



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Perceptions, power, and polarisation: the political impact of UK fact-checking

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# Introduction

In the final 10 minutes of BBC *Question Time*'s [Leader Special](#) last June, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, addressing a public audience in York, responded to a query about whether more funding would be allocated to the National Health Service.<sup>1</sup>

*“There is more money going into the NHS today than there has been in its history,” he said. “I’m sure BBC Verify – after this debate – will verify this for you.”*

In fact, [we did](#).<sup>2</sup>

This prime-time Prime Ministerial name-check of our evidence-gathering service was a milestone – demonstrating to me that politicians are increasingly aware that fact-checking units like BBC Verify are adding a new layer of scrutiny to British politics.

Over seven years in the BBC’s fact-check unit, I’ve investigated countless contestable claims and presented my findings across TV, radio and digital. From NHS waiting lists, to crime figures and economic growth, political claims can lack important context or be outright wrong. Misinformation risks creating public confusion, underscoring the need for swift and thorough fact-checks to enhance accountability and audience clarity.

Media regulator Ofcom reports BBC Verify is the most used fact-checking website among UK adults, with 21% of those aged 16+ saying they have accessed it. Ofcom’s annual report also noted that “early indications from the BBC’s analysis suggest that BBC Verify is having a positive impact on perceptions of BBC News”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Question Time Leaders' Special, 20 June 2024. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0020cc0/question-time-2024-leaders-special-20062024>

<sup>2</sup> BBC News. (2024) Fact-check: Has NHS funding increased to its highest level in history? Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c844dp1yg1lo> (Accessed: 17 January 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Ofcom Annual Report on the BBC 2023-2024, 29 November 2024,

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/tv-radio-and-on-demand/bbc/bbc-annual-report/2024/ofcoms-annual-report-on-the-bbc-202324.pdf?v=386115> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Despite growing recognition of fact-checking and audience appreciation, my own work in fact-checking leads me to question its broader impact. Do the efforts of fact-checkers influence politicians' behaviour, or are they primarily a tool to help audiences navigate a labyrinth of contestable claims and provide essential context?

Two claims stood out during the 2024 UK general election: one, the [Conservatives](#) repeatedly claimed that Labour would bring in “£2,000 in higher taxes for every working family in our country” should it win the election.<sup>4</sup> And, two, [Labour](#) repeatedly claimed homeowners would pay “£4,800 more on their mortgage” under Conservative plans.<sup>5</sup>



*Channel 4 FactCheck (right) and FullFact (left) found both claims to be problematic Picture: Screenshots*

Fact-checkers scrutinised both claims, questioning the assumptions behind the calculations and how figures were presented.<sup>6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11</sup> Yet, both parties seemingly ignored these verdicts, continuing to repeat their claims.

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<sup>4</sup> Taxes, NHS waiting lists and small boats - BBC Verify tests key claims, BBC Verify, 5 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6ppnw1k6nyo> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Why the Conservative Party's manifesto will mean £4,800 more on your mortgage, Labour party, 13 June 2024, <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/why-the-conservative-partys-manifesto-will-mean-4800-more-on-your-mortgage/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Conservative claim that Labour would cost families £2,000 fact-checked, BBC Verify, 17 May, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy9x4n9gjz4o> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Would families face a £2,000 tax rise under Labour? Full Fact, 5 June 2024 <https://fullfact.org/economy/conservative-claim-general-election-labour-2000-tax-increase/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Sunak's claim Labour would raise taxes by £2,000, Channel 4 FactCheck, 7 June 2024, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-sunaks-claim-labour-would-raise-taxes-by-2000> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Labour claim that Tories would cost homeowners £4,800 fact-checked, BBC Verify, 17 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cydd0813y4mo> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Would Conservative spending commitments mean a £4,800 increase in the average mortgage?, Full Fact, 13 June 2024 <https://fullfact.org/election-2024/rachel-reeves-labour-4800-mortgage-rates/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Fact check: Labour says Tories will add £4,800 to your mortgage, PA, 15 June 2024, <https://pa.media/blogs/fact-check/fact-check-labour-says-tories-will-add-4800-to-your-mortgage/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

This example highlights a critical tension between politicians and fact-checking journalists, and raises a fundamental question: does fact-checking have the potential to influence political behaviour?

If the answer is yes, and politicians and strategists do factor in the risk of being fact-checked when crafting and delivering their messages, it implies fact-check journalism acts as a positive force on political discourse.

If the answer is no, another question arises: do politicians see a greater benefit in repeating contestable claims, even at the cost of being fact-checked?

Understanding this calculation helps to understand the role of the media in shaping political behaviour and the dynamic between public perception, persuasion, and polarisation.

At its core, this project seeks to pull back the curtain on how the political class monitor and respond to fact-checkers. Crucially, it will assess whether politicians' claims change in response to the presence of fact-checking organisations.

By shedding a light on the interaction between fact-checkers and politicians, this project hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of how fact-check journalism can enhance democratic accountability. Finally, it will offer practical recommendations for newsrooms to refine fact-checking strategies and maximise their impact.

## What does the research say?

Over the past 25 years, dedicated fact-check units have emerged as a journalistic tool to counter political misinformation in the UK.

[BBC Verify](#) aims to “explain complex stories in the pursuit of truth”, [Full Fact](#)’s mission is that “we all deserve information we can trust”, whereas [Channel 4 FactCheck](#) operates under the tagline “testing the claims of people in power”.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>

Despite the increasing prevalence of fact-check journalism, the UK public appears to be losing faith in politicians. As few as one in 10 voters trust politicians to tell the truth, according to recent [polling data](#).<sup>15</sup>

Has the proliferation of fact-check journalism had any real impact on the behaviour of politicians?

Previous research has mostly focused on the growth of fact-check journalism – how audiences consume, understand and value it – and there has been considerable [epistemological discussion](#) surrounding its objectivity and reliability.<sup>16</sup>

However, despite its growing reach, comparatively few studies have examined the influence fact-checking has on political discourse, especially in a UK setting.

Some evidence suggests fact-checking may shape politicians’ strategies due to the potential influence on their reputations. Researchers Andrea Ceron and Paride Carrara, for example, carried out a [statistical analysis](#) in 2021 of almost 8,000 claims made by politicians that were assessed by fact-checkers in the U.S. and Italy between 2007 and 2018.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> BBC News puts transparency at its heart with BBC Verify, BBC Media Centre, 17 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/bbc-news-transparency-bbc-verify> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Full Fact, <https://fullfact.org/about/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Channel 4 FactCheck X account, <https://x.com/FactCheck> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>15</sup> Rebuilding trust in public life, Institute for Government, Ipsos Veracity Index 2023, 26 February 2024, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/rebuilding-trust-public-life> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Uscinski, J. and Butler, R. 2013, *The epistemology of fact checking*, Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society <https://philpapers.org/rec/USCTEO> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Ceron, A. and Carrara, P. 2021 *Fact-checking reputation, and political falsehoods in Italy and the United States*, New Media & Society <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14614448211012377> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Their study proposes that politicians view their personal reputations as critical to their re-election prospects. As a result, they carefully weigh the risk of reputational damage when making statements that could later be debunked by fact-checkers.

