Gans, 2014; Hamilton, 2015), and this may result in

individuals to form worldviews and opinions that are not based on the effective evaluation of information due to an over-reliance on ‘balanced presentation of the viewpoints’ as a heuristic device. There is a risk that false equivalence reporting leads to an increased “winnability” of multiple political issues, including women’s rights (Jane, 2016, p.13), vaccination (Dixon and Clarke, 2012) and climate change (Brüggemann and Engesser, 2017).

In contrast to the assertion that factual information can be easily gained from text-based sources and more contextual information is more readily gained face-to-face from experts, in the context of political information, participants often identified the difficulties of locating factual information about politics (P5, P9, P15). To address this issue, they reported going to their parents, teachers and librarians to tell them what the “facts” were, and described the role of teachers in relation to political education as being to give them “the facts” about political processes and issues. One participant described frustration about how teachers do not provide simple answers to social and political issues and instead seek to communicate their complex nature to students. The participant describes turning to a TV programme to provide a straightforward ‘answer’ to their question:

I mean I get why he [Sociology teacher] talks to us about how politics is everywhere and to do with everything we do but, it’s a bit much. I just want to know, why, like, we have to pay for people who aren’t working hard or whatever, because I don’t think that’s fair. And I can find that out from *Skint* [TV programme] and places like that. (P5)

This preference for the simplest interpretation is supported by psychological research (Chater and Vitanyi, 2003; Lombrozo, 2006, 2007) and has been acknowledged as a strong factor in individuals’ information evaluation processes (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). However, addressing this tendency through educational interventions may not be straightforward. In the context of misinformation, Lewandowsky describes how when people are corrected with alternative, but much more complex, explanations, they are likely to reject these in favour of a simpler, misinforming, account. This has implications for education and information literacy support; the cognitive biases that influence individuals’ conceptions are strong and there is no simple intervention to tackle them.

### ***Constructs evaluating the authority of the source***

This category includes constructs that participants used to determine the authority of the elements, or information sources. Although related, it is distinct from Category 2, in which the authority of the *informational content* is conceptualised, rather than the *source itself*. It presents the findings relating to constructs that participants used to determine the *authority* of the elements, or information sources. These constructs are distinct from the construct category in the previous section, which contains constructs that participants used to describe the ways they evaluate the *quality of the information* communicated by the sources.

One commonality among the majority of participants was that they reported that they preferred to receive political information from other people, regardless of the constructs they related to these sources. This is a widely acknowledged phenomena; people tend to prefer other people of sources of information, even when the information is not as reliable or authoritative as from other sources (Case 2007, p.200). The ways in which participants described how they decide which sources are authoritative are discussed below.

Sources that ranked highly for authority did so because participants considered them “knowledgeable”, “experienced”, “trustworthy” and “well-intentioned”. Other factors that influenced how authoritative sources of political information participants considered them to be included the personality of the source, their level of formality and “modern” participants considered them to be in

general terms. These criteria are similar to those identified in studies of young people's views of web content evaluation, which found that, even with a set of evaluation categories provided by the researchers, young people placed less emphasis on the importance of evaluative factors associated with authorship and more emphasis on aspects such as currency, spelling and grammar, and verifiability (Pickard et al., 2014).

The perceived level of knowledge possessed by information sources was also an important factor for participants in deciding on the authority of sources. Although the rankings of elements according to these constructs cannot be assessed statistically because not all participants identified the same sources of information as elements in their grids, it is nonetheless of interest to note that several participants did perceive the same elements as knowledgeable where there were crossovers across individual grids. These include *BBC News*, *BBC Question Time*, teachers, and school lessons.

In some cases, participants perceived a certain degree of trust in an information source based on conduct or behaviour rather than the information content provided. For example, P12 described how they were more likely to go to the BBC for information if it was for a school project, whereas if it was "just for news out of personal interest" they were more likely to go to *The Daily Mail*. This apparent divide between political information for use at school and political information for personal use, with participants describing, for example, how they would look something up on the internet for schoolwork about a political issue but be less likely to fact check something they passively encountered in their everyday life. This is in line with observations from previous studies that young people frame their lives in terms of "school" and "not school" schema (Agosto 2002), and is of relevance to information literacy support. An awareness of this dividing line may help practitioners to understand how to communicate the relevance of information literacy practices in everyday life.

