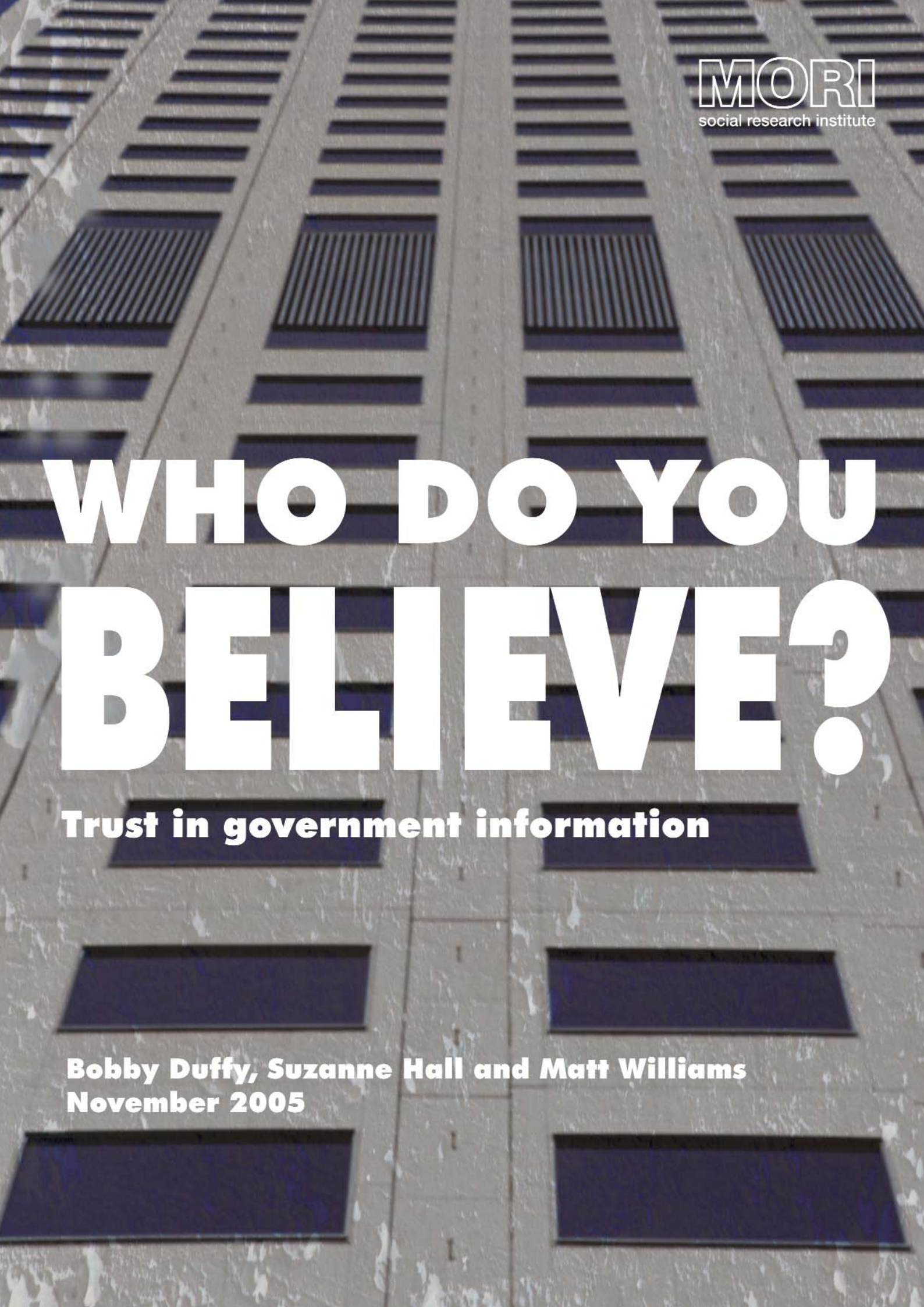

MORI
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WHO DO YOU BELIEVE?

Trust in government information

Bobby Duffy, Suzanne Hall and Matt Williams
November 2005

MORI's Social Research Institute works closely with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector to understand what works in terms of service delivery, to provide robust evidence for policy makers, and to help politicians understand public priorities.

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Contents

In the consultation document "Statistics: a matter of trust", the government emphasised its intention to seek a new relationship with citizens based on openness and trust.

Tony Blair, October 1999

But actually, he thought as he re-adjusted the Ministry of Plenty's figures, it was not even forgery. It was merely the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another.

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

Our job is to create the truth.

Peter Mandelson

Foreword

All governments worry about trust. Confucius described trust as more valuable even than armies and resources, and today's public agencies and political parties devote considerable energies to winning back often frayed public confidence.

In recent years their success has been mixed, to say the least. One of the surprising consequences is that in modern Britain the government's worst nightmare is not that its policies might fail, but rather that they might succeed but that no-one would believe them because of chronic distrust of the official numbers detailing improvements in policing, hospitals and schools.

This study is the latest instalment in a long tradition of pathbreaking work by MORI that has dissected the anatomy of public trust and helped to demolish a few myths along the way. One of the many virtues of this work is that it has served as a reminder that some of the facts and issues have changed very little over the last few decades, including, for example, the relatively low trust ratings of elected politicians.

This report now goes a step further and also points to some remedies. It makes a strong case for ensuring that public statistics are visibly independent from any political influence, but also shows that on its own independence is not enough. There also need to be third parties to validate, praise and, occasionally to denounce. Just as important politicians need to be careful about how they use facts. If spin doctors aren't kept firmly under control their misuse of statistics can quickly corrode confidence in otherwise sound data.

History shows that there is nothing inevitable about governments losing trust. Low trust can be reversed with care, discipline and persistence. This report provides some of the vital pointers to how that can be done.

Geoff Mulgan
Director, The Young Foundation

Summary and conclusions

This report contains the key findings of a research study carried out jointly by MORI's Qualitative HotHouse and Research Methods Unit to explore the extent to which the general public trust government statistics and information, the key drivers of trust and steps that could be taken to increase credibility. It builds on MORI survey data collected on the question of trust going back to 1983.

The key findings from the study are that:

- While there is no general crisis of trust, there have been significant declines in some important aspects, including trust in the government and the Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, Iraq provides the backdrop to many people's attitudes to government information;

- Setting up an independent National Statistics Service to produce and "kitemark" official statistics could help restore trust, but only if there was also improved policing of the use of the information. Most people have few concerns about the accuracy or objectiveness of the statistics themselves, but are concerned by their manipulation by politicians and the media;

- The policing and auditing role could follow the model of the *FactCheck* organisation in the US, which tested the accuracy of political statements throughout the presidential elections, or could be covered by an increased remit of existing bodies, such as the National Audit Office;

- Whatever the organisational changes, there needs to be greater imagination in the communication of government information. For example, *Which*-style publications that are independently produced and are open about the sources and limitations of the information are likely to be very popular.

This study comprised two phases: desk research to scope the project and gather the findings of existing research on the subject; and qualitative research, involving five 'experimental' focus groups with members of the general public across the country. The content and conditions in these groups were systematically varied to help identify which variables contributed most to how views were shaped. The techniques and criteria for varying group conditions included:

- How information was delivered/presented (newspaper, video, radio, slides, read out);

- Who gave the information (video clip of David Blunkett, mocked-up radio interview with junior minister, newspaper reporter, moderator);

- Source of information (government and different independent organisations, e.g. King's Fund, Migration Watch);

- The level of support given to the information by the researcher leading the discussion.

This approach was vital in untangling the relative importance of different factors in influencing views.

The report firstly explores the context for government information, and in particular why it has become harder to be believed, then moves on to look at what steps could be taken to improve this situation.

A crisis of trust?

While survey trends going back decades suggest it is wrong to talk about a new crisis of trust in government, there have been significant and worrying declines in some aspects of trust in recent years. In particular, the proportion saying the government can be trusted to put the interests of the country before the interests of its party has halved since 1986. It is therefore hardly surprising that six in ten do not feel that the government uses official figures honestly or that official figures are produced without political interference. Some argue this is a sign of a more sophisticated, healthy scepticism of government motives. There is some sign of that in the research conducted here, but there is also a great deal of unthinking, dismissive suspicion.

These attitudes and shifts can be explained by a number of relatively recent changes that have made it more likely that government information will be questioned or ignored by the general public. Some of these are successive governments' own doing, but others reflect wider changes in how we receive and assess information.

There is undoubtedly much greater awareness among the general public of the *packaging of politics* – or more commonly spin – than there was even a decade ago. This was seen throughout our discussions, and is a result of the focus placed on spin by the media and opposition parties, as well as the celebrity status of key figures, particularly Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson. Quotes such as the one below suggest how suspicious people have become, and how difficult it will be to change views.

> *Everything - there's spin on it. Even when you don't think it has got spin, it's got spin on it.*
>
> Stockport

Of course, this awareness also comes from some recent high profile examples of where information is seen to have been twisted, in particular Iraq, which surveys have shown to be a key context to all current discussions of government trust. Over the past few decades it has been the measurement of unemployment levels, the BSE crisis and general perceptions of "sleaze". The currency of Iraq was backed up by our discussions, which emphasised how much leakage there was between views of the government's trustworthiness on different issues.

This has come at a time of general *misinformation overload,* through the proliferation of media outlets, including the internet. As many have argued, while the new information sources should make us better equipped than ever to identify the truth, they actually make it harder to tell fact from fiction. This was well recognised by discussion participants, and left them confused about who to trust.

Many discussion participants further suggested that government and the media take advantage of this uncertainty to cherry-pick information to support their side of the stories, knowing there is little that people can do to question them. Crime figures are often given as particular examples of this, with (often perfectly explainable) discrepancies between recorded crime and figures from the British Crime Survey used by the opposition and the media to score points. A leader article from the Daily Mail in the run-up to the election illustrates this approach: *"He (Blair) blithely brushes aside his own official evidence and seizes on quite separate figures to assert that violent crime is down. Confused? You're meant to be. Manipulating statistics to muddy the waters is a New Labour speciality."*[1] This is an effective strategy to highlight legitimate issues of concern in the short-term, but in the long-term it helps reduce general levels of trust in all government information.

This study has also found a *blurring of personal experience.* While people claim that they base their opinions on direct experience of services or situations, when they are probed carefully it is clear that a lot of this comes from anecdotes from friends or family, or overheard stories – and, in many cases, even from reports in the media. This will be partly because people have never considered where their views come from, and when challenged, personal experience is the most powerful source of information to back up their arguments, as the source cannot be questioned. But it also likely that this blurring is becoming more important, as we become more isolated from each other and draw more of our experience through the media and the internet. At the same time the media are becoming more reliant on individuals for its material, with the use of "citizen reporters" backed up by mobile phone pictures and videos forming a key element of recent major news stories such as the London bombings. These dual trends are helping to make personal experience less clear cut.