As part of this balancing of risk, the study found that politicians are more likely to spread falsehoods when the perceived benefit outweighs the potential cost – especially as elections draw nearer. Part of the calculation was a belief that corrective fact-checks would be carried out after election day.

False claims are, the authors found, more likely to occur in unscripted moments, such as debates or interviews. Conversely, prepared, scripted statements are more likely to be corrects because written falsehoods are considered intentional.

The findings highlight the strategic nature of political deception and the role elections plays in proliferating false claims.

Reputational risk was also highlighted in Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler's [2015 study](#) of U.S. political elites.<sup>18</sup> It found fact-checking can improve accuracy by deterring politicians from making misleading statements. Their randomised experiment, conducted during the 2012 U.S. general election, revealed that when legislators were warned about the risks of making false claims they were significantly less likely to receive negative ratings from fact-checking website PolitiFact or have their accuracy questioned publicly.

More recently, three fact-check organisations – Africa Check, Chequeado and Full Fact – produced a [2020 paper](#) examining the impact of fact checkers' work based on a selection of 15 relevant studies.<sup>19</sup>

The review found politicians exhibit a range of responses to being fact-checked: some correct themselves in public, while others continue to repeat falsehoods. Overall, it found that fact-checks can impact politicians' behaviour.

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<sup>18</sup> Nyhan, B. Reifler, J. 2015, *The effect of fact-checking on elites: A field experiment on U.S. state legislators*, American Journal of Political Science <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24583087> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Sippitt, A. 2020, *What is the impact of fact checkers' work*, Full Fact <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/impact-fact-checkers-public-figures-media.pdf> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

It provided case studies, such as when then Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt cited unpublished mental health service figures which could not be checked by UK fact-checkers. In that instance, Full Fact wrote to the statistics regulator who put pressure on the health department to release the figures. According to the paper, as a result of Full Fact's work, "the NHS decided to reinstate a survey on mental health crisis care provision in [accident and emergency response units]".

Such examples suggest fact-checking can make politicians more cautious and even lead to behavioural shifts in some instances. However, the findings of other studies suggest the evidence is not clear cut.

For example, the method used in the Nyhan and Reifler's 2015 study – examining the influence of fact-checking on political behaviour – was replicated by different authors [in 2023](#).<sup>20</sup> Specifically, this study analysed tweets by state legislators during Donald Trump's first impeachment trial. Contrary to the original findings, the replication study observed no significant effect of fact-checking on the accuracy of legislators' statements.

The authors suggest this could be down to the informal nature of social media, which carries weaker reputational cost for those promoting false claims. A highly polarised political environment was also cited as a possible reason, where the cost-benefit calculation had shifted since the original study. In other words, sharing popular misinformation outweighed the risk of being debunked by a fact-checker.

Lucas Graves and Federica Cherubini's [2016 analysis](#) of European fact-check organisations found politicians often ignore or disregard fact-checks and in some cases "prominent politicians often develop a reputation for being impervious to fact-checking".<sup>21</sup>

The mixed evidence, as shown in the studies above, highlights the need for further investigation to determine whether and how fact-check journalism influences political discourse and decision-making.

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<sup>20</sup> Ma, S. Bergan, D. Ahn, S. Carnaha, D. Gimby, N. McGraw, J. Virtue, I. 2023, *Fact-checking as a deterrent? A conceptual replication of the influence of fact-checking on the sharing of misinformation by political elites*, Human Communication Research <https://academic.oup.com/hcr/article-abstract/49/3/321/6909031?redirectedFrom=fulltext> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Graves, L. Cherubini, F. 2016, *the rise of fact-checking sites in Europe*, Digital News Project 2016, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/rise-fact-checking-sites-europe> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).



Focusing on a UK context, this project explores two competing hypothesis:

- Politicians and strategists actively moderate and/or adjust their behaviour in the presence of fact-check organisations, including altering or withdrawing problematic claims.
- Politicians and strategists ignore and/or overlook the findings of fact-check organisations, repeating claims even after they have been debunked.

# Fact-check journalism in the UK

Fact-checking – that is to say: selecting, testing and evaluating the veracity of political claims – is a practice in relative infancy compared to traditional journalism. The first organisations dedicated to publicly evaluating the truth of political claims appeared in the U.S. in the early 2000s.

The first U.S. outlet dedicated to political fact-checking was Spinsanity, founded in 2001 by three recent college graduates. This was followed in 2003 by FactCheck.org, which is still active today.

The UK was one of the first European countries to embrace fact-checking, leading to the emergence of three prominent organisations:

- Channel 4 FactCheck
- Full Fact
- BBC Verify (previously known as BBC Reality Check)

Two of these organisations, Channel 4 FactCheck and BBC Verify, are attached to legacy media – Channel 4 News and BBC News, respectively. Full Fact is an independent fact-checking organisation with charitable status.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from each of these organisations.

## Interviewee details

Details of interviewees from fact-checking organisations

Name	Role	Organisation	Interview date
Georgina Lee	News Editor	Channel 4 FactCheck	November 14, 2024
Chris Morris	Chief Executive	Full Fact	November 15, 2024
Anthony Reuben	Senior Journalist	BBC Verify	October 21, 2024

### Channel 4 News FactCheck

Channel 4 FactCheck was established in advance of the 2005 election, making it one of the earliest fact-checking organisations affiliated with a UK media outlet, according to editor Georgina Lee.

Channel 4 FactCheck operates an online blog which promotes its digital fact-check articles and other content, including social video. The blog has been a permanent feature of the Channel 4 website since in 2010.

Lee explained that the concept was initially named for a Channel 4 news presenter as “Cathy Newman’s Fact Check”, with a number of editorial staff feeding into it.

As one of the UK’s earliest fact-checking outfits, Channel 4 FactCheck managed to register [@FactCheck](#) as its Twitter handle, which it still uses to day on X with about 94,700 followers.<sup>22</sup>

While Channel 4 FactCheck has largely been an online innovation, Lee explains that a regular TV slot – headed up by Channel 4 News’ data correspondent Kieran Jenkins – is a more recent feature.

### **Full Fact**

Launched in 2010, Full Fact is an independent charity, made up of fact checkers and campaigners who find, expose and counter the harm caused by “bad information”.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Channel 4 FactCheck and BBC Verify, Full Fact takes a proactive approach by actively pushing for corrections – a strategy chief executive Chris Morris describes as “publish and act”. This approach has yielded notable successes, including prompting several cabinet ministers to issue corrections.

The organisation employs a politics editor and three political journalists as part of an overall editorial team of 14 people.