Related to levels of trust, some participants discussed their perceptions of the intentions of the information sources. The language used when discussing the intentions of the sources in the case of the three participants who discussed the purpose of the elements and the information they were sharing echoed the language I observed in school lessons. Students were encouraged by teachers to consider the purpose and audience of the text, and whether the intention of the author was to inform, persuade or advise, with teachers explaining how these factors can lead to bias in writing. This consideration as a means of evaluating the trustworthiness and authority of the source echoes Pickard et al.'s (2014, p.15) suggestion that students' information evaluation methods and capacities are strongly influenced by what they are taught in school, from the emphasis placed on the evaluation of the spelling and grammar of their own work to the vocabulary around informing, persuading and advising. Given the strength of influence of this curricular content and the values students develop as a result of the ways their work is assessed, it would be beneficial to explore the potential role of schools in holistically supporting media and information literacy in line with the needs of the modern political context more effectively.

Another method participants described discerning whether or not an information source was authoritative was the perceived experience of the source or speaker. For example, P2 viewed their friends as relatively inexperienced (scored 2), in comparison to both of their parents and maternal grandmother (scored 9), maternal grandfather (scored 10), and paternal grandfather (scored 8). The participant viewed themselves as having a similar amount of experience to their friends, including a lack of knowledge and experience relating to some topics, such as Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative government of the 1980s. The participant suggested that this lack of experience meant that they needed to learn more before they could be considered authoritative sources:

Friends are pretty much the same as me, just more learning to do cos there's less experience. Granddad's got much more experience. (P2)

P16 viewed their parents and grandparents as relatively experienced (scored 9 and 10 respectively) in comparison to their sisters (scored 6). *The Daily Mail* and television documentaries were considered as being experienced (scored 9), with Google and the regional news programme *Look North* ranking most highly (scored 10) and Twitter and Snapchat the lowest (scored 6 and 4). Look Fashion was scored 7. When the construct “less experience vs. more experience” was elicited from this participant, they were comparing their parents to their sisters:

I'd say my mum and dad have a broader knowledge which is probably better, because they've been around for longer and they've got more experience. Whereas my sisters, although they think they know a lot because they're learning a lot at school, they don't know a lot about wider world affairs. (P16)

The perceived level of life experience and the knowledge associated with this experience accounts for the authority in which the majority of participants held their parents and other older relatives. This has been found to be a key characteristic facilitating political discussion between generations within families (Levinsen and Yndigegn, 2015). Discussion with parents is an influential aspect of political socialisation and a predictor of future political participation (Amnå, 2012), which has implications for the political agency of young people whose parents are politically disengaged, and may result in intergenerational disengagement from political and civic participation. Several of the participants in the present study reported a desire to discuss political issues with school teachers and librarians, who were viewed as authoritative, knowledgeable and trustworthy, but said that they frequently experienced disengagement and a refusal to discuss political topics because of perceived “rules” around this. There is the potential for individuals within these respected roles to encourage the development of political agency, and although a raft of limiting factors been identified (Smith, 2016) the potential benefits include increased youth participation in formal political processes such as voting in local and general elections and referendums and participation in other forms of political activism. Furthermore, the impact of political socialisation from outwith the home on young people from families who are disenfranchised is reflexive and stands to support the political participation of these marginalised adults (Terriquez and Kwon, 2015), thereby strengthening representative democratic systems.

In addition to experience, transparency about opinions was a major influence on participants' perceptions of the authority of sources. The majority of participants described a positive view of television programmes, describing how they give them an insight into the political world and how they viewed them as “reliable” (P26, P22), “trustworthy” (P22, P28) and “unbiased” (P17, P23). Television was not viewed as a homogenous source, and preferences for certain programmes or channels were expressed, with *BBC News* and programmes such as *BBC Question Time* being rated highly for quality and lack of bias. In contrast, internet sources were construed as more homogenous sources and less trusted due to perceived bias:

“BBC News tells you like a more, not a biased opinion, do you know like, whereas google, you could click on a website what's more biased.” (P2)

This understanding of the structure of the internet and the relationship between Google and other websites was communicated by nine participants, a conception identified in previous studies (Smith, 2010). A lack of trust in websites as information sources because of the risk of finding out of date content (P14), and construing information on the whole of the internet as being opinion- rather than fact-based (P7, P23) were also conceptions that participants reported as limiting their trust in the internet as a source of political information. Additionally, participants described how they were more likely to trust information on social media if it was shared by celebrities they respect (P21), relating to the perceived authority of the person sharing the information.