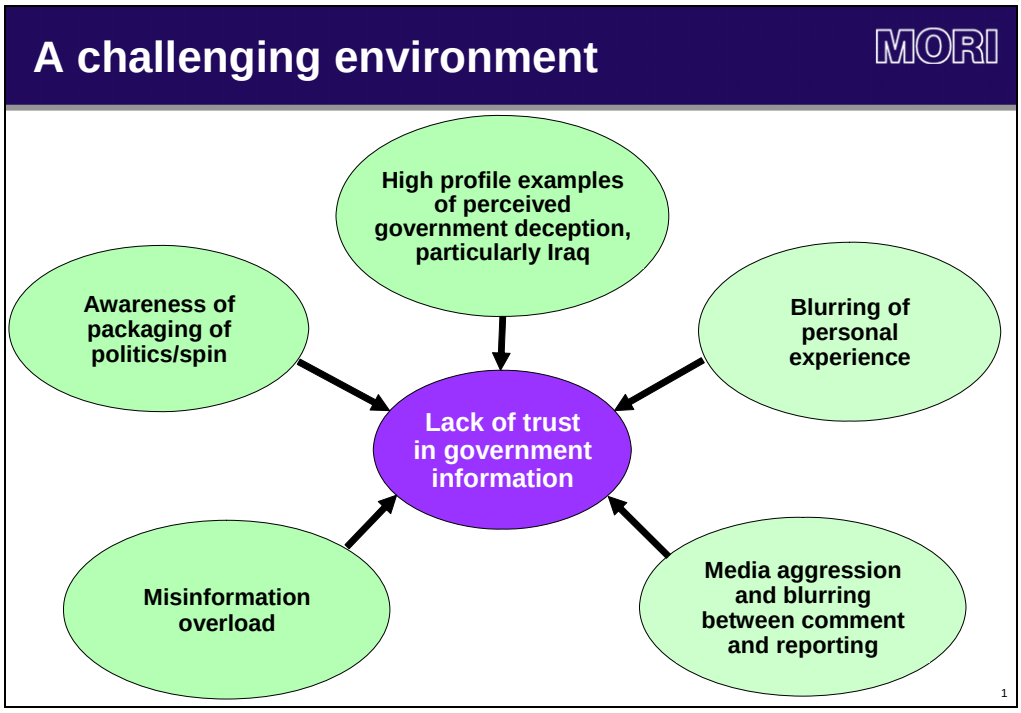
Much has been said about *changing role of the media* in recent years. The dismissive and bitter reporting that many identify, along with the blurring between reporting and comment is a vital piece of context for government information, as for the vast majority of people it is just about the only way official messages can be communicated. While levels of trust in the media are generally low, the influence on views of particular issues (especially those that people can have little direct

[1] Daily Mail 22nd April 2005

experience of, such as immigration) is seen to be huge in the discussions and a number of survey studies.

The media are also likely to be a key part of the explanation of the *perception gap* we have seen emerge between relatively favourable views of personal experience of public services or peoples' own local areas and relatively unfavourable views of how things are going nationally. The more critical stance of much of the media therefore goes a long way to explain this gap in ratings. It is also likely that views of the national picture will be much more influenced by an individual's political views than ratings of direct service experience.

Overall then, there are a number of reasons why the context for government information has become much more challenging, as the chart below shows. Some of these are a result of the government's own actions, but others are largely beyond its control and unlikely to improve on their own.



How do we increase trust in information?

Given this more difficult context, it will take a series of quite significant steps to increase trust in government information.

The discussions suggest that there may be fewer advantages from using familiar politicians to provide information than we see in other sectors. Indeed there are clear signs that a change of faces helps improve reactions to information provided, as these are less associated with past failings. This has also been seen in more general discussions of political renewal, which is a serious issue for long-term governments.

However, the discussions also emphasised that the real issue is perceived independence and objectivity – and that the key actions are therefore to ensure that information is seen to be beyond government influence, and that its use is regulated and audited. This would involve either developing the remit of existing bodies such as the Office for National Statistics themselves, the Statistics Commission or the National Audit Office, or setting up a new independent organisation that could "kitemark" information, and follow-up misuses by government, the opposition or the media.

Independent national statistics services have been established in a number of other countries, including Australia and Canada, and it has been proposed by a number of politicians in this country before, including by members of the current government in the mid-1990s. It seems to be a policy that is more attractive in opposition than government, but it could be the ideal time to push it through: it would be a clear signal of an attempt to rebuild trust in government information, in the way that giving independence to the Bank of England demonstrated a new approach to economic management.

Even if such a body were given serious government support, there would still be a need to communicate better with the general public on these issues. We detected a real appetite for more information about information; with the increased uncertainty about the believability of sources, people do want more assurance of the quality and pedigree of the information that is provided. While this does not mean bombarding people with technicalities, it could mean more inventive approaches. This could include setting up a similar service as the FactCheck service in the US, which tested the veracity of US presidential election claims: "StatCheck UK", which would be limited to use of government information (and not cover policy claims, as in the US), is likely to be very popular.

But there are other communications approaches that need to be explored. For example, *Which?* style magazines/websites that provide comprehensive tests of government services or policies are also likely to be popular with the public, as long as they are seen to be from an independent and objective source. There are already some attempts to provide information in more flexible formats, such as the Neighbourhood Statistics Service, but when compared with private sector equivalents it is clear we still have a long way to go.

Finally, as well as providing ideas on how to improve trust in information, the research also gives some clear pointers on making information memorable. These generally reflect conclusions from a number of communications theories. For example, it was clear that surprising facts linked to case studies and meaningful stories were particularly likely to be remembered. The discussion also showed, however, that apparently minor aspects of presentation, such as whether the percentages given translated easily into fractions, had a substantial effect on recall.

Introduction

This report contains the key findings of a research study carried out jointly by MORI's Qualitative HotHouse and Research Methods Unit. Some of the elements of this work were partly sponsored by the Department of Health and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

Research Objectives

The purpose of the research was to explore the extent to which the general public understand statistics and government messages, and the factors that contribute towards their trust and belief in this information. The research specifically focused on three key issues of current general interest; the National Health Service (NHS), crime and asylum.

This paper examines in detail the following areas:

- The current climate of political communications;
- How and why views are influenced by the media;
- Understanding the impact of personal experience and the role it plays in influencing opinions;
- Local versus national perspectives and understanding the 'perception gap';
- How respondents react to different sources of data;
- Determining which data sources are perceived to be the most reliable and trustworthy;
- Identifying how far the presentation of data alters perceptions.

Methodology

MORI undertook two phases of research for this study:

- Desk research to refine the scope of the project and gather the findings of existing research on the subject;

- Qualitative research, involving five 'experimental' focus groups.

To place the findings from the qualitative phase in context, a review of research conducted to date, both by MORI and other organisations, was carried out. These findings are referenced throughout the report.

The qualitative research involved five experimental focus groups conducted during September 2004. Each focus group lasted around two hours and typically contained eight respondents. Participants were recruited according to various criteria, including: age, socio-economic grade, ethnicity, attitude towards the Government[2] and newspaper readership. A breakdown showing the composition of each group is shown below.

- Group 1: London, mixed gender and ethnicity, 20 – 40, social classes ABC1, dissatisfied with the government;

- Group 2: London, mixed gender and ethnicity, 41 – 60, social classes C2DE, London, mixed views on the government;

- Group 3: Chester, mixed gender and ethnicity, 20 – 40, social classes C2DE, satisfied with the government;

- Group 4: Chester, mixed gender and ethnicity, 41 – 60, social classes ABC1, mixed views on the government; and,

- Group 5: Stockport, mixed gender and ethnicity, 20 – 40, social classes C2DE, satisfied with the government.

The conditions of the groups were also systematically varied to help identify which variables contributed to how views were shaped. The techniques and criteria for varying group conditions included:

- How information was delivered/presented (newspaper, video, radio, slides, read out);

[2] To obtain a mixture of views on the topics covered, the groups were structured to ensure there were two groups with participants who are generally satisfied with the government, two groups with a spread of views, and one group with people who are generally dissatisfied with government performance.

- Who gave the information (video clip of David Blunkett, mocked-up radio interview with junior minister, moderator);

- Source of information (government and different independent organisations, e.g. King's Fund, Migration Watch);

- The level of support given to the information by the researcher leading the discussion.

This approach was central to untangling the relative importance of different factors in influencing views, although there were limitations imposed by conducting only five focus groups.

Interpreting qualitative research

Qualitative research involves an interactive process between the people carrying out the research and those being researched. It provides a way of probing the underlying attitudes of participants, and obtaining an understanding of the issues of importance. It allows insights into the attitudes, and the reasons for these attitudes, which could not be probed in as much depth with a structured questionnaire. The flexible nature of this research method allows participants to define their own issues and raise their own problems.

However, that also means these results are not based on quantitative statistical evidence and are therefore illustrative and not statistically representative. There is also a tendency for qualitative discussions to elicit critical views. This report should be read with these notes of caution in mind.

Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from participants. These were selected to exemplify a particular view of a body of participants.

Acknowledgements

MORI would like to thank David Halpern for his help in developing this project, and Bob Worcester, Simon Atkinson and Gideon Skinner at MORI for comments.

Bobby Duffy

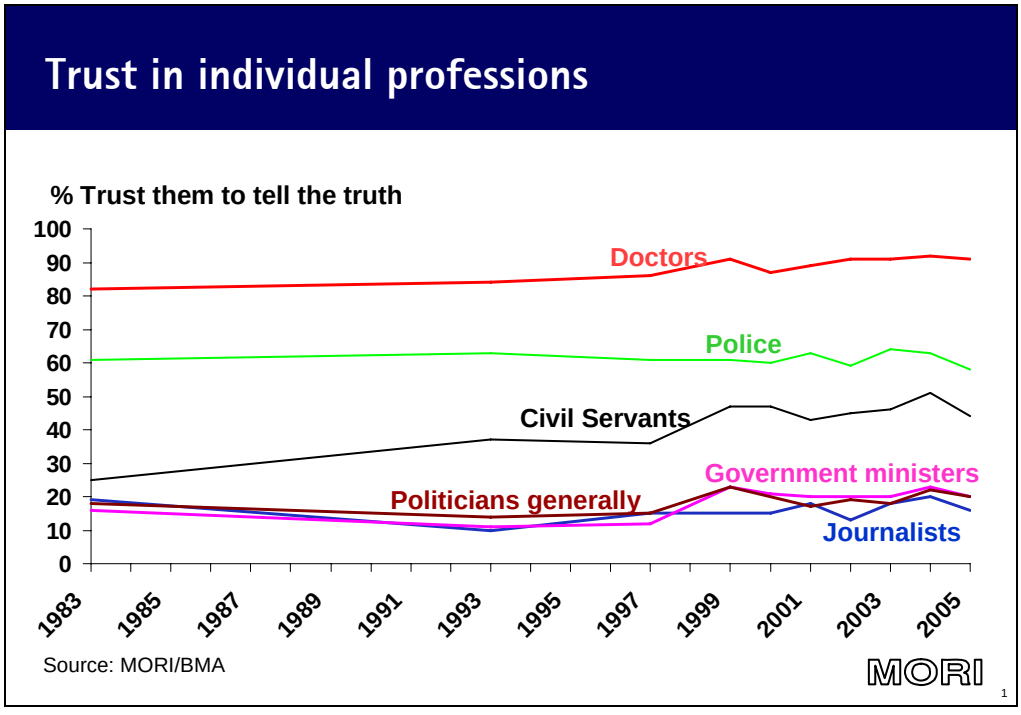
Suzanne Hall

Matt Williams

1. A crisis of trust?

Trust in the government and the Prime Minister was a key issue in the general election. Discussions of trust tended to focus on the information that was used to make the case for the war in Iraq, but this set the context for much more general statements about how the government can no longer be trusted to provide high quality, accurate and unbiased information. Indeed, one of the key Conservative posters of the campaign was "*If he's prepared to lie to take us to war, he's prepared to lie to win an election*".