Social media plays an increasingly important role in disseminating its fact checks, Morris explained. Full Fact also publishes a newsletter which is received by about 100,000 people each week.

While not formally attached to a broadcaster, Morris said Full Fact has previously worked with BBC, Sky and ITV News. During the 2024 election campaign, Full Fact

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<sup>22</sup> Channel FactCheck X account, <https://x.com/factcheck?lang=en> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>23</sup> Full Fact, *frequently asked questions*, <https://fullfact.org/about/frequently-asked-questions/> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

partnered with UK news agency the Press Association (PA) and distributed its fact-checks through the agency's wire service.

As well as working with established media organisations, Full Fact has been involved with Meta's third-party fact-check programme. Under the programme, Full Fact identifies and flags material that it believes to be false or inaccurate on Meta's major platforms, Facebook and Instagram.

The partnership is currently unaffected by the January 2025 announcement that Meta is ending its third-party fact-checking programme in the U.S. – although it may be worth noting that, under the programme, FullFact was never able to fact check direct speech from a politician.

### **BBC Verify**

The BBC's fact-checking unit, previously known as BBC Reality Check, has evolved significantly since its inception. Originally introduced during the 2010 general election, the BBC Reality Check brand was not initially a dedicated fact-checking product. Instead, it provided audiences with context and analysis from specialist editors during major news broadcasts, explained senior journalist Anthony Reuben.

The brand was brought back for the 2015 general election and then the 2016 EU referendum, before becoming a permanent part of BBC News output following a review that highlighted the need for consistent and reliable statistical reporting, Reuben explains.

The BBC's first foray into fact-checking occurred in 2014, during a televised debate on the UK's future as part of the European Union (EU) between Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg and UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage.<sup>24</sup>

In April 2023 the unit was relaunched as BBC Verify. Today, it combines fact-checking with Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) journalism, data analysis, social media investigations, and monitoring disinformation, alongside handling user-generated content.

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<sup>24</sup>*At-a-glance: Key bits of Clegg v Farage EU debate*, BBC News, 3 April 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26859392> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Its core UK political fact-checking team consists of three senior journalists, an editor and a correspondent. It also draws on the BBC's internal expertise, including specialist editors.

# Project questions and methodology

We've established that the way politicians and strategists respond to fact-checking in the UK is largely unexplored.

To address the gap, this project presents the results of 11 semi-structured interviews with UK politicians and strategists. All participants currently hold, or previously held, senior roles in government or opposition over the past 25 or so years.

One of the project aims was to understand how the awareness of fact-check units has evolved between Gordon Brown's Labour administration – when fact-checking in the UK was first established – to the present day.

Where participants demonstrated an awareness of fact-check journalism, they were asked a series of questions about internal party processes: such as whether fact-check investigations were actively monitored and if specific strategies had been developed in response to the growth of fact-check journalism.

Two crucial questions, designed to get to the heart of this project's central research aims, were:

1. Whether the interviewees believed the presence of fact-checking journalism influences political behaviour, and
2. If they believed fact-check journalism enhances or diminishes democratic accountability.

Participants were also asked whether they trusted the verdicts of fact-checkers, if they perceived these units to be "fair" and if they believed the public paid attention to fact-check organisations and their verdicts.

Taking a semi-structured approach to the interviews allowed for follow-up questions that aimed to better understand the participants' attitudes towards fact-checking. Where possible, interviewees were pressed for specific examples.

Participants were selected primarily on the basis of their seniority in government or opposition, and their willingness to speak candidly about their experience. Among

the participants were former Cabinet Ministers, Communication Directors, Special Advisers and senior Number 10 officials.

## Summary of interview conducted

Interviewee	Government/party affiliation	Role	Interview date
SLM	Sir Keir Starmer (Labour) Government	Government source	November 14, 2024
Luke Sullivan	Sir Keir Starmer (Labour)	Former Political Director to the Leader of the Opposition	November 27, 2024
James Nation	Rishi Sunak (Conservative) Government	Former Special Adviser to Rishi Sunak / Former Deputy Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit	November 12, 2024
SSCM	Rishi Sunak (Conservative) Government	Former Senior Cabinet Minister	November 20, 2024
Baroness (Olly) Grender	Sir Ed Davey (Liberal Democrat)	Liberal Democrat Director of Communications for the 2024 general election campaign	November 19, 2024
JCM	Boris Johnson (Conservative) Government	Former Number 10 Senior Adviser	November 12, 2024
MCM	Theresa May (Conservative) Government	Former Special Adviser	November 12, 2024
Lord (Gavin) Barwell	Theresa May (Conservative) Government	Former Chief of Staff, Downing Street / Former Minister of State for Housing	November 8, 2024
Peter Cardwell	Theresa May (Conservative) Government	Former Special Adviser to four Cabinet Ministers	November 1, 2024
Sir Craig Oliver	David Cameron (Conservative) Government	Former BBC Editor, Former Downing Street Director of Communications	November 7, 2024
Lord (Peter) Mandelson	Tony Blair/Gordon Brown (Labour) Governments	Former Labour Director of Communications, Former Secretary of State for Trade & Industry, Former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Former Secretary of State for Business, Former First Secretary of State, Incumbent British Ambassador to U.S.	November 4, 2024

The majority of participants agreed to an on-the-record interview. However, four interviewees requested anonymity. To protect their identities, these participants are identified only with the following acronyms:

- MCM: May Conservative Ministry source
- JCM: Johnson Conservative Ministry source
- SSCM: Sunak Senior Cabinet Minister
- SLM: Starmer Labour Ministry source

All interviews were conducted over a short period (4 November - 27 November) through a combination of video and voice calls.

Some of my interviewees mentioned fact-checking organisations, including BBC Verify and its competitors, by name when levelling criticism about their work. These criticisms would require both verification, and demand that a right of reply be given to each organisation. Because the aim of this project is to understand how politicians view fact-checking in general terms, and because my time was limited, I have redacted organisation names where the inclusion would have detracted from the conversation at hand.



# Findings

## Awareness and engagement

Interviewees reported varying degrees of awareness and engagement with fact-check organisations. One trend was clear: participants from more recent governments were more aware and more likely to engage with the work of fact-checkers. Some actively monitored fact-checkers, while others were less engaged with one participant even describing them as an “irritant”.

James Nation, former Deputy Director of the Number 10 Policy Unit under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, confirmed Downing Street followed the work of fact-checkers, alongside other groups like the Institute for Fiscal Studies think tank. Most monitoring was done in preparation for announcements and PMQs (Prime Minister’s Questions).<sup>25</sup>

As part of the monitoring process, Nation explained how the government might use fact-checks to bolster their own arguments, stating “everyone on either side is appealing to external sources that back up their case”.