A construct of particular significance was the perceived opinions of these sources of information, and specifically the perceived transparency of these opinions. While participants had different preferences, many described that they like to know that the programme or speaker has particular opinions or does not have opinions, but fundamentally that these should be clear. In some instances, participants also identified a preference for sources that were perceived to share the same opinions as them, although this was of secondary importance to transparency. Elements described as being highly opinionated or possessing an “agenda” were mainstream and social media sources, such as Facebook, Tumblr, *BBC News*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Andrew Marr Show*, *Mock the Week*, and *Russell Howard’s Good News*. This perceived opinionated agenda did not impact the positive light in which the shows were viewed. The positive regard for television programmes and sources available through social media may be explained by the ways in which participants described how they formed opinions based on the opinions communicated via these channels. Studies of the relationship between entertainment and political learning and the effects of entertainment media on political knowledge have found that an increasing number of young people consider entertainment media an “important source of political information” (Kim and Vishak 2008). However, the sources of entertainment engaged with have not been found to be effective for learning. Rather, they have an effect on individuals’ perceived knowledge, based on what is described as impression formation - that is, an affective imprint rather than the learning of accurate information (Lee and Cappella, 2001; Pfau et al., 2001; Young, 2004).

### ***Constructs relating to affective responses to the information source.***

Affect and emotion formed a significant role in participants’ constructs of political information sources. The level of influence the information had on the participants, the degree to which participants agree or disagree with the messages communicated by the information sources, their level of interest in the information presented by the source, their emotional reactions to the information, how entertaining the information was felt to be, and how much participants felt they could relate personally to the sources, all influenced their engagement with the information sources.

Some participants described a basic construct of interest or disinterest in a source. The reasons participants gave for being interested in these sources varied. Some participants explained that they were interested in more “gruesome” and “controversial” news stories on television and in newspapers (P6, P21). Other sources of information, such as the radio, were described as being able to present content to deliberately interest different listening audiences (P32). For one participant the internet was construed as interesting because of the amount of information available and the opportunities it affords for “coming across something you’re not looking for” (P22). This construct did not correlate strongly with any particular elements across the interviews, and ranking of elements on this construct was dependent on the participant and the other factors influencing their perceptions of the source. This indicates that a person’s interest in a source of political information is dependent on a range of personal variables. However, several participants described an increased likelihood of actively engaging with information if it interested them, which although in itself is unsurprising, related to participants’ reporting of behaviour that could be described as “passive monitoring” (Savolainen, 1995, p.273). When participants felt that a political topic was interesting and of relevance to their lives, they reported that they were more likely to “keep an eye” on the news and listen out for mentions of it in the background, on the radio and on television, for example (P12). Topics of particular interest to participants most often related to their education, including discussions around changing school holiday timings and lengths (P22), curricular requirements to learn modern foreign languages (P6, P12, P25) and their employment prospects after school that may be affected by skills development (P26, P31).

Several participants described how certain information sources have an influence on their emotions and moods. Elements including television news were construed by several participants as eliciting

strong emotional responses, including P14 who said that they “hate” the *BBC News* because it talks about issues that are going on around the world and this is very much information which the participant is not interested in encountering. Other participants described affective responses to encountering television news:

I have an opinion on the news where I find news really depressing and bad. I don't really like to watch it because I find it puts me in a bad mood! (P16)

The influence of sources of political information on young people's emotions and moods, and the ways in which the participants expressed a preference for certain sources and an avoidance of others because of their perceived affective and emotional impact. For example, television news and newspapers were avoided by some participants because the content makes them “sad”. This is in line with assertions by Yadamsuren and Heinström (2011) that engagement with television news can have affective responses, many of which can be negative. Multiple participants reported that mood had an influence on their choice to use information, including P16 and P21 who said that they chose to avoid television news and newspapers because the content makes them sad. This is in-keeping with the wider literature on information seeking, where it has been argued that affective factors may often be more influential than cognitive needs in relation to information seeking (Wilson 1981), and that negative emotions and feelings may result in individuals avoiding active information seeking (Savolainen, 2014). While this disengagement from information that results in negative affective responses is not necessarily surprising, it does merit consideration when designing information literacy activities. If young people (among others) deliberately avoid sources of information that they anticipate will present them with unpleasant content, it may be of value to encourage them to reflect on these information practices whether these may have an impact on their long-term political agency, and what the disadvantages of selective information exposure may be.

In contrast to reports of avoiding content that might make them sad, multiple participants discussed their enjoyment of political information when it took a comedic format. For example, P21 identified Facebook, *Mock the Week* and *Russell Howard's Good News* as being “funny” or “lighthearted”, which they thought had benefits for learning about political issues. For example, one participant commented: “You remember stuff more if it's funny” (P21). The wider literature on the role of comedy programs in supporting political learning is mixed, with some studies showing no positive effects (Duncan and Nelson, 1985; Prior, 2005), while others suggest that political satire can empower audiences to critically engage with politics (Becker and Waisanen, 2013; Cao, 2008; Meddaugh, 2010). Young people's enjoyment of this format suggest it may be a useful tool for building political information literacy amongst this group, as part of a wider scheme of support.