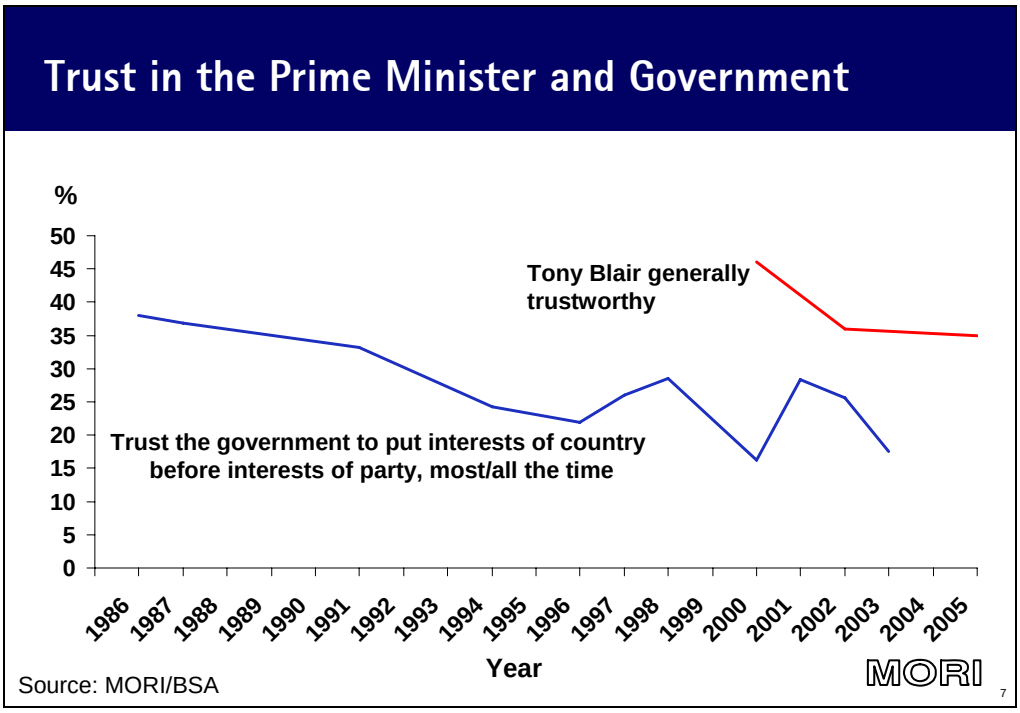
Of course, lack of trust in politicians is not a new phenomenon. As the chart below shows there has been very little change in levels of trust in many professions over the last twenty years, with government ministers and politicians always bumping along the bottom of the graph. Indeed, the only notable shift has been the general increase in trust in civil servants, which is encouraging, and something of a surprise given the negative focus of most media coverage of government "bureaucrats". Comparisons with other European countries also show we are not unusual, with around average levels of trust in our politicians.[3]



However, there have been some significant declines in specific aspects of trust in the UK which do suggest a shift in opinions. For example, as seen in the chart below, trust in Tony Blair since 2000 has seen a significant decline, although this was most rapid between 2000 and 2002, and attitudes towards Prime Ministers generally decline through their terms in office. Trust in the government to act in the interests of the country rather than their party seems rather more erratic, with a marked increase following the general election in 1997, followed by an even

[3] This is seen in both the European Social Survey and Eurobarometer studies.

sharper decline from 1999 to 2001. It is likely that the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the general election contributed to something of a revival, but the decline since has been equally sharp, and by 2003 the proportion who say they trust the government was half that seen in 1986.



It is perhaps surprising then that there has been relatively little examination of what engenders confidence in government information, although a recent review by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) started to address this. Britain is not unusual in this lack however – part of the ONS review shows that from 31 national statistics offices contacted only the Nordic countries had really looked in any detail at levels of trust and reasons for this.[4]

Early findings from the ONS study in the UK are hardly encouraging:

- 68% believe that official figures are changed to support whatever argument people want them to;
- 59% disagree that the government uses official figures honestly when talking about its policies; and
- 58% disagree that official figures are produced without political interference.[5]

As part of this programme of research, the Statistics Commission asked MORI to interview 36 stakeholders from across academia, parliament and the media. While

[4] See Sorrell, M *International Awareness: Public Confidence in Official Statistics* Feb 2005
[5] Jones, F and Kelly, M (2004) *Omnibus survey: initial findings on public confidence in Official Statistics*

they were less convinced that the government applies pressure to the statistical service to produce an agreeable set of figures, their views echoed the general public's concern about the selective presentation of data[6].

> *It's not lies, damned lies and statistics, it's lies, damned lies, and people who use statistics.*

This echoes all studies examined as part of our review, where there is seldom any question over the quality or validity of original government data. The focus is rather on how the information is selected, presented and, according to many, manipulated.

Part of the reason for suspicion among the general public, paradoxically, is the increased efficiency of political marketing, or what is commonly referred to as 'spin'. The prominence and persistence of discussions of spin has made many of the public more aware that policies and government are being marketed to them. This development has come hand-in-hand with other significant changes in how messages are received and interpreted, in particular the huge increases in the amount of information available to people and the changing role of the media.

This following sections examine the changed context for government information, before we go on to look at suggestions for increasing trust in and impact of communications.

The packaging of politics

Since the mid 1990's the way politicians communicate with the electorate has undergone a significant shift. Parties are more pro-active, co-ordinated and systematic in their news management – the techniques once seen only when an election was called are now key to day-to-day governing.[7] However, as has been well documented, this increase in the amount of political marketing, what the academic Bob Franklin calls the 'packaging of politics', has contributed to a rise in cynicism among the public.[8]

While the prominence of spin and terms like "spin-doctor"[9] is relatively recent, the practice itself is clearly nothing new. The first Press and Publicity Department in the Labour party was established in 1917, while debates about whether election campaigns should be 'image' or 'issue' driven began in the 1920's. In post-war politics, Tony Benn criticised Aneurin Bevan for what he saw as the ridiculous notion that *'all publicity is unimportant and that all you need is the*

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[6] MORI/Statistics Commission, *Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust* (2005).

[7] See for example, Norris, P *A Virtuous Circle: political communications in post-industrial societies* (2000) – one of other chapters

[8] Franklin, B *The Packaging of Politics: Political Communications in Britain's Media Democracy* (2004)

[9] The first use of the term "spin-doctor" is widely credited to the New York Times in October 1984, from a report of a Reagan/Mondale debate. This described them as: "*A dozen men in good suits and women in silk dresses [who] circulate smoothly among the reporters, spouting confident opinions. They won't be just press agents trying to impart a favorable spin to a routine release. They'll be Spin Doctors, senior advisors to the candidates"*

right policy'[10]. Harold Wilson in the 1960's suggested that *'most of politics is presentation and what isn't is timing'*. For decades press officers in the party machines have been adept at managing the flow of information into the public domain.

However, media and opposition focus, which helped create the celebrity status in Britain of Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, has helped raise the public profile of spin-doctors to such a degree that people are more aware that government policies and programmes are being 'sold'. This helps generate increased questioning of government information and arouses suspicion that the information used is less trustworthy, even though practices may not be that wildly different, as suggested by one opinion former interviewed as part of our work for the Statistics Commission:[11]

> *It's a concern that goes back further than just the New Labour period. It goes right back to the Thatcher government. What I think is new now is that it's placed in the context of a political culture dominated by spin.*

A number of books have examined this issue, looking at how much more attention is given to communications, or in some cases how new communications challenges have provided a justification for not being completely open and honest.[12] Political journalist Peter Oborne argues that the "*post-truth political environment*" applies just as much in the UK as the US, quoting from an interview with Tony Blair in 1987: *Our news today is instant, hostile to subtlety or qualification… the truth becomes almost impossible to communicate because total frankness, relayed in the shorthand of the mass media, becomes simply a weapon in the hands of opponents.*

The types of comments on spin outlined below were seen throughout our group discussions, and form the backdrop to all concerns about government information.

> *Everything - there's spin on it. Even when you don't think it has got spin, it's got spin on it.*
>
> Stockport

> *Stop spinning. The situation now is that they've been doing this for so long that they're now branded as untrustworthy and it's such a powerful branding that it'll take them ten years of being honest to sort it out and they haven't got that long. It is that they've created the mess themselves which originally worked very well for them. People believed them but time after time they lied and, as you say, on like Iraq.*
>
> Chester

[10] T. Benn, Years of Hope: Diaries, Papers and Letters 1940 – 1962 (London: Hutchman, 1994), p190.
[11] MORI/Statistics Commission, *Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust* (2005).
[12] Franklin ibid, Oborne, P The rise of political lying, London (2005)

As the latter quote makes clear, there is a great deal of leakage between judgements of information – if an individual or organisation is not trusted to tell the truth on one aspect it will clearly not be trusted on others. This is a key consideration, as high profile examples of perceived misuse of information, particularly over Iraq, do influence wider views. This was also seen in research conducted by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which found that 40% of people said that their views on trust in the government were influenced by recent events, and of these the vast majority cited the Iraq war.[13]

Misinformation overload?

As well as the increased focus on spin, many also struggle with the enormous amount of information that is now available to them. While this potentially provides the opportunity to make better choices and hold government or public services to better account, for many the messages become confused.

> *M: But the thing is, again, if you watch the news and you, for every time you'll hear somebody like David Blunkett saying this, you'll have the Tory party saying what a lot of nonsense this is …*
>
> *M: So, as just a man watching the telly, who do we believe? It's about who you trust.*
>
> Chester

These points have been seen in a number of recent studies, that have outlined the "paradox of choice" – how the greater volume and range of options has in fact helped make us less happy with our situation.[14] But the limitations of our ability to fully process the information available on our society is far from being a new phenomenon. In 1922 Walter Lippmann noted the key "artificial censorships" on our knowledge as including the limitations of social contact, the relatively meagre time available each day for paying attention to public affairs, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world and the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten our established routine. This all remains relevant, and is seen throughout the discussions.

People are also cynical about the usefulness of much of this information, with some believing we are now trying to measure too much and that this in itself can be counter-productive.