Nation also explained how the Number 10 policy unit would occasionally coordinate with the Number 10 press and communications team in response to a fact-check article that might undermine the government:

*“My sort of direct contact would be ‘have you seen BBC Verify put this blog up?’... and then equipping press colleagues and comms colleagues to have a bit of a hagggle where we felt that the fact checkers were being unfair.”*

Luke Sullivan is the former Political Director to Sir Keir Starmer and worked for the party during the 2024 election campaign. Like Nation, he was also highly aware of the work of fact-checkers, but his level of engagement varied depending on the situation:

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<sup>25</sup> PMQs (Prime Minister’s Questions) is a weekly session in the UK Parliament where Members of Parliament (MPs) question the Prime Minister about government policies and current issues. Held every Wednesday at noon when Parliament is in session, it is a key feature of British political life, showcasing parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

*“It wouldn’t be something [taking] up the time [and] attention span of the most senior comms and policy colleagues. However... if it was something we just vehemently disagreed with we would engage with it.... if it seemed like the main points [we] were making were being said by BBC Verify to be inaccurate, that would be something that would be properly engaged with and escalated in terms of seriousness.”*

Sullivan also indicated that Labour would strategically use fact-checks to their advantage, particularly when BBC Verify or another fact-checking organisation debunked a claim made by the Conservatives.

Also displaying high awareness was Baroness Grender, Liberal Democrat Director of Communications during the 2024 election. She recalled “quite a lot of engagement” with one fact-check organisation who she felt took an overly meticulous approach, focusing on minor details rather than the broader point being made. Grender described the experience “as like being under [an] insane tsunami”, stretching the resources of a comparatively small party press office.



*Parties can become overwhelmed by queries from fact-checkers, according to Baroness Grender. Picture: House of Lords*

A former Senior Cabinet Minister (SSCM), who served under Sunak, said he was aware of fact-checkers but admitted he “struggled to distinguish between them”. While he did not actively monitor their work himself, he believed CCHQ (Conservative Campaign Headquarters) did so as part of their regular monitoring.

“I kind of knew about BBC Verify [and] Channel 4 FactCheck. I’m not sure about the other ones,” he explained.

SSCM stated he’d never personally engaged with fact-checking organisations, but indicated that his team may have, adding he had never received any communication about it.

Sir Craig Oliver, who served as Downing Street Director of Communications under Prime Minister David Cameron, had a high level of awareness of fact-checker organisations. This was unsurprising given Oliver was previously the editor of the BBC’s News at Six and News at Ten flagship network bulletins. This period also coincided with the BBC’s first use of its “Reality Check” fact-check brand.

Oliver recalled active engagement with journalists and hinted at possible interaction with fact-checking organisations during his time at Number 10, but did not state so explicitly.



*Sir Craig Oliver oversaw the BBC’s first use of its “Reality Check” brand on its flagship TV news bulletins. Picture: BBC*

Lord Barwell, who served as Prime Minister Theresa May’s Chief of Staff, was also aware of the work of fact-checkers, but did not personally monitor their work. He

occasionally encountered fact-checks in news reports, but did not actively seek them out.

MCM, who also worked under Theresa May, had limited awareness of fact-checking organisations during their time in government. They stated they had “never even heard of” BBC Reality Check, the precursor to BBC Verify.

Lord Mandelson, a former Cabinet Minister who served in multiple roles under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, did not explicitly state whether he monitored fact-checks, but was aware of their work and was very supportive of broadcasters’ efforts to promote fact-check journalism:

*“It demonstrates that these broadcasters are conscious of their responsibilities. And that they are there to guide the public, factually and objectively, and not simply to churn out their own prejudices”.*

Peter Cardwell, former Special Adviser in Theresa May’s government, was aware of fact-checking organisations and found them helpful for claims made in general, but it was not something he worried about as part of his role. As an individual, he monitored fact-checks through Twitter (now known as X) and news consumption, but could only recall a few instances where he visited fact-checking websites.



*Peter Cardwell said he found fact-checkers helpful. Picture: Supplied*

JCM, a senior Downing Street official in Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government, said he too was aware of fact-checkers. Unlike Lord Mandelson, he found them to be more of an “irritant” than a valuable tool.

During his time in Number 10, JCM said the government viewed fact-checking as something the general public tended not to engage with, declaring “the bubble pays for more attention to fact-checkers” and his team were not interested in winning the fact-checker race.

### **Influence on political behaviour**

Several participants suggested fact-check journalism influenced behaviour, with politicians exercising greater caution when making claims that might be inaccurate. Others, however, argued that politicians often ignore fact-checks or even exploit them for strategic gain.



*Lord Mandelson has previously been described as Britain’s first “spin doctor” Picture: BBC*

Lord Mandelson, described as the UK’s first “spin doctor” in 1987 as Labour’s Director of Communications, argued that fact-checkers, especially those attached to reputable institutions like the BBC, have increased awareness among politicians about the need for accuracy:

*“I wouldn’t want to – if I were a minister or somebody advising a minister – I wouldn’t really want to fall foul of BBC Verify.”*

He believed fact-checkers do influence political discourse, comparing them to institutions like the independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) that also holds the government to account:

*“The point of the OBR is to keep politicians honest, to keep ministers honest. [...] And I think that when ministers create institutions and entities like this, they’re creating rods for their own back. But it’s long-term gain for short term pain. And again, in the long term is greater trust.”*

Strategists and politicians, he argued, should avoid making outright false claims in the presence of fact-checkers, asserting that “verification, like news, percolates” and one should not “take a risk in lying”:

*“You varnish the truth, you select, you choose how to answer a question, which may be evasive. It’s not the same as lying because it’s too risky... politicians in this country are not natural liars, believe it or not.”*

James Nation held similar views to Mandelson. He argued fact-checks have the potential to change political behaviour, but acknowledged some limitations:

*“If we get it [a claim] wrong, then we know that BBC Verify or another fact checking organisation is probably going to shine a light on us.”*

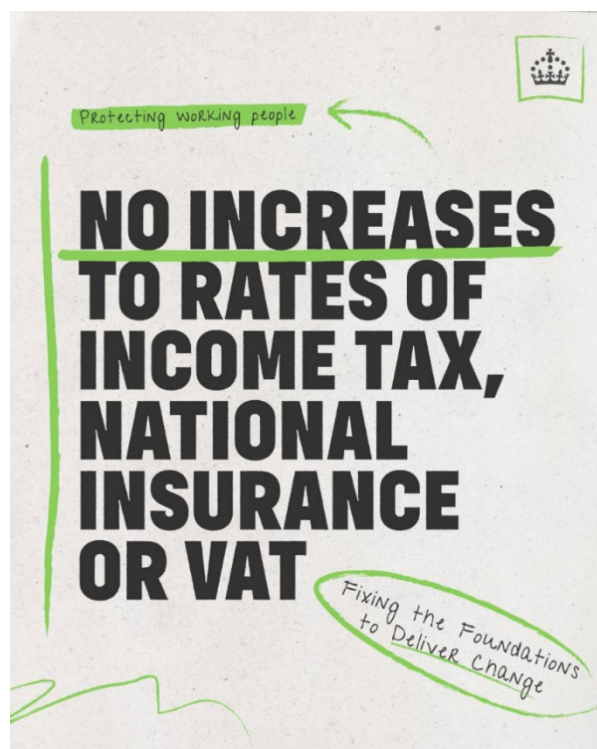


On the whole, Nation felt fact-checkers were a “good presence”, adding “we are in a much healthier place with our debate around them in the United Kingdom than the United States”.

