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START AUDIO

Interviewer: So, the first thing, can I ask you to turn to page four in your book? That one. That shows the times of day when you sent us news.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: So, just could you confirm whether those are the sorts of times of day that reflect when you actually access news?

Julie: It does, yes.

Interviewer: Then also, could you just talk us through using that, or just a typical day on what news you’ll access, how and when, throughout a typical day?

Julie: Okay, so based on this and on my memory of doing the diary, I most frequently check it in the afternoon. That is to do with my job. So, I work in student services on the helpdesk. We tend to get a bit of a lull in the afternoons and I have my phone at my desk. (Laughter) So, I’ll often check the news then. Or it’ll be that I’ve been sent notifications, so that’s when I’m looking at them.

I think the second highest time is early morning. So, that is usually when I’ve just woken up and do the typical millennial thing of, pick up my phone off the bedside table, check all my apps and obviously look at the news then. Not so much in the morning and at noon, because those are busier times in the workday. So, yes, it tends to be mostly the afternoon and a little bit earlier in the morning, before I actually leave for work.

Interviewer: That purple one at the top, we just haven’t written it on, but that would mean night. As in, probably… Or evening, sorry. Late evening. So, that- When would you access news in the evening or late evening time?

Julie: I wouldn’t access it directly. It would just be if I came across it on social media. Because I tend- In the evenings, I have a lot of hobby stuff that I do. So, it would usually be if I’ve come across it by scrolling through social media or if someone has sent me something in a WhatsApp message. So, in the evenings, I don’t tend to be interacting with the news, as far as I’m aware.

I’m not a regular watcher of the news as it is on the TV either. I don’t tune into the radio or watch the TV specifically for the news. It’s just if I came across it whilst flicking through and then I’d probably flick over to the Simpsons, or something. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, you mentioned the apps. Which are those?

Julie: So, I have the BBC News app and I’ve got the Guardian app. I’d have to look at my phone to see what else I’ve got downloaded, but I think those are the only two where I have notifications enabled. I follow both of those on Facebook as well.

Interviewer: You have the Facebook app?

Julie: Yes, I’ve got the Facebook app.

Interviewer: And other social media apps where you might see news?

Julie: Well, I didn’t think of it until you mentioned it earlier, but I do have TikTok. But I don’t really… The content I interact with, the algorithm doesn’t really send me news-related stuff. So, I don’t really come across it on there. I use Twitter, but quite infrequently. I use my Twitter more as a platform to complain to companies. (Laughter) I don’t really use it to get my news, but sometimes I’ll see if someone has retweeted something.

Or if I’ve seen something, say, on the BBC News, and I think, “I wonder what other people think about this,” I might do a little search to see if it’s trending. But it wouldn’t be my go-to place to get it.

I have Instagram as well and there are a few accounts that I follow on there, that have got a political slant, where I pick up on titbits. I follow, I think it’s called UK Fact Check Politics, or something. It’s something along those lines. I follow that and there’s a page I follow called Feminist, which in between posts about Harry Styles, it does sometimes have news and political issues mentioned in there. So, Instagram- I guess I wouldn’t have thought of it as where I get my news from, but I do see stuff on there as well.

Interviewer: Great. We are just talking about just information as well and not strictly news.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: Because I think everybody has a different definition of news.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: We’ve discovered actually through doing this, some people, what they think of as news is very strict and other people’s is more open. So, have you noticed- So, you just talked about patterns and trends in online news consumption there. Have you noticed that changing a lot over time, or any shifts in the trends in the times and the way you access news?

Julie: I would say so. A few years ago, I used to actually sit down and watch the news. A couple of nights a week, I’d be like, “Oh, I’d better watch the news,” and I used to watch Question Time as well. Then I just found it too depressing. So, I’ve actually- (Laughter) Probably not great for this study, but I’ve made a conscious effort to try and lower my consumption of what we class as the traditional news. So, I don’t watch the News at Ten, and I don’t watch Question Time and stuff like that anymore. Because I just found it was too depressing.

Especially during COVID, when you felt like you had to because it was the daily briefings. So, at the beginning of COVID, I was still watching those. Then when it just got to announcing how many people were dead, or how many people had COVID, I was like, “This is not good for my mental health.” So, I think since probably about 2020, I don’t really sit and go, “Right, okay, it’s 6 o’clock. The news is on. I’ll put it on.”

I don’t do that anymore. It’s more what I come across, what will happen across online. I don’t actively sit to specifically focus on the news anymore.

Interviewer: What about with the- You mentioned the BBC app and the Guardian app.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: Is there any routine around when you access them, or has that changed over time at all?

Julie: With those, I don’t tend to go on the app. I tend to just go on it when they’ve sent me a notification. But sometimes, if the notification is about something I’m not bothered about, I’ll just delete it and not even click on it. If the headline has anything to do with the royal family, for example, I’m like, “No, not interested.” But there doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to what they send their push notifications about. So, it’ll be really random stuff.

So, it’s really hit and miss as to whether I’ll actually click on it and then go into the app. Then once I’m in it, I then might have a scroll through. But I don’t ever tend to open the app specifically for having a look at the news on there.

Interviewer: Great. So, the book also shows on page seven some of the topics and issues that you seem to have gravitated towards during the study. The ones that you recognise within that, why do you think you do gravitate towards these issues and topics?

Julie: I think there are just certain areas that I’ve- I wouldn’t say a passion, but I’ve got an interest in. So, things like gun laws in America, because I’m quite interested in true crime and that is something that I just find ridiculous, that anyone can walk around with a gun. So, this school shootings thing- I think it was the shooting in Alabama at the time that I was doing this diary.

So, obviously there were a lot of news articles about it and that is probably one time when I did actually go and look at updates on it. Because I wanted to know, how old was the person who did it? Did they have a history of mental illness? Because I’m interested in that stuff.