> *M: I believe that over 20 years we've probably* [arrived at] *a state where now things are being over measured…*
>
> *F: I would agree with that and from where I work I've seen a huge growth in the performance management culture.*
>
> Chester

[13] *Survey of attitudes towards standards in public life* Committee on Standards in Public Life (2004)
[14] See for example Schwartz, B *The paradox of choice* New York (2004) and Sen, A Development as Freedom New York (2000)

This echoes points made by Onora O'Neill[15], that the current culture of performance management (the "audit explosion") will not increase levels of trust, as it does not measure the right things, displaces older systems of accountability and raises suspicion about why the information has been collected in the first place. As she points out, transparency does not necessarily lead to trust: *On the contrary, trust seemingly has receded as transparency has advanced. Perhaps on reflection we should not be wholly surprised. It is quite clear that the very technologies that spread information so easily and efficiently are every bit as good at spreading misinformation and disinformation. Some sorts of openness and transparency may be bad for trust.*

It is also clearly not just government information that has proliferated, with many more private sources, from commercial and media organisations as well as individuals. This often leads to (real or apparent) contradictions that people find very difficult to resolve because they do not have the information or expertise to make judgements about apparently similar sources. This point is made clearly by O'Neill: *How can we tell which claims and couterclaims, reports and supposed facts are trustworthy when so much information swirls around us? It is hard to distinguish rumour from report, fact from fiction, reliable source from disinformant… Paradoxically then, in the new information order, those who choose to make up information or to pass it on without checking its accuracy, have rather an easy time… Supposed sources proliferate, leaving many of us unsure where and whether there is adequate evidence for or against contested claims.*

This concern about an individual's inability to identify what information should be believed is seen very clearly in the discussions with group participants:

> *But even when they do argue in the House of Commons, they give different figures and they call each other liars so how are we in the middle supposed to know what's the truth?*
>
> Chester

> *There's that many polls now that you think 'well who do I believe?'*
>
> Chester

This abundance helps encourage the view that governments are selective in their use of information, and indeed that they adapt it to suit their own ends.

> *I think what disturbs me about the figures that you constantly hear trolleyed out at the moment, is the fact that, when the last set of figures that the Labour government released didn't suit them, they changed the way the crimes were counted. It stinks, it's just false accounting. If it doesn't suit the picture you want to paint, they're moving the numbers.*
>
> Chester

[15] O'Neill, O *A question of trust* BBC Reith Lectures (2002)

There are also serious studies that support this view of selectivity. For example, a study by a group of academics shows how information on the Labour Party website in the run up to the 2001 election was manipulated to show that every constituency had improved on every key indicator identified by the government, through changing either the source of data, the time period or the level of geography until the story was positive.[16] This type of crude editing of information helps encourage media suspicion, which in turn feeds through to the general public.

Crime statistics were a particular focus for discussions, with many people picking up on the discrepancy between different sources. As outlined earlier, this is important because people do read across from one area of government activity to others – and crime figures were used by many as an illustration of how anything could be made out of statistics, and as one excuse for not trusting any government information.

> *Well the thing is they've got two figures that they measure crime by and one's the British Crime Survey and one's the, I think it's the actual figures that are recorded by the police. And they keep changing which one they're highlighting depending on which one's the best and so the police one is actually a much lower figure than the British Crime Survey, although the British Crime Survey's gone down a lot so they're highlighting that.*
>
> London

Crime figures also arose as an election issue in April, when a Conservative campaign was criticised by police organisations for misrepresenting the latest figures (which broadly showed a decline according to the British Crime Survey, but an increase in recorded violent crime) to encourage a critical view of the government's record and increase fear of crime.[17] The Conservative campaign leaders were probably aware that trends from official recorded crime figures are likely to be misleading as an indicator of actual crime levels, because of changes in recording and reporting patterns, but would have viewed them as a very effective tool to spotlight what they saw as a policy area they could gain from.

For example, the Daily Mail's coverage included the headlines *"Blair loses the plot on crime"* and "*Blair complacent on violent crime"* and David Davis is quoted in the articles as saying "*That attitude [*highlighting BCS figures*] is absolutely typical of Mr Blair's behaviour over the last 8 years. Try and manage the issue off the front pages with a blizzard of misleading denials".* And the leader comment shows how effective simplistic interpretation of information can be: *"He [*Blair*] blithely brushes aside his own official evidence and seizes on quite separate figures to assert that violent crime is down.*

[16] Dorling, D, Eyre, H, Johnston, R and Pattie, C *A good day to bury bad news? Hiding the detail in the Geography on the Labour Party Website* Political Quarterly 2002
[17] See for example *Tories under attack over politics of fear* Guardian 1 April 2005

Confused? You're meant to be. Manipulating statistics to muddy the waters is a New Labour speciality."[18]

While effective in the short-term, the longer-term consequence of this approach, which, of course, the Labour Party also used in opposition, is to help lower levels of trust in official information in general.

We should also note that the issue or subject being considered also has an influence on levels of trust in government pronouncements. In particular, in our study and the review by ONS, it is clear that willingness to believe depends on both the complexity of data and on what the government has to gain from influencing the figures. For example, in survey work by the ONS, there are much higher levels of trust in statistics on road casualties than there are on hospital waiting lists or burglary figures, because these are seen as much less politically important.[19]

The blurring of personal experience

While government information is vital, personal experience is one of the most important factors in forming attitudes and opinions. This is common sense, and is a key aspect of more formal theories and philosophies of how people form views.[20] Many respondents speak of their suspicion of official messages simply because the story they tell does not tally with what they themselves have seen or heard:

> *You have to do it on gut feeling, I suppose, on your own experiences. If I got beaten up everyday there's no way I'm going to believe what he's saying [ie David Blunkett in video clip on crime figures].*
>
> Chester

> *I think it tends to be balanced towards personal experiences. Mainly because what you've been told, you feel a little bit sceptical about simply because you're not being told enough and it's not clear enough.*
>
> Chester

However, on closer inspection what people count as "personal experience" is often drawn from a wide range of sources; stories and anecdotes relayed by family and friends, and even information gleaned from the media is often included in this definition. This drawing on what can be seen as "second-hand personal experience" was particularly obvious when we challenged respondents'

[18] Daily Mail 22nd April 2005

[19] Jones, F and Jones, A-M *Public confidence in Official Statistics: an analysis based on data collected in the National Statistics Omnibus Survey* Feb 2005.

[20] See for example D. Cardinal, J. Hayward and G. Jones, *Epistemology: The Theory of Knowledge* (John Murray, London, 2004), p. 55.

views with contradictory information, as the following discussion about immigration figures illustrates.

> *Female: You go off your own experiences as well as what you read. You can't just read something and believe in it. I think you have to see something sometimes.*
>
> *MORI: You're not at Dover counting 20,000 people, how do you know?*
>
> *Female: No but you can imagine it's a lot… Cos you see, like you say, on the news all the time, all the people coming in so you can imagine it's a large amount…*
>
> London

There are several possible explanations for this pattern. Firstly it could be that people just do not know where their views come from, and it is only under questioning that they realise the sources may not be what they thought. This was seen in the discussions, where it was clear many people were thinking about how their views had been formed for the first time:

> *Now I think about it I'm not sure where I get my views from. I suppose I think of them as being based on things I see myself, but they probably come from a load of different things. It's interesting, I hadn't thought about it before.*
>
> London

> *You see it all the time. You read it in the newspapers, you see it on the television. You get it from your friends and neighbours about what's going on*
>
> Stockport

This can also be explained by the theory of *cognitive dissonance*, the psychological phenomenon which refers to the discomfort felt when there is a need to accommodate or dismiss new ideas that contradict ones you already hold. People recognise that claiming personal experience is less subject to questioning than citing second-hand information, which may be doubted, depending on the source. Therefore the most powerful way to defend existing views is to cite their own experience, even where this is actually from another source[21].

[21] For more information on cognitive dissonance with regard to political communications see R. Worcester, *The Diffusion Process; Who leads whom to think what about politics in Britain?* (June, 1995)

Whatever the cognitive explanation, it seems likely that this blurring is becoming more important, as we become more isolated from each other[22] and/or draw more of our experience through the media and the internet.

This is likely to be reinforced in the future by the increasing reliance of the media on individuals for its material. The use of eye witness accounts backed up by mobile phone pictures and videos formed a key element of recent major news stories, particularly the London bombings. As a Guardian article describes, *'the mobile phone photographers, the text messagers and the bloggers – a new advance guard of amateur reporters had the London bomb story in the can before the news crews got anywhere near the scene'*[23]. Some media analysts are talking about the arrival of the 'citizen reporter' while Helen Boaden, BBC's Director of News, spoke of a complete 'gear change' in how news is reported in that minutes after the bombings occurred, newsrooms received a flood of images and video clips sent from the scene. This is clearly only a recently emerging trend, but the fact that news is increasingly reported by 'one of us' may make it all the more difficult to differentiate between what we experience directly, and what is seen through a media filter.

The role of the media – and the opposition

There is currently a great deal of debate about whether the approach of the media in general has increased public distrust of government and made it more difficult for the public to engage in policy debates. This has a long history, particularly in the US[24], where theories of "media malaise" (how increased media availability and consumption has helped create public disengagement and mistrust of government) first appeared in the early 1970s. Refinements of this thinking have come in regular waves since, with for example, Onora O'Neill recently emphasising the role of the media in what some see as a crisis of trust: *If we can't trust what the press report how can we tell whether to trust those on whom they report?...There is plenty of more or less accurate reporting, but this is very small comfort if readers can't tell which are the reliable bits.*[25]

Similarly Franklin summarises the views of critics: *Critics allege that the political process is being diminished by growing media involvement: the charge is that the media corrupt as well as communicate political messages. The process of packaging of politics manipulates as well as informs the public.*

However, others have argued that this emphasis on the role of the media is a little unbalanced, and that parties and governments have largely shaped the media response through their own tactics – that media responses are mainly a result of

[22] It is important not to overplay the point on greater isolation. While there are fairly strong arguments in the US that people are becoming more detached (most notably outlined in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone)*, the evidence in the UK is less clear cut (see, for example, Halpern, D *Social Capital* (2005) and *Social Capital: A review of the Literature* by ONS (2001)). However, the point remains that on average we now rely more on the media and the internet for information than we used to.

[23] The Guardian, 11th July 2005 *'We had 50 images within an hour'*

[24] See for example, Patterson, T *Out of order* (1993) New York

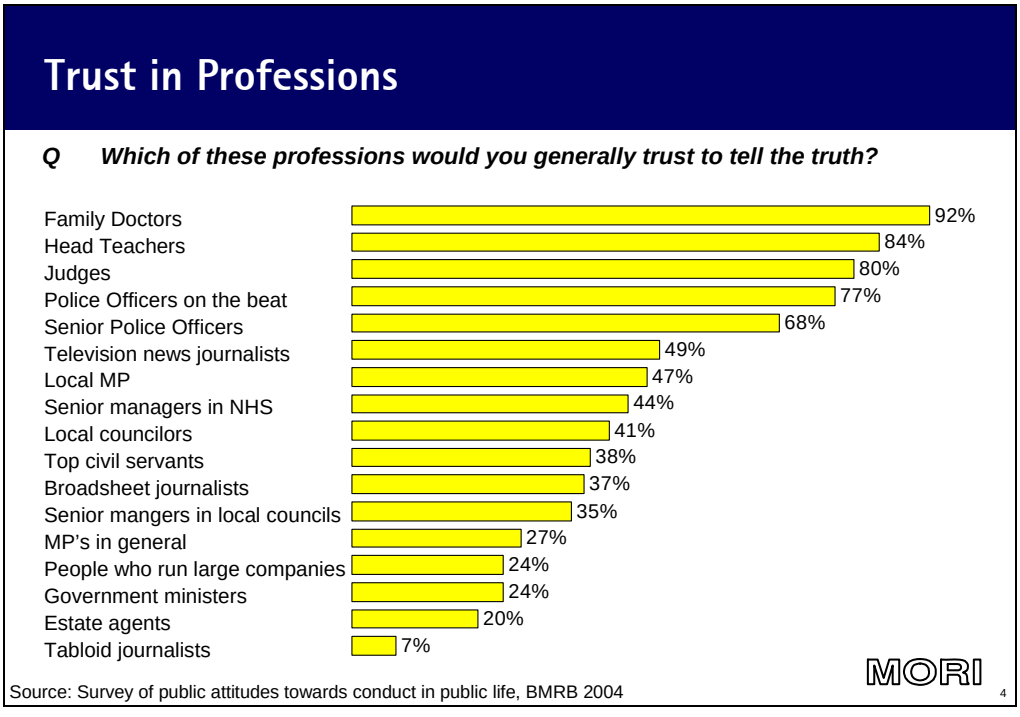
[25] Franklin, B *The packaging of politics* (2003) London

the increased sophistication of political communications from parties and governments.[26]

Whatever the causes it is clear that the confrontational style of interviewing, typified by Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys, and the famous Louis Heren question to keep in mind for all political interviews - *why is this lying bastard lying to me?* – does have an influence on trust in government information. As John Lloyd points out: *Foreigners who observe the British media and know the country remark on the matter constantly. They see a media which is polemically extreme, rhetorically bitter and savagely dismissive.*[27] This is something that has been taken up by the BBC chairman who wants the BBC to '*avoid slipping into the knee-jerk cynicism that dismissed every statement from a politician as, by definition, a lie*'[28].