While one-off fact-checks are unlikely to shift public perception, being on the wrong side on multiple occasions has the potential to leave “quite a bad impression”, he elaborated.

Nation further argued that political strategists will often frame claims broadly during a campaign, refining details post-election.

To illustrate, Nation referred to a recent Treasury graphic (see below) that stated there would be no rise in National Insurance rates, despite employer national insurance contributions being increased in Labour’s first Budget.



*The Treasury’s graphic included the phrase “protecting working people”. Picture: HM Treasury/X*

According to Nation, the graphic’s inclusion of the phrase “protecting working people” could be considered an attempt to prevent fact-checkers ruling the government had broken a manifesto commitment not to raise taxes.

The example also illustrates, according to Nation, the tension that can exist between Number 10 comms teams – who want clear messages – and policy teams, who strive for accuracy.

Although the presence of fact-checkers might have led to some “sneakiness” and “craftiness”, politicians on the whole, he said, have been forced to be more precise in their language in response to the increased scrutiny

*“[T]hey know that they’re going to be fact-checked... the fact that you know you’re going to be fact-checked is forcing people to be more precise.”*

To that extent, Nation agreed that fact-checking has influenced behaviour: “Yes, I think it has,” he said.

Luke Sullivan, who worked for Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer while Nation was working for Sunak’s Conservative government, offered a more nuanced perspective.

He acknowledged that Labour was fully aware, “that our statements would be scrutinised heavily and everything we had to say was true or probably true” and added the Labour party took great care to ensure its claims “stack up” to avoid potential issues.

But Sullivan also identified complexities in how fact-checking influences political behaviour. On one hand, Sullivan described fact-checking as a “useful” tool for holding politicians and advisers accountable – provided they care about facts. However, he noted that not all politicians adhere to those norms. He also remarked that if a party’s key claim contains a major flaw, “you’ve got bigger problems than the fact-check website”.

Overall, Sullivan suggested fact-checking has a modest influence on behaviour, saying it contributed to the layer of scrutiny within the UK’s unwritten constituency, akin to oversight by the lobby, other parliamentarians and civil society.

SLM, a senior advisor in the current Labour government, said fact-checking journalism is important “because it builds trust in politics”. They explained how



advisers consider the risk of being fact-checked when briefing ministers because they “want to get it right”.

Sir Craig Oliver, who worked for David Cameron, acknowledged the role and efforts of fact-checkers, but also highlighted the danger of not capturing the full context and complexity of political statements:

*“We live in a world where people just reduce it to binary, right or wrong. And of course there are objective, verifiable facts, but there is also context. And I think if you don’t include the context, you are misleading people quite often as well.”*

To preserve its integrity, fact-checking should not be reduced to a “zero sum game”, where fact-checkers are pressured into turning judgements into binary “ticks” or “crosses”, he argued.

He went on to that it would be wrong to just put the spotlight on politicians:

*“Too often journalists play fast and loose on this front – they magnify and amplify facts that suit their case, while downplaying or discarding those that diminish it. The result can be something that’s technically true, but lacks vital contextual information that gives a truer picture.”*

Oliver recommended news organisations make more use of fact-checkers and in-house experts so that political reporters are not reduced to “skating judges” where they are “supposed to hold up a mark like on *Strictly* or something” to judge the accuracy of a political statement.<sup>26</sup>

Whether or not fact-checking directly influences political behaviour comes down to individual politicians, according to Oliver: “Some take it very, very seriously. Others couldn’t give a monkey’s.”

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<sup>26</sup> *Strictly Come Dancing* is a popular UK ballroom dancing show in which couples compete in front of a jury for marks.

JCM, who served under Boris Johnson, argued that fact-checking has not significantly influenced political behaviour. He stated: “I’ve never stood in a session where I’ve knowingly put something down which was a lie or incorrect”. Using NHS waiting lists as an example, he argued that data is often subjective:

*“[I]t can always be manipulated by those who want to present without necessarily lying... so again it’s not clear to me whether a fact-check is really [a] valuable role in democracy.”*

Despite this, JCM later acknowledged that he “would never advise repeating a claim” flagged as problematic, indicating that he believes doing so would reinforce the fact-check’s credibility and draw more attention to the issue.



*JCM, a Downing Street official under Boris Johnson, viewed fact-checkers as “irritants” Picture: BBC*

He explained his typical advice to ministers would depend on the nature of the misstep. For example, if a minister made an incorrect statement about pension costs, without intending to mislead, he would recommend avoiding repeating the claim or issuing a correction to minimise attention. He characterised such instances as “inevitably cock up, not conspiracy,” and argued it is best to “move on from it very quickly” unless the point is fundamental to the argument.

JCM emphasised that “no minister is going to repeat a lie that they know to be untrue.” Based on these views, he concluded that fact-checkers may not play a “valuable role in democracy” given their limited influence.

MCM, who served as an adviser in Theresa May’s government, suggested fact-checking may have changed political behaviour, but not in the way that was intended. They anticipated some politicians may seek to “cherry-pick” facts for their own purposes, using them to support their arguments while dismissing findings that contradict them. This could create a “war” of competing fact-check narratives, where a variety of fact-checkers are established to push particular narratives.

MCM also believed government communications teams do not live in “mortal dread” of being fact-checked, and stated that the public are not particularly swayed by the verdicts of fact-checkers:

*“Even if you can present people with the absolute, unvarnished 100% factual evidence or something, you will still find a substantial amount of people that will [still] not believe... [They] would rather very quickly disappear back into an online echo chamber and go, ‘Ah, well, they would say that’.”*

The Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Greener felt that some politicians – particularly the Conservatives – “got away with lots of disinformation in the general election, in spite of fact-check organisations existing”. She attributed this to a deliberate strategy by certain parties to exploit the reality that far fewer people consume a debunk compared to those who hear the original false claim.

When it came to the Liberal Democrats, Greener stated the party always strived “for a high degree of accuracy” to ensure statements meet a standard of truthfulness. This approach, she argued, “has been the case for a long time” and was not a reaction to a perceived threat of being fact-checked:

*“We wanted to project a cast iron accurate reflection of our [manifesto] costings that passes [the truth] test and that has always been incredibly important to us. And therefore the fact*

*that some of the fact checkers have come onto the stage hasn't affected our behaviour.”*

While acknowledging the role of fact-checkers, Grender highlighted the Institute for Fiscal Studies (an independent economic think tank) as the party’s primary test for ensuring its policies are credible.