Several participants compared elements with each other in terms of how entertaining they find them. Elements such as comedy news programmes tended to be ranked highly, with newspapers ranking relatively low. P9 described how they thought newspapers sparked their imagination more because the format offers more descriptive potential and provides images to help paint a picture. P16 said they found Twitter entertaining because “controversial issues tend to be discussed” on there. Similarly, the choice of information source was sometimes influenced by the entertainment value that comes from perceived controversy:

I look on *The Daily Mail* because it's controversial and stuff so it's interesting to read. (P21)

In some instances, participants explicitly stated that how entertaining they found different information sources influenced how often they used them, and this was reflected in their ranking of the elements along the relevant constructs. It is interesting to consider the role that entertainment value plays in engagement with political information sources, including increased political awareness (Baum, 2003), and an increased likelihood of engaging with more traditional “hard” news (Ibid) that may then lead

to improved knowledge and understanding of political issues. For example, positive emotions and feelings played a motivational role for participants. Some expressed a preference for sources of political information that are perceived as funny and entertaining, and believe the information is more likely to help their development of knowledge and understanding. Although positivist in nature and therefore contradictory in epistemology to this study, the Uses and Gratifications paradigm (McQuail, 2005) may be a useful lens through which to view this finding. Lin (1993) used the uses and gratifications approach to identify several positive outcomes sought by young people when engaging with different forms of media. One of the forms of gratification was entertainment, which was a positive affective element identified by participants in this study when discussing their engagement with television news. Another affective element was the enhancement of interpersonal communication, with some participants discussing how they may encounter information online, on television or the radio or in a newspaper, and then discuss the information they had encountered with friends and family. Entertainment and the enhancement of social interaction are two of the five goals for media use identified within the uses and gratifications paradigm, and these are identified in the reasons participants engage with media in this study.

An acknowledged issue within information science research is that the majority of studies focus on negative affect from a deficit perspective (Kari and Hartel, 2007, p.1131). Although some positive affective responses were communicated by participants in this study, as it was not a central focus of the research the spectrum of emotion was not explicitly explored and it is unclear how affect plays a role in political information behaviour in this context. Given the significance of affective factors in relation to information behaviour (Crudge and Johnson, 2007; Lopatovska and Arapakis, 2011; Neal and McKenzie, 2011), and the highly personal, and sometimes unexpected ways in which these factors manifest (for example in explicitly seeking out controversy), those seeking to engage with young people's political information use through research and practice should take the time to understand the affective, as well as cognitive, motivations and rationales for political information experiences. Young people are not a homogenous group, and their unique perspectives and experiences influence their interpretation of political information.

## **Conclusion**

The study has identified the various ways in which young people are aware of encountering and using political information, and has explored the variety of ways political information itself is conceptualised by young people; a currently underexplored area of information behaviour. Results indicate that young people use a wide range of sources of political information to become informed about politics and the world around them. These sources of information include family, friends, teachers, television news, newspapers, radio shows, comedy shows, social media and community meetings. Participants were aware that they passively encounter information sources as well as actively engage in debate and discussion with other sources. The nature of young people's experiences of political information varies greatly, as exemplified by findings presented here. The degree of complexity in the experiences of political information varied not only between participants but was also dependent on their particular relationship with the information sources under scrutiny.

Analysis indicated that some participants had difficulty critically evaluating the political information sources they encounter. Even where the sources of information can be seen as more easily critically assessed, such as textual information or formal learning resources, there were relatively few instances in which participants discussed their ability to challenge the authority of information sources, the truth, validity or reliability of the information. When participants did discuss aspects of critical evaluation, several participants used inaccurate terminology, and there was a lack of clarity about what this means as well as looks like in practice, which indicates an area in which young people may require more support. Participants often conflated the notions of truth and opinion, both of which participants described as "facts". This lack of clarity of concepts could be seen as another area in

which young people would benefit from learning about in order to effectively evaluate the reliability of political information. However, participants did talk about some evaluative aspects of their experiences with political information sources. Some participants were capable of applying critical thought to their comparison of political information sources. This indicates the potential for young people to develop critical political information evaluation skills with adequate support, the implementation of which may be aided by findings and discussion from this paper.