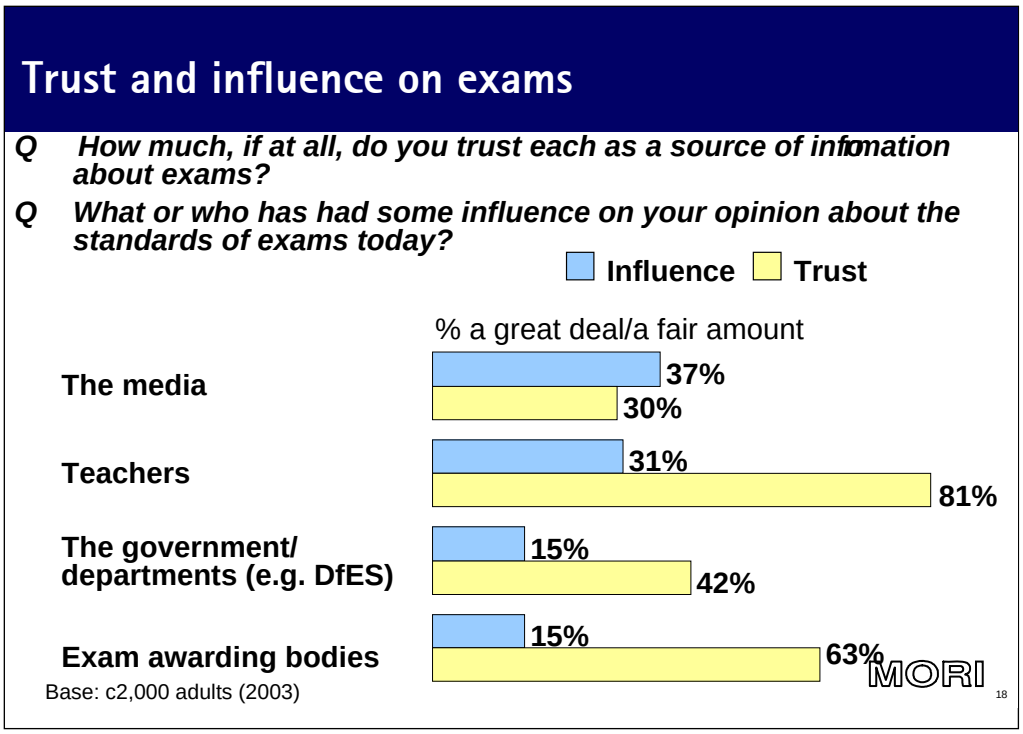
But we could question how important the media are in any case as levels of trust in elements of the media are even lower than levels of trust in politicians. It could be argued therefore that they are unlikely to have a great deal of influence on views – but this is clearly too simplistic, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, people do distinguish between different elements of the media (and indeed different types of politicians and officials): television news journalists are fairly highly trusted, as are local MPs; broadsheet journalists are less trusted, but much more so than MPs in general or government ministers; tabloid journalists are on their own at the bottom of the list.



[26] See discussion by Pippa Norris in for example *Political Communications Transformed,* Bartle, J and Griffiths, D (eds) 2000 and Oborne, P *The Rise of Political Lying* (2000)
[27] J. Lloyd, What The Media Are Doing To Our Politics (London, Constable and Robinson, 2004)
[28] 'Paxman Answers The Questions', The Guardian, 31 January 2005

And secondly, as we have seen in a number of research studies, while trust in the media tends to be relatively low, their influence on views is high, given people's sheer level of exposure to their messages. This is seen in the chart below, where the media are the least trusted of sources of information on the exam system, but the most influential.



This was reflected in the discussions where many felt that the media do help to dictate the issues of the day, and the growth in the volume of coverage has meant their influence has increased.

> *The more coverage something gets the more priority it will be given in people's opinions*
>
> Chester

> *A lot of it is down to how much media coverage it gets*
>
> Chester

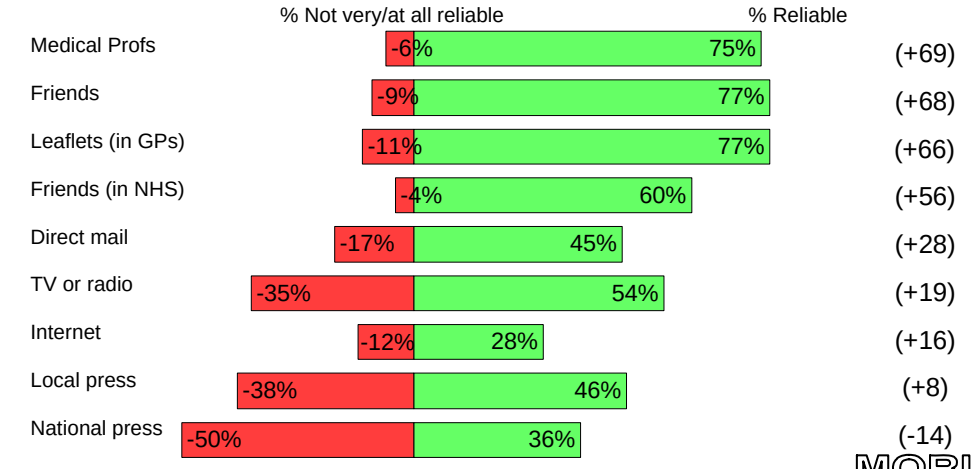
> *Because you can see more of it. It's on the TV, it's on the news. There's 200 channels you can watch. You can find a news programme on a hundred of them at any point of the day. You've got your radio, you've got your newspapers. So, in that sense… we're more aware, as a general populace, of what happens outside the street we live in.*
>
> Chester

This is also seen in the two charts below. The first shows the perceived reliability of sources of information on how the NHS is performing, and media sources come clearly bottom – although TV and radio are rather more trusted than newspapers, and local press is somewhat more trusted than national. But when

we plot this against exposure in the second chart, we see how much greater the influence of the media is likely to be, as exposure to more trusted sources such as friends who work in the NHS and medical professionals generally is much lower.

Perceived *reliability* of information sources

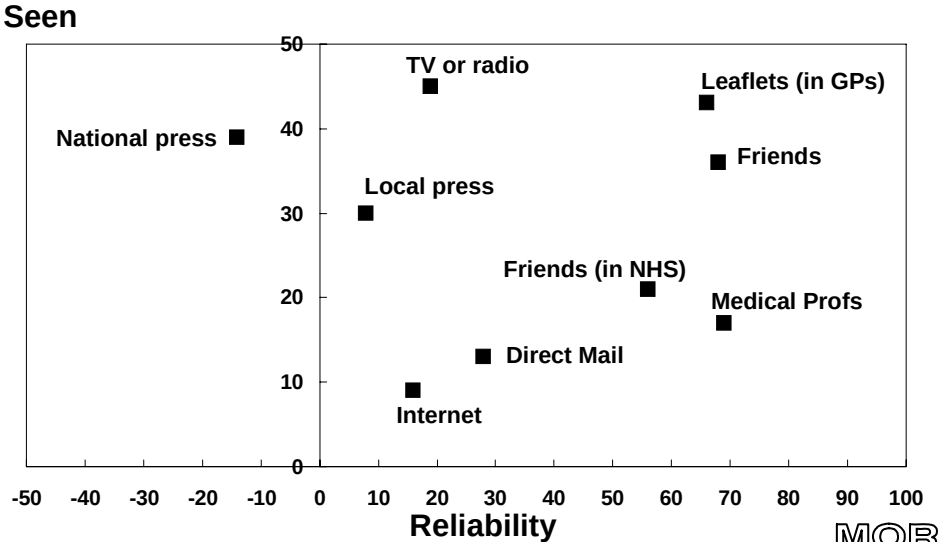
Q How reliable do you think that the following are as a source of information about how well the NHS is performing?