Celebrity events has come up, which I’m not usually interested in. But it was… Paul O’Grady died and there were news articles about that. I kind of feel like I’ve got a bit of a personal connection, because he’s a Scouser and my dad was a Scouser. So, he feels a bit like Uncle Paul. I’ve never met him or anything like that, but it was a celebrity that I felt more of a connection with. Usually, celebrity events I’m not really that interested in.

Space exploration is a weird one, because I hate space exploration. But mainly because I’m quite against it because of the amount of money that is spent on that, rather than stuff in the tangible real world, that could help real people. So, I more angrily read stuff about space exploration. It’ll be like, “What are they wasting their money on now?” (Laughter) So, that one coming up is fairly funny, because I’m not interested in it. I’m angrier about the concept of space exploration. So, yes, sometimes I do read stuff just to enjoy being angry about it.

Legal cases, I can’t even think of what that might relate to. I guess part of my interest in true crime. Maybe it has come up as me clicking on something that will have sparked an interest there. Beauty trends, I don’t know what that could relate to, but I am quite interested in beauty trends and things like that. But I can’t think of what in a news sphere that might’ve been triggered by. But that is actually something I’m interested in.

Then financial matters I think is not something I’m interested in at all, but I have been forced to be because of the cost-of-living crisis. So, if there’s an article saying, ‘Martin Lewis says you can save £5,000 a year on something,” I’m like, “Oh, what is it? Can I do it?”

So, with the financial matters, it’s not an interest as in, “Oh, I love the stock market.” It’s more that I’ve been forced to be aware of it because of current circumstances. So, that’s probably why financial matters have come up. But I can’t even think anything with numbers, so it’s not an interest. It’s more a need to be aware of it at the minute.

Interviewer: So, how would you then- Away from what we’ve got in this book, what would be the kind of things you did gravitate to, do you think? What kinds of issues and topics?

Julie: I think big shootings is like- (Laughter) It sounds awful, but stuff like that. Big criminal events. Because I’m quite interested in- Because I’ve got that interest in true crime, I’m interested in the psychology behind how an everyday person can do something so horrific. So, when there are reports on a murder, or a shooting, or a drive-by, or a hit and run, I’m interested in those.

I gravitate towards those, because I want to be like, “Oh, so was the person from a deprived background, or are they a rich person?” I’m just interested in that side of things, which you don’t often get in the news. You don’t really get much of the nitty-gritty, but it’s more surface-level reporting. But I still look at it and then I might go away and see if there are any podcasts about it and that sort of thing. Yes, [that’s kind of it 0:11:00].

Interviewer: How often do you encounter online news that you suspect is fake or misleading in some way?

Julie: I don’t think that often, because I think I’ve curated my sources and the algorithms of all the different sites. They don’t really show me the kind of stuff that I would class as fake news. It doesn’t come up and get shown to me. It’s more when other people that I might have on social media share stuff. So, I don’t come across it from- Like a post from an actual site itself. It'll be something that someone has maybe reshared, rather than me coming across it organically.

In those cases, I just tend to ignore it. But because I do have- I follow the BBC and the Guardian. They tend to be what comes up on my Facebook and social media feed. I don’t tend to get the smaller publications, where I’m a bit suspicious of it. I don’t really tend to come across those.

Interviewer: So, you said sometimes other people might reshare something and then you’ll ignore it. But who- Are these people who are in your social network that are resharing things, or…?

Julie: So, it’s more groups. I follow a lot of local Facebook groups. Like there’s one for Felling, and there’s one for the North-East and places like that. People send to share… Like anti-vaxxer stuff, and conspiracy theory kinds of things on those. Sometimes, I’ll read through the thread, because there are interesting arguments in the comments, but I wouldn’t ever click on the news source. Because I don’t want to give it the click and give it the validity of having gone into it and looked at the article.

I just read the headline and be like, “Oh, yes, that’s absolute nonsense.” It doesn’t tend to be people I know personally. It tends to be people in groups that I’m a member of.

Interviewer: On Facebook predominantly.

Julie: On Facebook, yes.

Interviewer: Then they’ll be place-based things. So, the town where you live’s local page and-

Julie: Yes. So, there’s one group- The Facebook group for- It’s called the Felling Group, so it’s for people who live in Felling, and it tends to be quite ridiculous stuff that people share on there. It tends to be Meghan and Harry conspiracies and things that I would just never seek out myself. But, yes, it’s not people I know personally and the news source- Sometimes, it’s a lot from the US. I feel like things like Fox News and things are quite gossipy.

They would put stuff in the news that I would expect to be in a tabloid or a ridiculously cheap magazine. But they have it as headline reporting. So, quite often, bizarrely, nannas in Felling are sharing articles from Fox News and things. (Laughter) Which is quite strange, but it just shows that obviously there must be something different on their algorithm that means they’re coming across those things.

Interviewer: Then sharing them. They think it’s important enough.

Julie: Yes, they do.

Interviewer: So, have you ever intentionally, easy for me to say, sought out sources online to check or counterbalance something you’ve read online?

Julie: Yes, I’ve used- I think it’s called Snopes, which is a fact-check website. But sometimes, it’s not for a specific article. It’s more for a fact that someone is putting forward. Like when people share- It’s not exactly a meme, but it’ll be like, ‘Did you know that…?’ or it’ll be a photo of, ‘Look at this baby panda that was only one inch tall,’ or something.

You’re like, “Is that not Photoshopped?” It tends to be for imagery that I’ll use Snopes when people share- I suppose they’re meant to be good news, lighter news stories, where it’s like, ‘Look at this tiny lizard that is best friends with a horse.’ That kind of thing. I’m like, “Is that real?” I tend to go on Snopes for things like that.

Interviewer: How does Snopes work for you in that scenario? What’s the process?

Julie: So, I would usually type into Google, ‘Baby lizard horse Snopes,’ then if it comes up, if the top result is, ‘It has actually been answered on Snopes,’ then I’ll go into it. I don’t tend to go to Snopes and then search it. I’ve never done that before.

Interviewer: But you’ll do…

Julie: I’ll put that as a keyword in the Google search, to see if they’ve already got a post about it.