The former Cabinet Minister in Sunak’s government, SSCM, stated the presence of fact-checkers played no influence in any of his decisions to make or repeat a claim. “I make my own personal judgement,” he said.

He did not see fact-checkers as holding a privileged position in the political debate: “I wouldn’t elevate it massively above, ‘what a media outlet said’, ‘what a think tank said’... It’s just another element of the sort of democratic debate.”

Despite this, SSCM did acknowledge fact-checkers as “another player in the debate”.

While supporting the work of fact-checkers, former Special Adviser Peter Cardwell felt that politicians can ignore fact-checkers findings on the basis that “most people don’t use them”.

Cardwell further argued that while fact-checking enhances democratic accountability, politicians exploit the time it takes journalists to carry out investigations, especially in a very fast news media environment:

*“The problem is that politicians and others within the political sphere in public life know that the cliché is true: the lie is half around the world before the truth has got its boots on.”*

Lord Barwell said while he hoped the presence of fact-checkers would change political behaviour, he asserted, “I don’t think there’s huge evidence of it”.



*Lord Barwell felt fact-checks were less likely to influence behaviour during elections. Picture: House of Lords*

He also felt the nature of election campaigns makes it less likely politicians are held accountable for misleading or false statements. This, he said, was down to the back-and-forth nature of campaigns, where the public already has low expectations for honesty:

*“You just get into a white noise argument, where you try and throw up a load of chaff against the chaff they’re throwing up against you and, - you know, -hope something gets through. And you’re probably a little less likely to get called out on it because everyone’s doing it in the context of an election campaign.”*

Fact-checks, he argued, were more likely to influence political behaviour outside of election periods. A demonstrably false claim made by a PM in a major policy announcement will garner more attention from both the media and the public, making a fact-check more effective, he hypothesised.

Broadcasters should also consider elevating the work of fact-checkers, Barwell argued, by giving on-air reporters higher visibility.

Like Oliver, Barwell also suggested involving high-profile figures, like the BBC’s political editor, in fact-check coverage.

### General Election 2024: £2,000 and £4,800 claims

Participants that worked for the Conservative and Labour parties during the 2024 general election were asked additional questions about two claims that were challenged by fact-checkers during the campaign season.

The [Conservatives](#) claimed Labour would increase taxes by £2,000 by family. [Labour](#), in turn, claimed mortgages would rise by £4,800 under the Conservatives.

The UK's leading fact-checkers questioned the assumptions that had gone into calculating the figures and the way they were presented (as annual figures rather than cumulative over the five years of the next Parliament). BBC Verify, for example, concluded both claims “risks misleading people”.<sup>27, 28</sup>

SSCM, a senior cabinet minister during the campaign, acknowledged that he was aware the £2,000 figure had been disputed, but maintained he would “look at the analysis” and would only use figures like this “if I was convinced that the numbers were sufficiently robust... And if I wasn't, I just would choose not to use it”.

He also felt politicians would be “very stupid” to mislead voters because they would not be able to get away with it.

James Nation defended the claims, stating “there is a kernel of truth behind each claim” and fact-checkers could not dismiss either the tax claim or the mortgage claim as an outright fabrication.

He elaborated by citing Liz Truss's “mini-budget” as evidence of previous Conservative government policy leading to higher mortgage costs. On this basis, he stated it was difficult to “fundamentally refute” Labour's “logic train”.

In this situation, Nation welcomes the presence of fact-checkers to navigate the public: “You've got the parties kind of making claims often based on their own analysis” and “I think fact-checkers, on the whole, have been a good addition”.

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<sup>27</sup> Conservative claim that Labour would cost families £2,000 fact-checked, BBC Verify, 17 May, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy9x4n9gjz4o> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Labour claim that Tories would cost homeowners £4,800 fact-checked, BBC Verify, 17 June, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cydd08l3y4mo> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

When asked what the calculation was to pursue Labour’s claim that families would see their mortgages increase by £4,800 under the Conservatives, SLM (Starmer Labour Ministry) explained:

*“I guess it was kind of tit for tat, really. At that point, we didn’t make the first move”.*

Luke Sullivan defended the figure, arguing Labour was trying to craft a number it believed was “genuine” and “representative”. He also indicated a tension between how Labour wanted to present its position and the way fact-checkers analysed it.

While Labour wanted its position to “stand up to scrutiny”, Sullivan suggested fact-checkers sometimes get into difficult territory where “assumptions and models are contested”. He claimed fact-checkers were not saying the party’s number was false, but that additional information was needed – or there were other ways of calculating it. He felt during the “rough and tumble” there is often disagreement about what is a fair assumption, or what is a more accurate calculation.



*SLM, a Labour government source, defended the party’s £4,800 claim as “tit for tat”. Picture: BBC*

According to Sullivan, fact-checkers sometimes go “down a rabbit hole” and focus on issues that are too detailed or technical for the public. During the election, Sullivan recalled reading a fact-check that was “just so in the weeds” he assumed



“nobody’s interested in this” and the organisation was “trying to prove a point, rather than it being a wider public service”.

### “Factcheck UK”

JCM was asked an additional question concerning an incident during General Election 2019, where the Conservative press office renamed its X (formerly Twitter) account “factcheckUK” for a live TV debate involving then Conservative and Labour leaders Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn.

During the debate, the rebranded account posted a series of tweets that were presented as fact-checks. The account reverted to its “[CCHQ Press](#)” name after the debate.<sup>29</sup> At the time of the incident, FullFact branded the Conservative press office’s actions as “[inappropriate and misleading](#)”.<sup>30</sup>



*There was no intention to mislead and the response to the rebrand was “overblown”, according to JCM. Picture: X Screenshot*

JCM felt the response to the rebrand was “overblown”, arguing “no one seriously looked at that Twitter account and thought that they were actually trying to pretend to be an actual fact-checker and mislead people”. Instead, JCM suggested that the party was instead “trying to make a political point”, specifically that “Labour were saying things that were untrue”.

He believed that people understood that it was not a “real fact-checker”.

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<sup>29</sup> Election debate: Conservatives criticised for renaming Twitter profile 'factcheckUK', BBC News, 19 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-50482637> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Tories pretend to be factchecking service during leaders' debate, The Guardian, 19 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/19/tories-tweet-anti-labour-posts-under-factcheckuk-brand> (Accessed: 24 January 2025).



## Trust and fairness

The interviewees' views on whether fact-checkers are fair also varied among the participants, ranging from high levels of trust to outright scepticism.

Of all the participants, Lord Mandelson held fact-checkers in the highest regard, arguing they play a crucial role in bolstering public trust by demonstrating a commitment to accuracy and objectivity. Lord Mandelson singled out the BBC:

*“BBC Verify is the most well-known show in town. I think they’ve developed it very well and it would be great to see other public service broadcasters adopting the same technique, professionalism and standard.”*

He went on to commend fact-checkers, saying they are “there to guide the public – factually and objectively – and not simply churn out their own prejudices”.