Base: All respondents (994) DoH Winter 2004 Tracking Survey

MORI 15

Reliability versus exposure



Base: All respondents (994) DoH Winter 2004 Tracking Survey

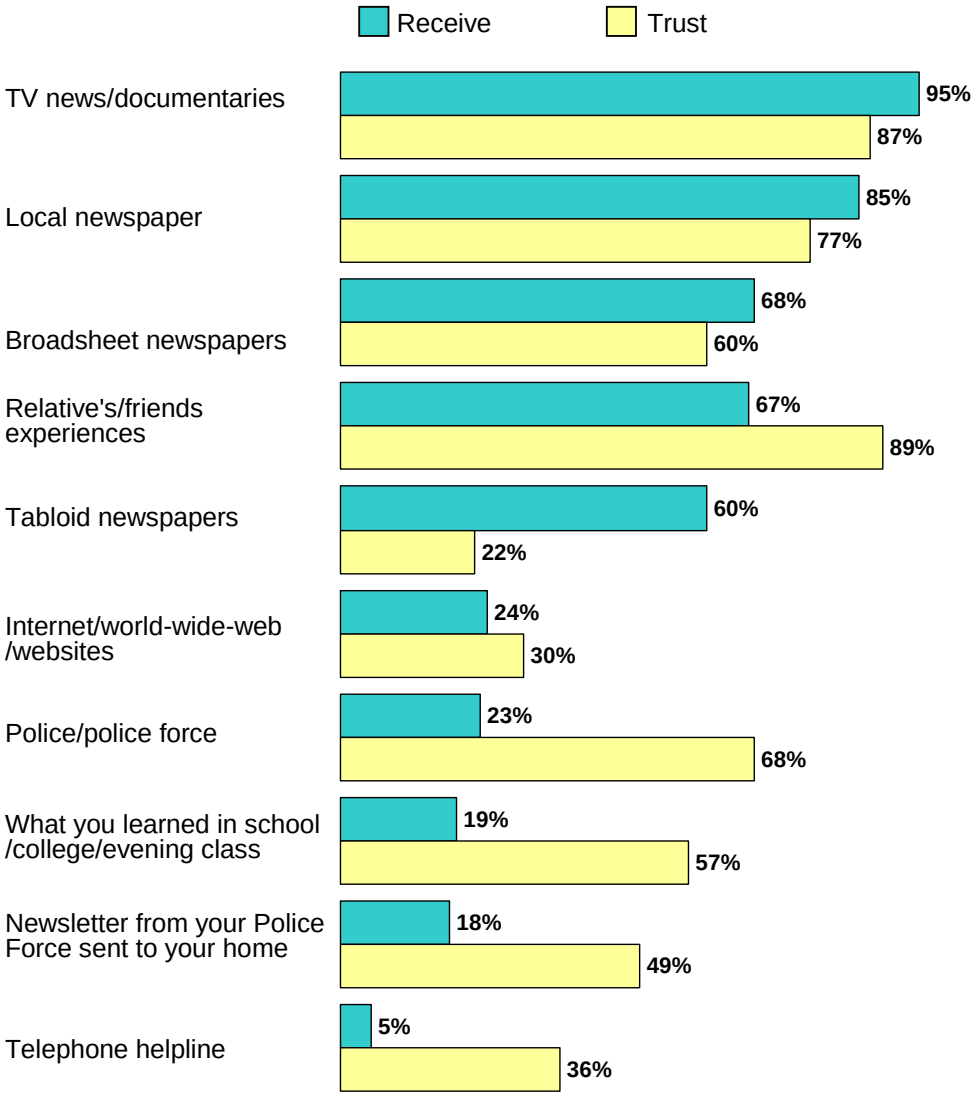
MORI 16

We see similar patterns when we look at trust and exposure to sources on crime issues – although here it seems that some media sources are rather more trusted. For example, information from TV news/documentaries is on a par with friends' experience, and trust in local and broadsheet newspapers is viewed as similarly reliable as information directly from the police.

What do we see and who do we trust on crime?

Q *I am going to read some of these out, would you please tell me from which ones you, personally receive the most information?*

Q *Do you trust... to tell the truth about how crime is being dealt with?*



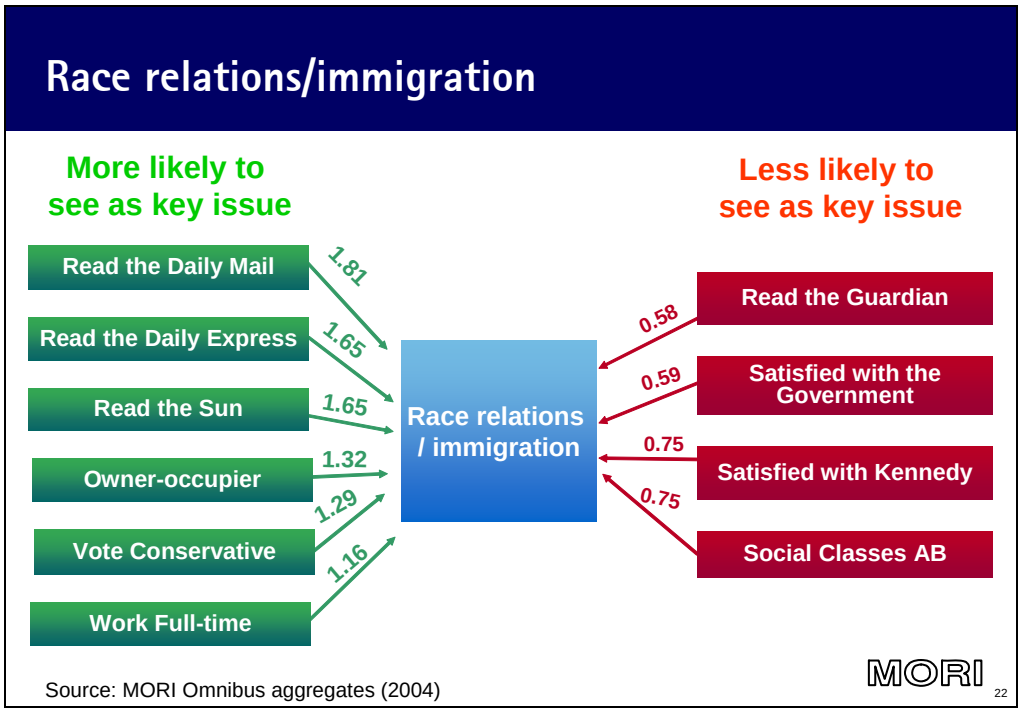
Base: 2,001 GB Feb-March 2003, aged 16+ Source: MORI

This illustrates the fact that the impact of the media will depend on the issue being considered, with people particularly reliant on this type of second-hand information where their own direct experience is limited, such as with crime. This was also seen in recent reanalysis of MORI data, which shows that what newspaper people read seems to influence whether they see immigration and asylum and, to an extent, crime as key issues facing Britain – but does not seem

to be related to their views of topics they are likely to have more direct experience of, such as the NHS.[29]

For example, the chart below shows those factors that are most associated with choosing immigration as a key issue (in green on the left), and those that are least associated (in red on the right). The chart also gives an indication of the strength of each relationship, with the "odds ratio" showing the chances of each group thinking that this is a key issue facing Britain. In general terms, the higher this number the better the chances are that someone in this group will select this issue, and the lower the number the lower the chances.

In contrast to other major issues, newspaper readership is very clearly related to whether or not race relations/immigration are seen as important issues, even after controlling for demographic differences. The four most important predictors are all whether people read particular newspapers – Daily Mail, Daily Express and Sun readers are all more likely to raise this as an issue, while Guardian readers are less likely. While this type of analysis cannot prove that newspaper coverage influences views (rather than people choosing newspapers that reflect their already-formed attitudes), there is trend evidence in our recent report that does suggest at least some direct effect.



The influence of the media on views of crime is also suggested in a number of research studies that have shown the link between common misperceptions and media coverage. For example, Jason Ditton from the University of Sheffield has shown that 45% of crimes reported in newspapers in the UK involve sex or violence, compared with only 3% of actual reported crime. This will help explain

[29] *You are what you read? The influence of newspaper readership on attitudes* Duffy, B and Rowden, L MORI (2005)

the fact that people overestimate the incidence of these types of crime by a factor of three.

It is clearly not just the media that people see as (John Lloyd would have it) "bitter and dismissive" – many discussion participants also pointed out the role of the opposition in undermining trust. Again this is not a new phenomenon, and there have been discussions of the impact of the "argument culture" on trust in the US for a number of years.[30] But in Britain a number of participants recognise that both the opposition and media had been working to make "trust" a more explicit and dominant issue in relations with government. Many see this as having replaced the emphasis on "sleaze" used by Labour in opposition, and recognise it as an effective tactic that is hard to counter, but may have long-term negative consequences.

> *It's trust to me, to this Government is what sleaze was to the last one and the opposition were banging away with the word sleaze and helped to demolish it and if the opposition was banging away with the word trust or no trust it would do the same sort of damage. Very difficult to get it back I would say.*
>
> Chester

Local versus national – a perception gap?

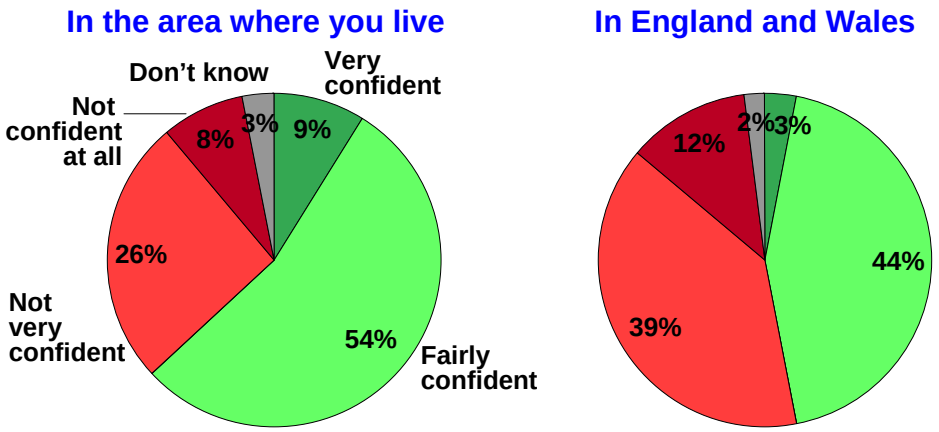
The largely negative media and opposition stance on many issues is also likely to be partly responsible for the "perception gap" between relatively positive views of personal experience of local public services and negative views of how things are changing in the country as a whole. This has been seen in a number of studies, and examples in crime and health are shown in the charts below.

For example, people are much more confident about the way crime is dealt with in their area (63% very or fairly confident) than in the country as a whole (47% confident). And, even more strikingly, around eight in ten people treated reported they were satisfied with their last visit to hospital, but fewer than half think that the NHS is providing a good service nationally and only 31% feel the government has the right policies for the NHS.

[30] The influence of opposition on generalised trust has been examined in, for example, Tannen, D *The Argument Culture* (1998) New York

The perception gap on crime

Q *Overall, how confident are you about the way crime is dealt with…?*

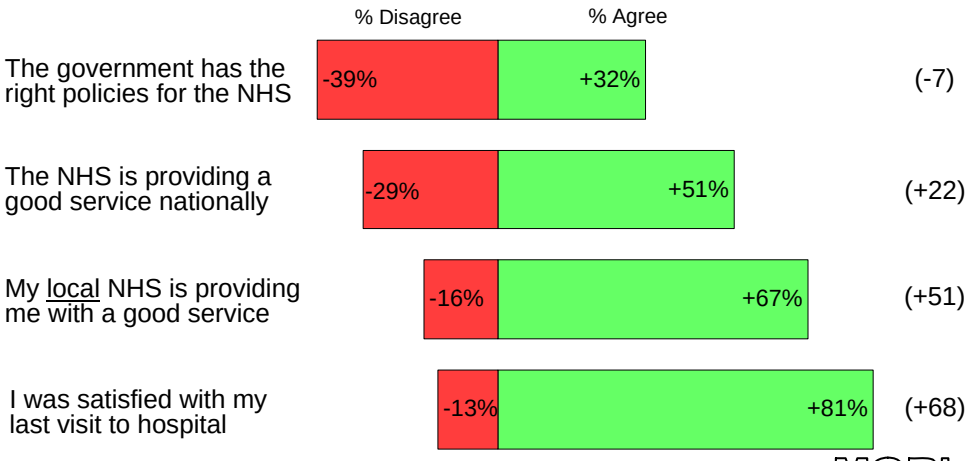


Base: 2,001 GB Feb-March 2003, aged 16+

MORI 11

The perception gap in the NHS

Q To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Base: All respondents (994), DoH Winter 2004 Tracking Survey

MORI 12

This pattern will clearly be caused by a range of factors, including that the individuals' political sympathies will have a much greater impact on views of national progress than personal experience. It is also not clear whether this is a new phenomenon or has always been the case, as trends on these types of measures are hard to come by. There are, however, fairly convincing arguments that greater levels of isolation from our local communities combined with the increased availability of information from mass media sources is likely to make questioning of the representativeness of our personal experience more likely. In any case, it remains a real issue for governments when trying to get people to

believe their positive experiences are not exceptions, and then to ascribe these improvements to government action.