Interviewer: Okay, so you wouldn’t directly go to the fact-checking site. But that coming up is a sign for you that-

Julie: Yes. It’s a big of an indirect way of doing it, but…

Interviewer: So, I’ll ask you this next question anyway, even though you’ve kind of answered it, just in case there’s more to see. Where is your go-to place to double check news that you’ve read? I was also going to specifically ask, have you ever used fact-checking services such as Snopes or FactCheck.org to verify a news article?

Julie: Yes, I’ve used Snopes definitely. FactCheck I kind of went off, because there was that whole thing during the election, when the Tories created a Twitter page called FactCheck or something. I was like, you can just write the words, ‘Fact check,’ and it would be anything. So, I wouldn’t ever use a website called FactCheck because of that reason. Quite often, if I do see something in a smaller publication, I would then go to the BBC, to see if the BBC have reported on it.

So, often, on Instagram, the UK Fact Check Politics, there’ll be a story on there and I’m like, “Wow, that sounds like a big deal. Are the bigger outlets picking up on it?” Sometimes, I go not to check that the story is true, but to check if the story has been picked up by mainstream media. I’ll do that as well. Quite often, it hasn’t, which is sad.

Interviewer: So, you’ll encounter something in the social media and you’ll just see if that has been reported by-

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: When you say, “The mainstream media,” you mean…?

Julie: The BBC basically, yes.

Interviewer: Would you use the search function in their app or website to do that?

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: Great. So, in what we call the responses to news, you had a range actually. So, 40% of the time, you did nothing, which is actually quite low compared to a lot of people. But then you said you discuss it, you react to things, you did various kinds of responses. I just wonder, have you ever made a decision or taken an action directly based on something you read online?

Julie: I wouldn’t say I’ve taken action, but if there’s something particularly that I think people should know about, I’ll add it to my story on Instagram or something like that, or send it to someone. Or if the story is something that I think is in a particular field of interest that I know one of my friends is interested in, I’ll send it to them.

There was all the stuff in the news about the Don’t Pay UK. I did sort of- I didn’t really take action. I did some research into it. I went on the website and read things like that. I read about some of the meet-ups they were going to have, because I was considering it. But I didn’t ever go anywhere with that.

Interviewer: Was that around the utility bills?

Julie: Yes, it was. So, I think I shared it with a few people and I was going to do it, but then I think like the majority of people, I got scared of what the consequences would be of not paying my bills. (Laughter) So, I half took action and then backed away from it.

Interviewer: Okay, so you talked about sharing various types of stories. What factors might be…? I guess, yes, what do you consider before deciding to share something?

Julie: What do I consider?

Interviewer: That’s quite tricky to answer, I suppose, but if you can kind of-

Julie: It’s usually if it’s something that I’m interested in, have a comment on and I don’t just feel passive. Like, “I’m just reading this information that has no bearing on my life or existence.” But if it’s something where I think I have something to say about it, I’ll maybe share it, going, “Have you seen this? What a load of rubbish,” or, “Isn’t this terrible?”

Interviewer: When you were on about sharing, do you primarily share within end-to-end messaging groups?

Julie: Yes, like WhatsApp.

Interviewer: Ever online? Do you ever share stuff on Facebook or Twitter?

Julie: Sometimes I do. Not on Twitter. I’m not very active on my Twitter.

Interviewer: You mentioned on your Instagram stories.

Julie: Yes, I’ll put something on my Instagram stories. It’s usually UK Fact Check Politics, their account. If there’s something on there, I’ll put that in my story. If there’s a story on there that hasn’t been picked up by mainstream media that I’m a bit shocked by or think is important, I’ll put it on there. It does feel a bit echo chamber-y [sic] though, because the people that I’m friends with, I think, “Well, they’re going to be interested in that sort of thing anyway, so they probably already know it.”

So, I’m probably not reaching anybody to change their mind about things, but it feels a little bit like I’ve done something by clicking the share button. I suppose when I said I don’t really take any action, I have been on protests and things before, about stuff that’s happening in the news. So, I have taken part in demonstrations. None recently, but I have done that before.

Interviewer: Based on stuff you’ve read online.

Julie: Yes, and just stuff that’s happening in the zeitgeist. Like Trump and things like that. So, I’ve taken part in a few demonstrations and things.

Interviewer: Locally?

Julie: Locally, yes.

Interviewer: If you are going to share a news article, particularly on social media or even in a messaging app, would you do any fact-checking or verification first?

Julie: Not really, no. Because usually the stuff I’m sharing is from sources that I trust and assume are accurate and correct. So, if I did share something that was dodgy, it would probably be to laugh at, “How hilarious is this conspiracy theory?” It wouldn’t be because I believed it. It would usually be like, “As if someone has actually put this in writing and thinks it’s true.” So, the stuff that I share, I don’t tend to fact-check, no.

Interviewer: But you’re doing this process of verification because you’re only sharing certain sources.

Julie: I suppose so, yes.

Interviewer: So, this Fact Check Politics-

Julie: I think that’s what it’s called.

Interviewer: You say you don’t trust anything with ‘Fact Check’ in the name. (Laughter)

Julie: (Laughter) Yes, I suppose so.

Interviewer: I’m joking. Yes, so that would be something you think you might- Well, you share stuff in your Instagram stories from them, because you think they have done the verification for you. You trust that source enough to-

Julie: Yes. I don’t know why I just assume it’s correct. I don’t know. I think it’s because it’s… It’s probably because their politics seems to be quite similar to my own. So, because it’s backing up what I believe and think, I’m like, “Oh, this must be right,” which is probably a bit stupid.

Interviewer: No.

Julie: But because it’s coming from the same angle as I would, I agree with it a lot. So, I don’t then do the fact-checking other than to see, has this been picked up by anywhere else? I don’t really know what their sources are or if the people running it are journalists. I don’t know. I haven’t ever really looked into that.

Interviewer: But you’re saying you might- It’s stuff that you agree with. But I’m assuming there’s more to it than that, because I guess you’re not- Does there have to be some level of plausibility? You’re not going to- Because you might agree, you might think it’s great to say, “This particular member of parliament has been involved in this scandal.”