The rise of social media makes the need for fact-checking greater, he argued.

Peter Cardwell stated he “usually” trusts fact-checkers’ verdicts but asserted they can make mistakes. He cautioned against using fact-checks to dominate interviews and emphasised the need for fact-checking organisations to maintain high standards of accuracy.

Baroness Greender believed fact-checking is part of democracy and welcomed the scrutiny it brings. However, she also felt the fact-checking community is not consistent, suggesting that some units are fairer than others.

The importance of fact-checking was also recognised by Lord Barwell and James Nation. Barwell felt fact-check services were broadly fair, stating that if criticism comes from both sides “you’re probably getting the balance about right”.

Nation believed fact-checkers contribute to a healthier public discourse, but also noted a “general vibe” that fact-checkers can get caught up in the “media zeitgeist”, leading to a perception of uneven scrutiny applied to different political parties.



*James Nation, the former Deputy Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit. Picture: LinkedIn*

From Downing Street’s point of view, Nation said, it was unclear what fact-checkers were choosing to focus on given their finite resources.

SSCM expressed a belief that fact-checkers hold a left-wing bias, although he acknowledged this was a “gut feeling” and not based on empirical evidence:

*“There’s a greater preponderance for people who choose to go into the media having metropolitan, liberal left views than rural conservative views and so therefore it’s just in that broad sweep.”*

He also felt fact-checkers were more likely to be preoccupied with “left-wing” issues like “equality-, poverty-type stats issues, than growth, inflation, armed forces spending”.

SSCM added he would attach more weight to the observations and judgements of organisations like the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the International Monetary Fund compared with fact-checkers, who he placed “near the bottom of the tree”.

Contrary to SSCM, Luke Sullivan felt the Labour party was “held to a higher standard than everyone else – not least the Tories – and the things we said had to be true and based on evidence”. He apportioned this to an expectation Labour would win the election meaning greater scrutiny was given to their claims.

SLM (Starmer Labour Ministry) claimed one fact-check organisation held a bias against the Labour Party, arguing “they came after us”. The source added they eventually chose not to engage as “we didn’t feel we were getting a fair hearing”.

Despite this, SLM also said there was a moral obligation to respond to fact-checks: “I always felt, morally, we should always at least try to answer the question”.

JCM (Johnson Conservative Ministry) acknowledged the potential value of fact-checkers, but argued they risk overstepping their role by attempting to adjudicate on inherently political matters where no single truth exists:

*“In many cases, they are trying to rule on something which is a political choice or political judgement; where it’s not one single truth. And by trying to pretend that there is a single truth, or that they can somehow arbitrate this, they are entering into the political sphere.”*

He also criticised fact-checkers for presenting what he considered a simplistic “yes/no” or “black/white” manner which failed to capture the complexities and nuances of political debates.

MCM (May Conservative Ministry) was extremely critical of two fact-checking organisations: questioning one unit’s record for accuracy and believing that another carried a heavy left-wing bias. While generally supportive of the principle of holding politicians accountable, they suggested fact-checking could exacerbate polarisation.



*MCM, a Special Adviser in Theresa May’s government, heavily criticised two fact-check organisations. Picture: BBC*

Like SSM, MCM believed parts of the media – including the BBC – indulge in groupthink and “tends to hire the same kind of people with the same kind of background who went through the same kind of education and have a very similar worldview”.

She argued that if trust in fact-checking was undermined – either due to mistakes or biases – the industry “will very soon be dismissed as part of the problem”. This could potentially lead to the emergence of partisan fact-checkers, allowing politicians to “cherry pick” fact-checks and creating a toxic political discourse.

It was therefore “vitally important for our democracy”, MCM argued, that fact-checking be as accurate as possible.

# Discussion

The interviewees responses reveal a complex and evolving relationship between fact-check journalism and political behaviour in the UK. Participants reported a spectrum of awareness, engagement, and behavioural responsiveness to fact-checking – ranging from strategic adaptation to outright dismissal of fact-checkers, as summarised in the table below.

## Results

Summarising interviewees' reported spectrum of awareness, engagement, and behavioural responsiveness to fact-checking

Participant	Awareness of fact-checkers	Engagement level	Perceived behavioural response
James Nation	High	Active engagement	High-moderate, can change behaviour despite limitations
Luke Sullivan	High	Moderate engagement	Moderate-limited, adds an extra layer of scrutiny
SLM	High	Moderate engagement	Moderate, potential to enhance trust
Lord Mandelson	High	Supports aims	Strong, encourages greater precision and accuracy
Baroness Grender	High	Cautious engagement	Limited, potential to overwhelm parties and not elevated above think-tank analysis
JCM (Johnson Ministry)	Moderate	Low	Limited, another player in the debate
Peter Cardwell	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate, influence limited by being too slow to act
Sir Craig Oliver	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate, influence depends on individual politicians
Lord Barwell	Moderate-low	Low, passive monitoring	Limited in elections, moderate influence outside election periods
SSCM (Sunak Cabinet)	Moderate-low	Low	Limited, "near the bottom of the tree"
MCM (May Ministry)	Low	Low	Limited, potential to exacerbate polarisation

## Influencing behaviour

About half of participants believed fact-checking can have some influence on political behaviour (such as encouraging claims to be worded more carefully). A majority also suggested it can contribute to a healthier political discourse, albeit with some nuance.

At one end of the spectrum, Nation and Lord Mandelson suggested fact-check journalism can foster greater precision, and SLM felt it can enhance trust. For those that view the industry as credible, repeatedly falling foul of fact-checkers risks reputational damage – a finding consistent with analysis by [Ceron and Carra \(2021\)](#).

Nation's reference to "sneakiness" and "craftiness" highlights how the presence of fact-checkers can influence language used in political messages, even if it cannot completely counter the way some claims are strategically framed.

Whereas Mandelson held reputable fact-check organisations in particularly high regard, participants such as JCM, SSCM and MCM expressed minimal engagement, viewing fact-checking as a low or non-priority when it comes to political strategy.

This difference in views shows that politicians and strategists engage with fact-checkers based on their own priorities and whether they see any benefit. As Oliver put it, some politicians and strategists simply "couldn't give a monkey's" when it comes to being fact-checked.

Although not as critical, Lord Barwell observed that fact-checking was less effective during high-stake moments, like general elections – an observation that is also consistent with the findings of Ceron and Carra.

Other participants acknowledged that fact-checking has some influence and provided their own insights into why its overall impact was not greater:

- Baroness Greender believed fewer people engage with fact-checks compared with consuming the original claim, potentially reducing their influence.
- Peter Cardwell highlighted the slow reactive nature of fact-checking, and how this can be exploited by political strategists.
- Luke Sullivan observed fact-checkers often go "down a rabbit hole" offering convoluted and overtechnical explanations.