Interestingly, the picture painted by the survey data does not tally with how people *say* their views are formed. In a similar way as with personal experience, people claim to base their opinions on what they see in their local area.

> *You can't believe anything you're told nowadays…I suppose that's why we talk about local issues, because we see it more*
>
> London

> *It's much harder to believe if what you're experiencing in your local area is contrary to what he's saying*
>
> London

> *We tend to think of things as London*
>
> London

In fact this is likely to be a similar phenomenon as claiming personal experience, in that it is seen to give more weight to people's views. In practice people are often basing much of these views on media reports of local issues, rather than direct local experience.

> *A lot of robberies. I've been fortunate that I've not had it happen to myself as such but in Stockport, you see in the papers, it is quite rife isn't it with people getting stabbed…*
>
> Stockport

That is not to say that this is the case for all, and personal and local experience are still key influences on views, as are the views of staff, who are seen to have a particularly powerful insight into local services.

> *Well, it's stuff I've read, it's stuff I've seen on the TV and it's what you pick up from speaking to people that work in the industry. Nurses, doctors, the like. The pick up that you get back from a lot of people that work in the hospitals is the frustration of the fact that there's more chiefs than Indians.*
>
> Chester

2. How do we increase trust in information?

The previous section outlined how difficult a job it will be to rebuild trust in government information. Trust has never been that high and recent trends such as the proliferation of information sources have made it even harder to be believed. However, there are steps that can be taken, which we go through in the following sections.

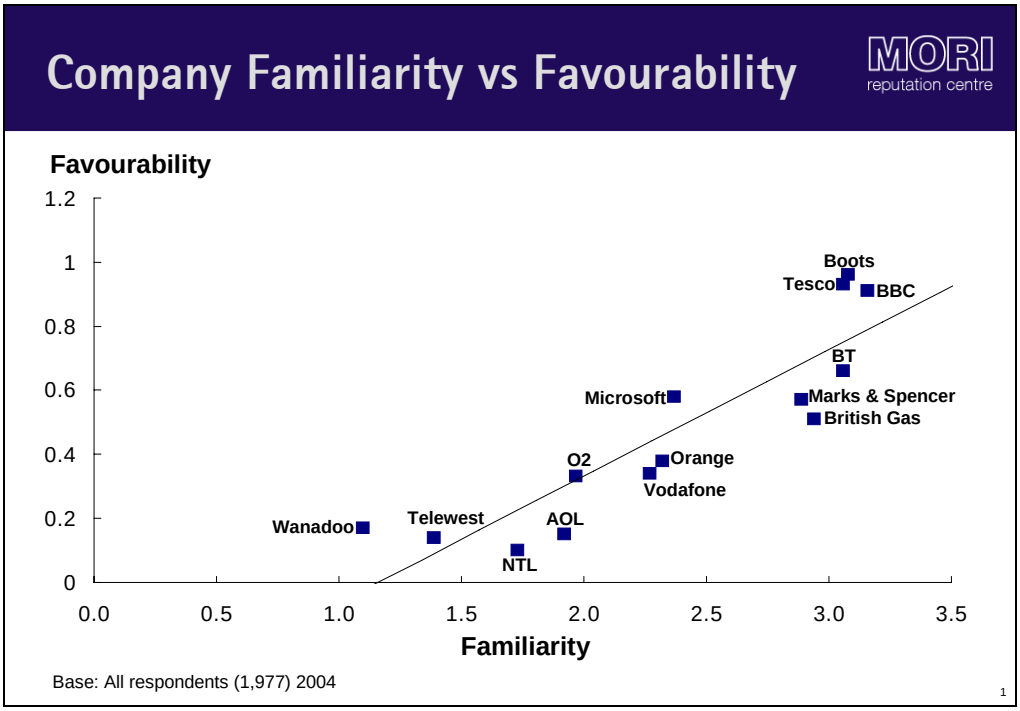
There are a number of theories and models from academic and commercial communication studies that can help frame responses. For example, the "elaboration likelihood model" suggests that belief or attitude change can take one of two routes. The "central route" is the most powerful, but requires people to actively process the information at a high level – thinking hard about the content and logic of the message. In the "peripheral route" the person is much less likely to carefully consider the message – and instead is much more influenced by the source, the number of arguments and how they are presented. In psychological experiments these influences include background factors, such as how playing pleasant music increases people's willingness to believe information. This section looks at the likely impact of varying the equivalent range of "background factors" for messages on public affairs.

Familiarity, favourability and contempt

Previous MORI research suggests that using a high profile expert to convey a message generally increases authority, respect and trust. Similarly, we generally find that favourability towards an organisation or individual is directly related to levels of familiarity with them, as the chart below shows for a range of companies. However, the discussion groups suggest that using a 'known' face to speak to the public might have fewer advantages in political communications.

The emphasis on increasing familiarity as a way to improve trust is seen in a recent article in Prospect by Geoff Mulgan, former head of the Strategy Unit at No 10: *Having seen the correlation between people's knowledge of public agencies and the extent to which they were trusted, the Party determined to communicate not only what it was doing but also why, providing a running commentary on its own actions.*[31]

[31] Mulgan, G *Lessons of Power* (Prospect, 110, May 2005)



But Mulgan goes on to say this may have gone too far, or that politicians became too impatient in getting good news stories out: *too often the gap between a modest pledge and the public's raised expectations was filled by grand ministerial rhetoric. On many occasions government spending announcements were inflated or repeated…Some pilot projects that had barely started were proclaimed as successes.*

This does seem likely to be an important explanation for declining trust. But there also seems to be a case that the relationship between familiarity and favourability just does not hold quite so well within politics This was seen throughout our discussions. Firstly many respondents just view all politicians as untrustworthy and, as such, one of the key factors why they do not believe official messages.

> *Politicians are the problem because I don't believe any politician*
>
> London

> *I look at all the politicians, David Blunkett and the like and they're just puppets*
>
> London

> *He [David Blunkett] comes from a lying government doesn't he? They're all liars.*
>
> Manchester

But when we presented the same information in a number of formats, including through a video clip of David Blunkett and a mocked-up radio interview with a

supposed junior Home Office minister it was clear from the discussions that there was particular suspicion reserved for those with the higher profile.

This should not be surprising, given that these prominent politicians are the focus of media and opposition attacks, and they are most clearly associated with past failings. However, the implication of this is that it may sometimes be better to use less well known figures to communicate key information. This is not to say that there should be a constant stream of new spokespeople, but there was clearly less immediate suspicion in the discussions when those with no 'history' were presenting the messages.

This point is also suggested by Mulgan, who, from a review of how parties across Europe have renewed themselves while in government, counts a change of faces as the first factor required: *First, renewal depended on new people: at some point there had to be wholesale changes of personnel, sometimes including the leader. Nothing better symbolises renewal than a selection of younger faces to replace the old guard.*

This appears to raise a contradiction with a number of studies of trust, which suggest that admissions of failings and errors can actually increase feelings of trust. For example, a MORI/Audit Commission study on trust in the public sector found that admitting mistakes was a particularly powerful driver of trust.[32] However, there is no real inconsistency here, as one is about being open about the failings of particular approaches or policies, while the other is about being associated with previous dishonesty. The discussion groups conducted as part of the current study, as with previous MORI work, emphasise the importance of not trying to paint an overly favourable picture.

> *Well if you heard a politician sometimes say "I was wrong" that would be a starting point. I got that wrong but I'd like you to listen to what I believe I got right here and that starts to come across as a more balanced…*
>
> Chester

> *If I were advising I'd say look balance it out … we're not doing so well and we'd like to tell you. Always going to be positive and he* [Tony Blair] *is demanding that of public sector generally. All got to be positive. Can't afford to be getting it wrong. That's not real is it?*
>
> Chester

The chart of trust in individual professions shown at the start of this report suggests a key point – that practitioners and frontline staff, such as doctors, are much more trusted than those who manage or oversee the services. However, we have to be careful not to overstate this, and clearly it is not possible just to draft in front-line staff to give government messages – because part of the reason for the higher level of trust they enjoy is that they are not part of government and therefore are seen to have no political agenda.

[32] *Trust in Public Institutions* Downing, P and Duffy, B MORI/Audit Commission (2002)

Independent and objective organisations or individuals

Of course, an even better method of encouraging trust is for the information to be sourced to and presented by a completely independent organisation. Unsurprisingly, respondents are far more receptive and positive about messages that come from an independent organisation than they are about those from government sources. We explored this in the discussions by taking the same information and sourcing it to a number of different government and independent organisations.

> *They* [King's Fund] *just have this record that they're telling the truth don't they? Whereas I don't think the government does have*
>
> Chester

> *If it is a government survey then you tend to be more sceptical about them*
>
> Stockport

> *If it was more disassociated with government I think that would make a lot of difference*
>
> Stockport

This has also been seen in a recent MORI/Prospect survey where people were first asked whether they thought health and police services were getting better in the country. Those who said the services were not getting better were told a short series of facts (all positive, correct and drawn from official government sources), with half the sample being told they were official government figures and the other half that they were from an independent organisation. The table below shows that there was a significant difference in effect depending on the source, with those who were told the information was independent more likely to say they would change their views, and with the effect somewhat larger for health services. These may not seem like huge differences, but they are statistically significant and do suggest an important impact, particularly given how simple and relatively crude the experiment was.

% of people saying they are willing to change views that health services/police services are getting better…

	Government source	***Independent source***
Base: All respondents (c1,500)	*%*	*%*
Health services	*16*	*23*
Police services	*16*	*20*

Source: MORI/Harvey Cole/Prospect magazine

However, an interesting factor seen in our group discussions is that respondents generally do not put a great deal of emphasis on differentiating between the integrity of different independent organisations – the fact that they are dissociated from government is enough for the majority to accept their outputs with far less critical questioning.

For example, data we sourced to MigrationWatch in the discussion groups was afforded most of the advantages of data sourced to the King's Fund, despite the former having a much more prominent campaigning role. Furthermore, this was the case across a broad spectrum of knowledge and political opinions; it was not merely those with little or no comprehension of the background and remit of these organisations that believed their outputs to be of near equal value.

This is not to say that independent organisations are given a free reign by all members of the public and some people do distinguish between independence (in the sense of not being part of government) and objectivity.

> *It's perfectly obvious that independent doesn't mean without a preconceived set of opinions.*
>
> Chester

> *Any independent organisation can have its own strong set of prejudices*
>
> Chester

> *Just because I see the word 'independent' then I don't confuse it with the word 'objective'*
>
> London

However, independence does confer significant advantages, and this backs up the calls that have been seen over a number of years for greater distance between government and official information providers. Jack Straw called for an independent National Statistical Service in a speech to the Royal Statistical Society in 1995,[33] and Oliver Letwin proposed an almost identical approach in January this year, with his call to *"free national statistics from political interference and make them the most transparent and accountable in the world"*.

Discussion of these proposals in Peter Oborne's book on political lying[34] suggests that it could work in a similar way to the independent Bank of England, while recent studies by the ONS suggest there may be a case for a statistics service that reports directly to parliament rather than the government.[35] A number of participants in the ONS study do recognise that this could reduce any perceptions of political influence. Both the ONS and Statistic Commission reviews also suggest a more prominent "kitemark" system, where statistics are quality and independence assured.