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: That might- You think, “Oh, that would be great. This reinforced my…” But I guess there’s some kind of other verification happening maybe.

Julie: I don’t know. I don’t know if I always do look into it. Because Instagram is so- It’s just instantly like, “I’ve read those few words. That’s anti this political party, which I am also against, so I will share it.” So, I probably don’t really do my due diligence on those sorts of things. I do sometimes look into it. If it has been picked up, it tends to be- If it’s an MP of a certain area, that certain area’s newspaper might’ve put something together about it. But they don’t tend to be on the BBC and the Guardian.

Interviewer: You did kind of mention, but is that your motivation for sharing then, do you think?

Julie: I don’t know. I think my- Well, Instagram is not always about what you think. It’s how other people are perceiving you. So, I want people to know that this is my political stance. It’s like I’m against these people and for these people, and… I don’t know. It’s just something that I might find interesting and think, “People should know about this.”

Interviewer: Yes. Have you ever shared something, WhatsApp, Instagram, anywhere, and later found out it was fake?

Julie: I don’t think I have. I can’t think of anything, no.

Interviewer: Have you ever…? Because you’ve mentioned you’re taking action based on stuff you’ve read and sharing and all this stuff, I wonder, have you ever changed your mind about something based on something you’ve read online?

Julie: Well, that Don’t Pay UK, it seemed like a really good idea and they seemed really active. So, I joined one of their Facebook pages. I was getting emails from them and things. But then I was reading elsewhere that it wasn’t a great idea. It was really hard to get to the actual bottom of it. Like, would there be consequences if you took part and did what they were advocating or not? So, I just decided, “Right, I’m just going to back away from this.”

Because I was actively sharing the- I think there was a campaign that you could sign up to, put your email address in, so I was sharing the link for other people to do that. Then I just backed away from it, because I wasn’t really 100% sure on it. I was looking on Money Saving Expert to see what people were saying on there and there was just too much conflicting information about it. So, I thought, “Because I’m not 100% sure what is the best thing to do in this situation,” I just ignored it after that, which was bad. I resigned their emails to my junk folder.

Interviewer: So, you didn’t even actively unsubscribe?

Julie: No, I just put them as, “Oh, you can go to junk now.” Because I just thought if something came through and it was interesting, then I could maybe look at it. But I just usually swiped them out of my inbox. Because it was just really- That was one where there was so much information, it was hard to really work out what was- Not necessarily truthful, because it was all hypothetical. Like, “If you don’t pay your bills, this could happen.”

So, because it wasn’t a concrete, “If you do this, this is the result,” I was like, “I’m not so sure about it. I don’t want to follow through with the action that it’s wanting you to take.” I stopped sharing stuff about it as well.

Interviewer: But have you kept an eye on that campaign, like what became of it?

Julie: Not really. One of my sisters was mentioning it in conversation yesterday, but I was like, “Oh, yes, that fizzled out, didn’t it?”

Interviewer: I think a lot of people just did what you did basically and just cooled off. So, you’ve talked about discussing that with your sister. You also reported to us during the two weeks that you tend to at times discuss news articles with people. So, can you talk about how that generally goes? Do you discuss things online, in person? What sorts of things might you discuss and with whom?

Julie: It tends to be in person. I’ve got quite a big family and we still do the traditional Sunday all sitting around the dinner table and talking about things like politics and the news. (Laughter) So, I’ve got- I think my family are quite into current events and stuff like that. So, we tend to chat about that in a family setting.

Interviewer: How do those conversations tend to play out? Is everyone in agreement about everything, or…?

Julie: Yes, pretty much, because I think all of my family are kind of the same in terms of where they stand in the political spectrum and we were raised with- Obviously, my sisters were raised with the same moral compass and that sort of thing. So, we do tend to have the same opinion. But I’m one of those people who if there’s a group of people and everybody agrees, I will play devil’s advocate, even if I’m on the side that they’re on. I will go, “Hm, but how about this?”

So, we do agree, but I do also try to… Not pick away at their argument, but also try and consider it from the other angle as well.

Interviewer: Does that position that you take come from stuff you’ve read online, or might it…?

Julie: I don’t know. I think it’s just because stuff you read online you think of as [the man 0:29:42]. So, it’s like as the little people, you always have to have a little grain of suspicion against what you’re being told. Because it could be like 1984 or something.

Interviewer: So, you’ve talked about and it shows in your book that you rely on certain sources more than others.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: Has that…? Has the stuff that you go to and rely on changed at all over time?

Julie: Yes, I would say so. I used to (Laughter) be a late-night scroller of the Daily Mail app, but actually reading it. The articles, it’ll repeat paragraphs and things. So, the actual quality of the writing was terrible. Quite often, I disagreed with their viewpoint, but I was just reading it to get another perspective rather than being in an echo chamber. Then I just used to be like, “This is just terrible. It’s absolute brain-rot.” I felt like I could actually feel my actual brain melting inside my head.

So, I was like, “I’m going to avoid stuff that’s just badly written and from a point of view that I don’t trust really.” I used to read- My parents subscribed to The Week, which is a print thing. It has got a summary of news from all over the place for the last week obviously. But they take bits from all different publications and condense it. So, I used to read that, but then as part of my stopping news consumption because it’s too depressing, I don’t really look at that anymore.

Private Eye as well, I used to- My parents subscribed to the Private Eye, so I used to dip into that. But again, it was just so depressing. It was always all the terrible stuff and I was like, “Oh, I don’t want to let this into my head anymore.”

Interviewer: How do you feel about the role of social media in disseminating news and information?

Julie: I think it’s good in a way, because I think there are a lot of people who wouldn’t sit and watch the news, or listen to the news. I think coming across it just organically when you’re not looking for it- I think it’s good that it’s getting into people’s minds through osmosis almost. But it’s like a double-edged sword. It depends what the source is. There’s nothing on social media to say, “This is actually fact-checked and correct.”