Despite the divergence in views, one clear trend emerged: participants from current and more recent governments were significantly more aware of and engaged with the work of fact-checkers.

This suggests that fact-checking journalism is gaining traction and cutting through to political figures far more effectively now than in the past.

The increased visibility and awareness indicates that fact-checkers efforts are starting to shape the way modern politicians and strategists approach public messaging.

To address these points and potential increase its influence, fact-checking units should seriously consider expanding their pre-bunking efforts – addressing anticipated claims ahead of key moments, like major speeches or debates.

While prioritising accuracy, fact-checkers should also do more to consider the accessibility and impact of their work. This could mean identifying clear public policy issues that are of interest and relevance to the public at large.

Consideration should also be made to the way fact-checks are communicated to maximise audience potential.

### **Reputational risk**

No interviewee admitted to spreading outright falsehoods, but a pattern of responses revealed some strategists and politicians consider reputational risk when crafting and delivering claims.

While interviewees said outright mistruths carried significant risk, many were happy to present contested claims, so long as they are not demonstrably false. In these instances, claims may be based on incomplete data or selected assumptions.

This was illustrated by the £2,000 tax claim by the Conservatives and the £4,800 mortgage claim by Labour. In both instances the claims were challenged by fact-checkers, but repeated by both parties.

These findings align with the broader literature, such as [Graves and Cherubini \(2016\)](#), which highlights how some politicians report engaging with fact-checkers strategically, while others report disregarding them altogether.

Whether misleading claims are levelled strategically or without regard, both insights suggest that fact-checking organisations should confidently issue stronger rebuttals, especially when addressing claims that have already been debunked.

To bolster credibility, fact-checking organisations could consider referencing accurate findings from other reputable units. This approach would make it unmistakably clear when a particular politician or party is reiterating a claim that has been previously discredited.

## **Trust**

Trust emerged as a key theme in understanding how the politicians view and respond to fact-checkers. The interviewees' views on perceived fairness were diverse and often reflected their own political experiences and perspectives.

The views of SSCM, who asserted a “metropolitan liberal” bias, highlights a key challenge for fact-checking organisations to ensure they are regarded as impartial. In SSCM's case, he was unable to offer any evidence of bias, simply that it was a “gut instinct”. Former Labour strategist Luke Sullivan argued that his party faced disproportionate scrutiny, suggesting that perceptions of fairness can be subjective regardless of political affiliation.

Critics like JCM and SSCM argued that fact-checkers risk straying into adjudicating political judgments rather than objective facts. JCM asserted that fact-checkers sometimes reduce complex issues into binary “right or wrong” categories.

Such conflicting views highlight the need for fact-checking organisations to maintain rigorous standards of impartiality and transparency. This is particularly true for those like BBC Verify, who operate under public service obligations.

The perceptions of fairness and impartiality raised by participants, whether grounded in evidence or instinct, further highlight the critical importance of trust in determining fact-checking's long-term impact.

To address this, fact-checkers could consider improving the explainability of their methods – directly, or indirectly. Greater effort to show how claims are selected and interrogated, for example, could encourage greater trust.



## Recommendations: a summary

As set out in the discussion section above, this paper has developed recommendations for newsrooms that could enhance the effectiveness of fact-checking operations.



*Newsrooms could consider elevating the prominence and visibility of fact-checking. Picture: BBC*

### **Pre-bunking**

Fact-checkers could anticipate and address potential misinformation before key events, like televised debates or PMQs. This could involve priming audiences on likely claims and providing context.

### **Focus on repeat offenders**

Fact-checkers should do more to highlight instances where politicians persistently make misleading claims despite being fact-checked. Referencing findings from other reputable fact-check units could further bolster credibility of the practice, and influence political behaviour.

### **Transparency**

To combat perceptions of perceived bias, fact-checkers should prioritise transparency by clearly showing their methodology, linking to data sources, and openly signposting any mistakes. While increased transparency is often presented as a universal solution, fact-checkers must approach this with care. Merely providing

detailed workings without a clear strategy risks overwhelming users with an excess of methodology, which could obscure the value of the service.

Instead, fact-checkers should adopt technological and design solutions that make it easy for users to access information about the methodology and the rationale behind selecting specific claims. These efforts should tie into overarching explainers that contextualise the purpose of fact-checking and outline available resources. By striking this balance, fact-checkers can foster trust without diminishing the clarity and impact of their work.

### **Reach and visibility**

News organisations should consider elevating the prominence and visibility of fact-checking. This can involve integrating fact-checks more seamlessly into high-profile coverage like BBC *Question Time*, and the use of senior on-air figures – like political editors – to highlight fact-check findings.

Fact-checkers should focus on issues that resonate with the public and consider how fact-checks are communicated to maximise audience engagement.

## Conclusion

This project explored the relationship between fact-check journalism and political behaviour in the UK. Through semi-structured interviews with 11 current and former politicians, officials, and strategists, it revealed key insights into how fact-checking interacts with political decision-making, behaviour, and democratic accountability.

Two competing hypotheses guided the line of questioning:

1. Politicians and strategists actively moderate and/or adjust their behaviour in the presence of fact-check organisations, including altering or withdrawing problematic claims.
2. Politicians and strategists ignore and/or overlook the findings of fact-check organisations, repeating claims even after they have been debunked.

The findings suggest politicians and strategists do adjust their behaviour in certain circumstances, particularly when reputational risk is high. On occasion, however, claims can be strategically crafted to evade outright rejection while maintaining public appeal. This was evident in the repeated use of contested claims during 2024's general election.

While fact-check journalism has introduced valuable scrutiny and enhanced democratic accountability, its influence on political behaviour is inconsistent. Some interviewees emphasised its role in encouraging greater accuracy and precision, while others noted its limited impact or strategic exploitation by political figures.

While this project provides valuable insights into the interaction between fact-check journalism and political behaviour, it is not without some limitations.

The project relied on semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, a relatively small sample size. While these individuals were selected for seniority and experience in government or opposition, their perspectives likely do not reflect the makeup and behaviours across the full UK political landscape. If further research is to be carried out, participants from smaller political parties, such as Reform, the Green Party, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) should be considered.

While this project provides detailed insights from qualitative methods, it lacks the statistical rigor that quantitative methods could bring. The reliance on self-reported data from politicians and strategists could be unreliable. Participants may, for instance, have downplayed occasions of misinformation in messaging, or overemphasised their engagement with fact-checking to appear more credible.

Fact-checking is not merely about correcting claims, it is about enhancing a culture of accountability that reaffirms the public's right to truth. This project contributes to the understanding of the political impact of UK fact-checking – its perceptions, power, and polarisation – by demonstrating that fact-check journalism has introduced greater scrutiny to UK politics.

To maximise the impact of fact-checking, organisations should prioritise strategies that increase public engagement, accessibility, and transparency. By focusing on these areas, fact-checkers can play a more influential role in shaping political behaviour and combating misinformation.