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[33] For reference, see www.therss.org.uk/archive

[34] Oborne, P *The rise of political lying* London (2005)

[35] Kelly, M *Public Confidence in British Official Statistics* Feb 2005

However, while important, these changes can only be part of the answer, as generally the problem is not with political interference in the production of information, but with manipulation in its use. The latter could be better dealt with by an auditing and review role, such as that developed by "FactCheck" which came to prominence in the last US presidential elections.[36] This is an independently-funded organisation (part of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania) that checked the accuracy of information used by all presidential candidates, spokespeople and adverts and gave its verdict on a website that at its height was visited by hundreds of thousands of people a day. This particular example goes beyond statistics and information to examine campaign plans and promises – and more recently other national issues, including providing an independent record of the actions of different bodies in the run-up to and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. However, even a more limited organisation – "StatCheck" perhaps – that can be called on to provide an objective assessment of competing claims about official information seems likely to be very popular with the public.

Of course this would not provide a simple and complete solution, as there is clearly not one straightforward objective set of "facts", and a lot of the arguments are to do with interpretation. Even verified information can still be used in number of ways.

It seems likely then that as well as an ongoing role for a StatChecker, there could also be a role for periodic independent reviews of the use of information by a range of bodies, including government, political parties and the media (an equivalent "MediaCheck" organisation is suggested in a range of forms by a number of commentators). Both ongoing and periodic activities could be done by expanding the remit and powers of existing bodies such as the Statistics Commission and the National Audit Office, or through new organisations. Geoff Mulgan makes the point that whatever the approach having an organisation that is responsible is likely to make things happen and act as a focus for public confidence: *Trust in the British government's ability to secure food safety collapsed after the trauma of BSE. Yet the arrival of the Food Standards Agency, which has worked openly and acknowledges ambiguity has picked trust back up. The general lesson is that changes in levels of trust are explained far better by how organisations behave than by larger trends.*

Information about information

Whoever provides the information it is also clear that many would like more detail on where the information comes from, to help judge its reliability and representativeness. As we've seen, many feel statistics are cherry-picked to portray the story that the provider wants, and a key way to help the public identify this would be to know more about the sources used.

> *They don't tell me anything about how the survey is done…*
> *because I don't trust it I need to see the backup on this…*

[36] See www.factcheck.org and the more limited UK version run by Channel 4 during the general election www.channel4.com/news/factcheck

I can't say that these figures are false. I can say I have to treat them with some scepticism.

Chester

I'd be more convinced if I knew more about how it was done and over how long a period and so on…something we saw earlier from May 2003, why was that month picked? The usual story, government's plucking at statistics. They find the worst starting point and take it from there…

Chester

Like I said they just skip over don't they. Like look at that. It's like a little two paragraph thing. All right, you don't want to read a book about it but you could do with a bit more, just background information really. How you got those figures. I know people might not all be interested in that but I think I'd certainly find it more believable.

Stockport

This type of request for more information is quite common but needs to be treated carefully, as we have already seen. People also complain about already having too much information, and providing technical details does not sit well with most communications theories that suggest you need to boil messages down to simple key points.

However, it really did seem from the all discussions that there is an appetite for more information about the information. Many respondents suggested that even if they do not always read it, the fact that comprehensive information is provided gives an important impression of openness and honesty that does help improve believability.

The perception is that if you keep it simple and you keep it minimal, you won't confuse the average Joe on the street. Credit us with a bit more intelligence… credit the general population with a bit more intelligence than they are at the moment, and corroborate your argument. Just giving one number, I'll tear it apart.

Chester

I think if the government wants to win back public confidence they need to be clear about what information they're gathering rather than like the NHS waiting lists. The definition of a waiting list changes from year to year and that list is managed differently and I'm sure that's the same with crime. They need to tell us a little bit more to get our confidence back and to avoid that sceptical attitude that we have I'm afraid.

Chester

> *Don't just give me one number and expect me to believe it. Corroborate it, back it up, support your argument*
>
> Stockport

Lippmann again seems to have seen this difficulty decades ago, when he described how simple stereotypes are often powerful, while independent and robust sources of information can be much more difficult and boring: *Bureaux of government research, industrial audits, budgeting and the like are the ugly ducklings of reform. They reverse the process by which interesting public opinions are built up. Instead of presenting a casual fact, a large screen of stereotypes…they break down the drama… and offer men a picture of facts, which is unfamiliar and to them impersonal. When this is not painful, it is dull and those to whom it is painful, the trading politician and the partisan who has much to conceal, often exploit the dullness that the public feels, in order to remove the pain they feel.*[37]

However, it is arguable that we can deal with these issues much better now than in Lippmann's time, as we have much more sophisticated communication tools available to us and greater experience of using various sources of information to inform decisions. The internet is obviously a key potential resource, and there are several initiatives underway to try to push important information out to people, such as the Neighbourhood Statistics Service run by the ONS[38].

But there is a need for much more of this information and greater imagination in how it is communicated. In particular, from our discussions it seems that there is a market for *'Which?'* style publications (online and magazine-based) that assess public services or government progress in general. These would need to be produced by independent organisations (or be kite-marked/StatChecked) and provide details on how the tests were done and judgements arrived at.

What is communicated and how

The focus of the discussion until now has been on the believability of information – but clearly the other key aspect is how affective and memorable that information is. The focus group participants had some clear ideas on what makes messages more likely to be remembered.

Firstly facts that surprise people are most likely to stick in their mind. Of course, this needs to be balanced against how believable they are, which, as we have seen is related to whether it chimes with personal experience.

> *MORI: Why did you remember that?*
>
> *Because it's big, yes. Bigger than I would have thought, quite honestly. It surprised me, yes.*
>
> Chester

> *… I would use that in an argument to convince people that things weren't quite as bad as they thought they were, with*

[37] Lippmann *ibid*

[38] For reference, see http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/home.do

> *76%* [satisfaction with NHS] *and marry it to my own experience of having my foot seen to last year, which was pretty remarkably quick actually.*
>
> Chester

It was also the case that apparently small details about how information is presented to people can have quite a significant impact on how memorable people find that information. For example, percentages that translate easily into fractions were much more likely to be remembered when we tested recall at the end of the discussions. These types of simple communications lessons need to be borne in mind when trying to get government information across.

However, 'killer-facts', by themselves, will not serve to overcome the presuppositions that people have. It is important to note as well, that alongside hard, statistical evidence, what people tend to remember are case studies or stories about individuals. Throughout this report we have highlighted the power of these, more informal, accounts and the credence that is given to eye-witness reporters. The power of 'real-life' stories is that they create an arresting message which is hard to ignore.

We also found this in recent work for the Fabian Society on which messages can best be used to highlight the extent of child poverty in Britain[39]. Overall, it was the surprising facts that stick in peoples' minds (such as the proportion of children who go without warm winter coats), alongside case studies of actual children that challenged the stereotypes of the undeserving poor.

> *It brings it home that some of the children if they live in poor conditions they can't go swimming once a month. It's something I take for granted*
>
> *It would be good to see a real life case study. A real life child in a real situation of poverty…anything just to show the public what it's really all about*[40].

Developing this idea further in the delivery of key messages may help to engender trust in what is being communicated.

It is not just what is presented but also how this is done that is key here. We used a range of styles in the discussion groups, and it was clear that more graphical presentation of data, rather than simply presenting numbers, were more effective. This is echoed by stakeholders in the MORI study for the Statistics Commission[41].

> *It's much more difficult to translate numbers than it is to translate words. The more we can use visual presentation to*

[39] *Life Chances – what does the public really think about poverty* Fabian Society (2005)
[40] *Ibid* Fabian Society (2005)
[41] MORI/The Statistics Commission, *Official Statistics; Perceptions and Trust* (2005)

demonstrate trends and show comparisons in a user-friendly way, the better.

Other aspects of how the information is presented were also seen to have notable effects, as predicted by a range of communications and cognitive theories. In particular, it was clear that information we presented in the first person as direct quotes was more likely to be believed, and where there was a clear presumption that the information was true people were less likely to question it.

Trust in researchers

This leads us to one final point on research methods. We were very conscious that research exploring the link between how information is presented and response to that information would be affected by how we, as discussion moderators, communicated with participants during the discussions. Therefore, moderator support for the information was systematically varied across the different groups to test how participants' views changed depending on whether the moderators backed-up or questioned the information.

And it was clear that a number of respondents were significantly influenced by the moderator's views towards the data. For example, when quoting fictitious data, supposedly from the Health Survey for England, on patient satisfaction with the NHS, nearly all respondents were initially very sceptical. However when moderators argued in favour of the survey, extolling the rigour and robustness with which the study is carried out, a number of participants slowly questioned their own views and after more persuasion completely changed their minds and accepted that the figures 'must be true'.

Male: …Now I accept that maybe in the last year or so, perhaps because of the extra spending etc, maybe… As I say, I'm into scepticism... [but] I'm not saying it's definitely false. I'm just putting a question mark against it.

MORI: OK has any of that information we've just shown you changed your mind at all about how you feel about the Health Service?

Female: It certainly makes you think… I just wasn't aware of those sorts of figures, quite honestly. That many people can't be wrong.

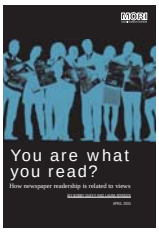
Chester

So while the potential impact of moderator influence on views is well documented, it is particularly important to be sensitive when presenting information in discussion groups, as it can give added power and legitimacy to moderator statements.

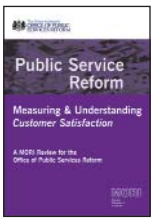
Publications

MORI staff regularly produce magazines and reports to reflect new research and our latest thinking across a broad range of topics. You can order these by emailing us.

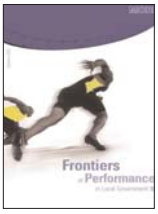
Please take a look below and email your full postal address to mori@mori.com - naming the publication/s you would like. If possible, we will send this to you in electronic format.



Newspaper Readership
How newspaper readership is related to views



Public Service Reform
This report for the Cabinet Office explores how to measure and understand customer satisfaction.



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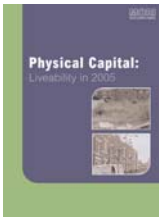
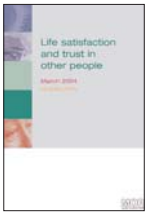


Liveability in 2005
MORI has revisited the liveability issue — and its analysis is encouraging. Research suggests work by central and local government over the past four years is now being recognised by the public — but there is still a long way to go.

The more things change...
Analyses movements in the issues MORI has been researching over the last 30 years.



Life satisfaction and trust in other people
Explores the key drivers of happiness and trust.

Understanding Society
The magazine from the MORI Social Research Institute, exploring MORI's research and thought leadership in the public sector.

incontext
Our Corporate and Consumer magazine designed specifically to inform senior management on strategic business issues

Events

This year we are holding various events across a range of subjects. If you would like to attend or would like more information, please email details to mori@mori.com

In 2005/2006, we are running events on the following:

- Environment: New Legislation
- NHS and Health Research: Patient Choice
- Corporate Reputation
- HR Research: Managing Change
- Crime and Policing: Anti-Social Behaviour

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