By using personal construct theory we have gained an insight into the political information experiences of young people that helps us identify where information literacy interventions can support young people to develop political information evaluation skills and the capacity to meaningfully and knowledgeably participate in political processes, including discourse and informal engagement as well as formal methods. Rather than approaching the issue from a deficit approach that assumes young people lack knowledge and awareness, this research explores experiences from the perspective of young people and identifies their potential and current capacities.

### ***Limitations of the research***

This study focuses on the deep exploration of political information experiences of a necessarily relatively small sample. As such, generalisations about young people's political information experience should not be made. Methodologically, the drawbacks of PCT relevant to this study include that personal construct psychology tends to take an individual approach to the issue under analysis, and is not easily applied to community or wider social phenomena. However, PCT has been used to explore social phenomena (Kalekin-Fishman, 1993, 2003), and we suggest that the key stages of analysis outlined in this paper offer a structured analytical framework for information-based phenomenon, where the psychologies of information evaluation are individual as well as socially and contextually defined.

This analysis has allowed us to identify both conceptual insights and practical applications (discussed below). As such, it does not build a unique theory. A forthcoming paper presents a new phenomenographic model of young people's political information experiences.

### ***Implications for practice***

A notable absence from the constructs relating to the evaluation of the quality of political information was a critical dimension focusing on how information could be established as true, reliable, or valid. There is an opportunity here for information literacy provision in schools to focus on helping young people determine definitions and understandings of concepts such as 'truth', which is particularly salient in the current so-called "post-truth" era (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). School libraries may be able to better support information evaluation and the development of the skills, capacities and vocabularies to critique information presented in different formats. However, the practical implementation of work of this nature in the UK context may be limited by significant barriers, such as the limited status of librarians within schools (Smith, 2016).

The findings of this study suggest a need for an approach to information literacy in schools that focuses on the application of critical thinking and information literacy capacities to political and news information sources. Political information and its use are situated and contextual, and in many cases take the form of secondary information reported by family and friends. There is a need for information literacy to ensure that its scope includes supporting young people to understand the various ways in which people interact with and communicate information, to support their effective use of information outwith the educational context.

The role of trusted adults in relation to information about news, current events and politics was key to the majority of participants, which has implications for young people who do not have access to

knowledgeable and engaged family members, as well as for educational practices, which often emphasise disengagement from discussing sensitive and political topics with young people. Further research is needed into whether school and library policies and practices have negative implications for young people's political information experiences and engagement with civic life.

In terms of specific information literacy practices, our findings provide insight into some of the ways of understanding and experiencing political information that may serve to inform the design of information literacy interventions with regard to political participation and media literacy. For example, the fact that young people reported that they were more likely to engage with information when it was of interest and relevance to them, for example about school holidays, curriculum content and employability is of relevance. Individuals supporting information literacy development may be able to effectively use these topics as starting points for engaging young people with political information seeking and evaluation.

### ***Implications for theory***

Although this study did not seek to evaluate young people's political information literacy capacities, it is important to note that participants did report conceptions and behaviours that may have implications for their ability to meaningfully participate in democratic life. The shortfalls identified in young people's information behaviour in the context of political information use, particularly in terms of critical evaluation, suggests a role for information literacy in this respect. Further investigation of young people's information evaluation and other aspects of information literacy in relation to political information is warranted, to apply existing information behaviour theory as well as to potentially develop theory within the specific context of political information encounters and use.

In the context of current widespread concern around "fake news" and "post-truth" society, participants' preference for receiving political information from other people has pressing implications for the outcomes of political decisions. In turn, this has implications for the library and information profession, with much current discussion centring on the role of information literacy in tackling the "fake news epidemic" (Hall 2016). It is evident that beyond supporting individuals to locate and evaluate information based on traditional criteria of reliability, validity and bias, for example, it may also be important to engage with concepts of cognitive bias from a psychological perspective, to support individuals to understand when their interpretation of messages may be influenced by their own psychological contexts. Findings from this study may serve as a useful starting point for considering salient issues and identifying how theory can be applied in practice to design methods of teaching, and understand where information literacy interventions are unlikely to be effective due to complex cognitive, social and structural issues. Several issues of cognitive bias were identified as potentially limiting young people's informed political engagement, but addressing these through educational interventions may not be straightforward. People's rejection of accurate information in preference for more simplistic explanations, for example, has implications for education and information literacy support, as well as political and social education more broadly. The cognitive biases that influence individuals' conceptions are strong and there is no simple intervention to tackle them. A more comprehensive interdisciplinary understanding of the complexities of political information experiences will be a valuable step towards supporting political agency and meaningful participation.

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