I think especially during COVID, there was just people sharing a video saying, “This is a consultant and he says vaccines will make your head explode.” It was like, “But what is your actual source? You’re just saying that’s a doctor.” So, it’s good that it means people will be able to access news and current affairs, but it’s also bad because there’s no control over what that is and where it’s sourced from.

Interviewer: So, is it important to you that the news you consume comes from a trusted source? How do you determine if it is trustworthy?

Julie: I don’t really know. I think it’s just ones that I’ve- The longevity of something I’ve been using. I feel like the BBC News- Because the BBC is owned by people that have a certain level of accountability and I like that often they will report on themselves. Which I think shows that they are… I don’t think they are as impartial as they could be, but the fact that if there’s a scandal on the BBC, the BBC will themselves report on it, does show a level of…

I don’t know. It just… I respect that about it. It has been around for years. They’ve got the best sources. They’ve got people in all the different countries where they’re reporting on, so I agree with it. The Guardian, I think- I don’t know. I think it’s because its viewpoint is quite similar to my own and I like the style of its writing. It doesn’t tend to do those articles where you’re reading a paragraph and you’re like, “This is what they just said two lines up.” So, it seems like good-quality writing.

Interviewer: The kinds of journalistic standards and stuff like that.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: On a similar note, what factors might you consider when determining something’s trustworthy? So, for example, I thought of- Is it the source, the platform you access it on, the subject matter, the person who shared it? Which of these factors do you think matter when you’re working out if something’s trustworthy?

Julie: I think the source- If it’s something I’m familiar with, if it’s from [Orange Wall News 0:34:43], just some random thing that I’ve never heard of, I’m like, “What is that? When was that even established?” So, if it’s well-established. I think, say, if it’s someone reporting on the war in Ukraine from an office in London, I’m a bit like, “How accurate is this? Is this just hearsay?”

But when you’ve got actual reporters who are in the field and that sort of thing- When it’s international news, I think that’s quite important that they are actually speaking to the people who are involved in it. Not speaking about the people, but to them. I think that’s quite an important distinction to have. I think the platform can be important, because I think now on social media, a lot of headlines are misleading deliberately to make you click into the article.

So, the way they word things isn’t actually what the content of the article is. It’s written in a- So, I think- I know that I’m guilty of it. Sometimes, you’ll just read a headline and not read the article, and that headline is, “Did you know this?” But now, it’s harder to do that, because headlines are written specifically in a clickbaity [sic] way. So, sometimes, when it is on social media, it is a bit harder to trust.

Because even things like the Guardian, which I think is quite a good publication, they’ll do those style of headlines just to make you click into it and that’s not actually the viewpoint of the story at all.

Interviewer: Do you think it’s becoming more important then to always read full articles?

Julie: Yes, it is, and obviously it’s important for them to be getting the clicks to obviously be generating income. But I do think headlines now are very tabloidy [sic] even when it’s from what would be traditional broadsheet newspapers.

Interviewer: You did mention this actually, but have you ever stopped following a news source or a website because you stopped trusting it?

Julie: Yes. Not necessarily because I stopped trusting it. Like, I said I used to use Daily Mail, but I had a friend years ago who recommended- “Oh, the Daily Mail is great. It’s great trash to read when you’re lying in bed at night.” So, I used to use the Daily Mail. I was like, “It’s just terrible. It’s rubbish.” It read like it was written by, I don’t know, a Year 9 student. It didn’t seem like the people writing were even qualified to be writing stuff in English. (Laughter)

So, I think it was more the quality of it. I knew that the viewpoints in it weren’t viewpoints that I shared, so it wasn’t necessarily that I thought it was untrustworthy. It was just that I thought it was bad quality.

Interviewer: Has the way- Has your trust in news and information- You might’ve been affected a little bit by clickbait headlines. But can you talk about, has it been affected by recent events, such as disinformation campaigns, or by technologies such as AI or deep fakes? How have things like that affected the way you trust news?

Julie: I think when it is a picture of something- Like I mentioned earlier, those cutesy news stories. When it’s a photograph of something, I don’t really trust photographs anymore. But I don’t really read many articles where it is based on an image. It’s more wordy stuff. But, yes, the deep fake thing is concerning, because people will share stuff and you just think, “Well, that’s clearly not real.”

You can tell, because of the shadows in the image and things like that. But it’s… Yes, I suppose imagery is harder to trust now, but it depends on what the source is for it.

Interviewer: What about the disinformation campaigns? You mentioned anti-vax in the local Facebook group.

Julie: Yes, so things like that, they don’t tend to come from a news source. They come from like, ‘My friend Susan’s cat’s babysitter,’ and stuff. So, because they’re not from an actual news platform, they’ve gone through no filters whatsoever. It’s just some random person has made a video of themselves, claiming they’re a consultant virologist and it could just be anybody.

There’s nobody to check that’s what that person is and that’s what their job is, and then people share it as- It tends to be video news. So, those videos, I wouldn’t trust. I like stuff when it’s written down and it has got actual people’s names to it and things. When it’s just a video- I could put a video up and say I’m a consultant neurologist, but I’m not. (Laughter) There’s nothing to check that. So, it tends to- It’s not from a news source, but people are sharing it as if it is news.

Interviewer: So, you think at the minute the way these technologies are, you’re somebody that you could see the difference between the fake stuff and the real?

Julie: I think so, but also not. Because I was reading a story recently about- It had happened in America, where some mother of a cheerleader, she wanted her daughter to be the head cheerleader and released all these photos of the other cheerleaders in compromising situations like drinking and stuff like this. Then she was getting prosecuted, because she had Photoshopped the pictures. But then it turned out that actually she hadn’t and all those images had been real.

So, the story itself wasn’t fake, but the subject matter of it- It was just interesting that people now- So, someone could have a solid piece of evidence- They could be like, “Here’s a CCTV image of you killing this person,” but I could go, “But that could be a faked video.” So, it’s the flipside of it, that stuff that we used to be like, “This is solid evidence of something,” is no longer- It can’t be that anymore. So, it is a bit scary.

Interviewer: Do you think people’s ability to verify things…? Do you think that’s a problem that’s going to get worse, or…?

Julie: I think so, yes. Because even for not nefarious purposes, but for film and media, they’re trying to make the technology better, so that you can’t tell what is real and what isn’t. So, that’s the whole purpose of the technology, to make it so you can’t tell. So, then if people are using it for nefarious reasons, then you can’t work it out.

Interviewer: As far as you’re concerned, what might be some nefarious reasons for creating fake content?

Julie: Well, stuff like the Matt Hancock news, when he was caught with his side piece in a piece of video. Say a few years down the line a scandal like that comes out and they’re like, “We’ve got a video of a person doing this,” that person could easily turn around and in their own defence say, “That isn’t me. That’s a faked video.” It gets to the point where, how do you verify that thing?

I know there’s probably technology to examine the technology, but I think it’ll become all tangled and quite difficult. So, 20 years ago, you could go, “Right, this is a photo of this person doing this thing. Aren’t they terrible?” You might not be able to rely on stuff like that as much anymore. So, when people are reporting on things, like, “Joe Bloggs sent CCTV,” well then you go, “Did he really send CCTV, or did he make CCTV and send it to us as a news source?” So, I feel like it’ll be harder for people to work out what is genuine and what’s not.

Interviewer: You’ve mentioned them a couple of times, but how comfortable are you with the use of algorithms to personalise your newsfeeds?

Julie: I think it’s a good and a bad thing. Because it does wheedle out stuff that I disagree with. But then at the same time, it’s probably making unconscious biases by what you’re seeing. So, if you’re only exposed to a certain point of view, it is that whole echo chamber effect. So, you don’t get a good balance of views. It’s hard to say, because if there’s something quite right wing that I disagree with, I don’t want to see it because I disagree with it.

But then at the same time, I suppose it’s important to know that there is that view out there, to understand it and be able to combat it. Whereas, I see more lefty stuff on my newsfeed. So, it’s good and bad, because on one side, I don’t want to see that stuff I disagree with, but also for the purposes of being an open and an analytical minded person, it’s probably not good that you’re only getting the one point of view. So, it’s good and bad really.

Interviewer: Have you ever been concerned about the use of your personal data on news sites and social media platforms?

Julie: Not really, because I always think there’s so much data about me in the world and what are they going to know? That I like drinking tea and I’ve got a cat. What’s anyone going to do with that information?

Interviewer: Sell you teabags and cat food.

Julie: Yes, but that’s fine, because I need teabags and cat food. So, it doesn’t really bother me. I know it’s a huge thing at the minute. People are like, “Oh, my phone’s listening to me,” but I just think, “Well, what can anyone do with it?” Unless it hears me committing a crime that I can then get blackmailed for, but none of the data that people are receiving from me is ever going to be enough to do anything harmful to me, or negative to me. That’s how I see it.

I don’t really think that Rishi Sunak cares that I think he’s a bit of an idiot. He’s not going to come and knock on my door, so I’m not really bothered.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you’re able to protect yourself from that sort of stuff? So, I know direct physical threat and stuff- But the idea that you could be targeted with certain types of information based on what people know about you? Beyond advertising, I mean.

Julie: I feel like if I cared enough about- Because I’m not really that bothered. I don’t think I’m that interesting or important of a person that anyone would really spend their time trying to find out about me, to target me with anything. But I think if I was bothered about it, I would have things on my browser like a VPN and there are ways of not accepting cookies, and all this sort of thing. So, I know there are methods to protect myself, but I don’t really use them, because I’m not bothered.

Interviewer: So, you don’t ever change the cookie settings or anything like that?

Julie: No, not really.

Interviewer: Just accept. “Get it off the page so I can see.”

Julie: If it has got, ‘Reject,’ or there’s an option, I’ll click, ‘Reject all.’ But to be honest, I don’t really know what the difference is about cookies. I feel like I get followed round between a work computer and my personal phone, and I don’t even know how it makes that connection. So, I just think, “No, it’s fine. It knows I was looking to buy some new shoes yesterday. What’s the big deal?” I’m not really bothered.

Interviewer: Do you feel though you’ve got some kind of, your own kind of protection or filter, where you don’t necessarily feel just because you’re told to buy this brand of teabags, or just because you’re told that this person is a good or a bad person- Do you think you’re not bothered because you feel you can navigate it yourself?

Julie: Yes, I feel like I can form my own opinions. I don’t… I think like I said earlier, I always take everything with a little bit of suspicion. But, yes, it doesn’t bother me, because I just don’t understand what the worst thing someone- I suppose someone could steal my identity, but good luck to them paying off my debt. (Laughter) I don’t really care. But I know there are ways around it. I know how to install a browser to change my VPN and those sorts of things. I just don’t actively do it, because it’s not one of my big life problems that I’m bothered about really.

Interviewer: What do you think are the main impacts of personalised newsfeeds on the types of information people are exposed to? You did touch on that a bit.

Julie: Yes, I think it just narrows your point of view a bit. I think it is important to see things from different angles and even if you don’t agree with that person’s angle, it is important to understand where someone might be coming from. I think it’s important, because if you’re arguing for, “This person is good,” and you’ve only ever seen that from one source, it’s harder to back that up.

I think it’s important to have an opinion that you can back up from all sides. I don’t know if I’m wording that properly. But, yes, I do think it narrows your focus a bit, which can be good in some ways. Because it means, “Oh, I’m interested in this particularly subject matter. I’m learning more and more about this particular subject matter,” but then it does mean you’re closing yourself off to other stuff, which could expand your world view and whatever.

Interviewer: What do you think the impact of that is?

Julie: I think it just cuts you off from other people a little bit. I think people are getting cut- Because we have access to so much, there’s so much more to then be able to label people with. So, you can be like, “Oh, that person is an anti-vaxxer.” You can give people labels, so I think it does close people off more from each other.

Because there are more ways to narrow someone down or label someone, based on the content that they’re accessing. I don’t know if that makes any sense. (Laughter)

Interviewer: It does completely. I’m just going to keep pushing you on this. (Laughter) So, what is the impact of that?

Julie: I think it’s a loss of community and more us against them sorts of attitudes. Especially in the online sphere, because social media, when people are like, “Oh, the vaccination is going to make Bill Gates turn you into a robot,” or whatever, it’s like people are- Because the people saying that have only been reading content pushing that idea, there’s no way of getting them to change their mind and come round to your way of thinking.

Because people are in a little echo chamber and everyone has been going, “Yes, good for you. That’s true. That’s true. That’s true.” So, when one person comes along and goes, “But have you considered this?” they’re just not open to even listening or hearing that opposite point of view. So, I think it’s bad.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the level of objectivity in online news reporting?

Julie: What do you mean by that?

Interviewer: Because you mentioned objectivity earlier, in terms of the BBC being objective, what do you think about just the general level of objectivity in online news?

Julie: I think you know where public- If it’s an established publication, like say the Daily Mail, the Guardian, the Sun, you kind of know, because they’re long established, where they stand and what angle they’re going to report on things from. So, when you’re reading a piece of news from those people, you know how to filter it. I don’t know how to describe it, but you know what point of view they’re taking.

I don’t think there’s any news publication, including the BBC, that is 100% impartial, because as human beings you can’t be. I think the only way to get completely impartial news would be if it was written by an AI. But then again, that would have people’s opinions to create it. So, I don’t think there’s any way of getting just completely no sided news. There’s always some kind of slant to everything.

I think it’s having an awareness of, “Right, that’s a traditionally right-wing publication, so they’re probably going to be talking about this story in this manner.” So, I think you can filter it if you know the history of the publication, for example.

Interviewer: So, do you think the sorts of news people encounter online has…? Do you think there’s just a problem with objectivity in general, as such?

Julie: Yes, I think so. I don’t think it’s necessarily a problem, because I don’t think as human beings, people can not be objective. Because if you’re writing a piece, it’s going to have- Your life experiences are always going to filter everything into your world view, because of your lived experiences. It’s not necessarily a negative thing. It’s just a fact. So, I think having an awareness of that when you’re reading something or watching something, that helps you to find the truth of it a little bit. So, you have to have a wider awareness.

Interviewer: Where do you think- How do you think you got that awareness?

Julie: Because I’m really smart. (Laughter) I don’t know. I just think-

Interviewer: No, I mean… Because…

Julie: I think just being exposed to stuff. Like my mum is very well-read. So, she would- My dad is from Liverpool, so the Sun is a bad publication and I used to be like, “But why?” and they would explain the whole Hillsborough disaster. So, I think it’s just having other people in your upbringing who are aware of those things. Also, I did history GCSE and you learnt about primary, secondary and tertiary sources, and the reliability of those. I think it has just been in my upbringing really to have an awareness of it. Because I had parents who did every day sit down and watch the news.

Interviewer: Do you think that’s the only way people can get that understanding, that awareness actually is a better word?

Julie: I don’t think so. I think that’s just because that’s where I’ve probably got it from. I think maybe if it was something taught in school a bit more. But then again, there’s so much stuff that should be taught in school and then you would end up being in school until you were 70. (Laughter)

Interviewer: It would change as well.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: How important is it to you that news sources are transparent about their sources and their processes of reporting and stuff like that? The transparency.

Julie: I think it is quite important. It depends what it’s about. Because if it’s a source that if they revealed who it was, that person would be in danger, obviously there are the ethical issues with it. But I think it is important that they are transparent. I do think it’s good when they’ve said, “This reporter has come from such and such in this place.” So, it’s verifiable. I think most news sources try to be. I think when it’s something that say like- It tends to be celebrity news where it’s a bit more like, “A close friend of the family.”

You just think, “Their cleaner?” or stuff like that. But when it’s, say, reporting on a war or a famine and it’s a person living in that area, I think it’s important to have… When reporting on something, to have people involved in the thing stating their opinion and not people who have studied the thing and are just saying their opinion of it. I think that’s important.

Like when there’s a long ongoing issue, for example, like the war in Ukraine at the minute, and they’ll have someone who is a professor of Ukrainian politics from Newcastle University and they’re doing Talking Heads on the news, I’m like, “Well, it’s interesting that they’re giving their academic opinion, but I do also think it’s important that sources are actually a primary source for someone who is living there and it going through it. I think it’s quite important that those people are heard.

Interviewer: What about sources that aren’t necessarily a person? Do you think it’s important to you that other sources of information or facts or whatever, that there’s transparency around that? You can see where that came from.

Julie: Yes. I think as long as they’ve credited it. So, as long as they’re like, “Well, these statistics are from the Office for National Statistics,” or, “These statistics have come from the UN.” Then you can maybe dig a bit deeper. But if they go, “20% of women do this,” but they haven’t said where that information is from, that’s when I’ll be a bit dubious. I like to have the- What do you call it? Like the bibliography almost of what I’m reading. (Laughter) Just so it’s not plucked out of thin air.

Interviewer: Do you think the state broadcaster, the BBC, should have different regulations or standards than the other privately owned news outlets?

Respondent: No, I think all- Even privately owned should have the same standards to follow. I think it should be a blanket standard. But, yes, I think in a society where money speaks, it’s hard. Because private newspapers are like- If someone says, “I’ll give you £50,000 to say this about me,” it’s harder to [determine 0:57:39]. Whereas the BBC, because they’re not receiving money based on what they report on, it makes them more trustworthy.

But, yes, I do think there should be journalistic standards across the board and it should probably be an international thing really. But that’s probably not going to happen for a long, long time. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, you mentioned the echo chambers that are created online, people’s access to information and people’s abilities to verify online information and things like that, and maybe trust in media. What do you think that news producers can do in that world to maintain their credibility and trustworthiness?

Julie: I really don’t know. If I knew that, I would be making millions of pounds. (Laughter) I don’t really know, because even if something is really trustworthy and you can see something before your own eyes is real, people are always going to be, “Hm, but…” There are always going to be conspiracy theories and things like that. So, I don’t really know what they could do, to be honest.

Because you think, “Well, have more photographs, because seeing is believing.” But even then it’s like, “Well, is that Photoshopped?” I really don’t know. I think we’re living in a post-truth society, so I don’t know. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Okay. That is the end of the questions I have written down. Is there anything that I should’ve asked, but I didn’t?

Julie: No, I don’t think so.

Interviewer: Have you got any reflections on the bit where you were doing the diary? Did that affect the way you thought about things? Or what was the impact of doing those two weeks?

Julie: I think I realised that I don’t pay as much attention to current affairs as I used to. But it’s more protecting my own mental health. Because I’ve got a sister who’s very politically involved and she’s very up on all of her issues. Often, I’m just like, “Oh, you’re stressing yourself out. You can’t help everyone.” So, I think good to not…

You need to know what’s going on around you, but also sometimes knowing what’s going on around you is depressing. So, it’s really hard, getting the balance. But I did find- Because I do have the push notifications off BBC News, I don’t think they’ve got any kind of algorithm about what I’m interested in. Because it tends to be really random what they report on. They’ll send through push notifications about Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby, and I’m like, “When did that become something that the BBC would report on?”

But I guess it’s just to- That’s what people are interested in, so that’s what they’re doing to engage people more. I think I’ve definitely seen the BBC taking more of a tabloid type of approach in recent years, which is a bit surprising.

Interviewer: You said that of the BBC and you also said that of the Guardian, that they’ve taken a more tabloid approach. Why do you think that is?

Julie: I think it’s to get the engagement. It must be what people want. So, what the people want is what the people get, I suppose. The majority of people- The kinds of things that they would- So, I think my friend put it best. He said, “Everything I’ve ever learnt about Meghan and Harry has been against my own will,” which I kind of agree with. It’s like, I have never sought out information on those people, but I know more about their marriage than I do about my parents’ marriage.

It’s just surprising that that is what’s being pushed by an impartial thing like the BBC. Because that traditionally is something that you would expect to be in ‘Take a Break,’ or ‘OK!’ or something. I don’t know. So, it must be the demand for that sort of information must be reflecting why that’s what they’re pushing out, I suppose. It’s not my demand. I’m not demanding that.

Interviewer: Yes, well, I guess two sides then. What do you think the BBC want from you? (Laughter)

Julie: (Laughter) From me? To be interested in Meghan and Harry.

Interviewer: Yes. Why…? If they’ve shifted to this tabloid mould, what do you think is driving that?

Julie: I don’t know. It’s like they have and they haven’t. Because there is some reporting- Like a lot of their editorial stuff on the website, that’ll be really interesting and really in depth. But then you don’t really get push notifications about the editorial things. It is about stuff where you can just read a headline and you don’t need to read the rest of the article. I think it’s because- I think people’s attention spans are a bit shorter these days.

Interviewer: Or the assumption is by them that it is. So, the other side of that then is, what would you want from them? What would you change about them to make it better for you? What would you want them to give you push notifications about? What would you want them to not bother about? What would you want them to change, I suppose?

Julie: I think I would just want it to be a bit more balanced, because it seems to be for, say, five notifications, three of them seem to be about celebrity tabloidy [sic] type stuff.

Interviewer: So, balanced in topic.

Julie: Yes, and then two will be about actual world news or current events. What I would class as news, rather than gossip. There seems to be more gossip these days.

Interviewer: Yes. You mentioned right at the start about how you’ve…? With an awareness of the algorithm, you said you get stuff you want to see. So, is that the same when you access news on the social media? Do you still get this celebrity gossip stuff, or is that a bit better for you when it’s…?

Julie: I think it’s a bit better, but I think because that’s what most publications or outlets are moving towards- I think it’s like you used to have to go to a different source for the different types of news. So, if you wanted gossipy stuff, you would go to a glossy mag. Whereas now, stuff that I would say 15 years ago would be classed as gossip, is just in the mainstream media. So, I think it’s hard to completely avoid it. Because it’s stuff like, I don’t know, that used to be in glossy magazines you would specifically go to, to be like, “Oh, what’s the latest on this soap star?”

But it’s now on the news at 6 o’clock in the evening and you think, “Eh? Really? They’re reporting on this?” But then that makes me start questioning, “Well, what are they trying to distract me from? Are they reporting on this, because there’s actually something that people should be angry about happening, but instead they’re getting us all to focus on this pathetic spat between these random celebrities I’ve never heard of.

Interviewer: So, do you think your trust in the media in general is affected by that.

Julie: Yes.

Interviewer: Has that been a thing over time? Or do you think that has been one moment where it has just switched?

Julie: I don’t know. I think it has been over time really. Just getting older and becoming more cynical in my 30s. (Laughter) I think you’re just like, “Oh, God.” But, yes, because I think especially with the politics account I follow on Instagram, sometimes it’ll be something where I’m like, “That’s really terrible. Has the BBC picked this up.” When they haven’t, I’ll be like, “Oh, they haven’t picked that up, but they’ve picked up that Harry and Meghan faked a car chase through New York.”

That’s not important for people to know. It’s important for people to know that our system is being exploited. I don’t know. When there are these stories that are, what I would class, as gossipier, I do often think is the motivation behind that, is it because people are interested in that so they’re trying to give the people what they want? Or is it because they’re trying to distract us from something that is more important and keep that anger at bay? So, we don’t all have a revolution against whatever this bad thing is.

Interviewer: Do you think then, just finally, that this account that you follow on Instagram, do you think that’s one way of navigating those issues with the media you talked about, in terms of the celebrity gossip stories.

Julie: Yes, I think so.

Interviewer: Do you think it’s important for people to have some kind of other online sources that are more focused?

Julie: Yes, I think we need to have- News needs to- There are people that are political figures. They are supposed to be accountable to the people, because that’s who has voted them in. Whereas celebrities aren’t really accountable to anyone. They’re just people who are good at singing or good at acting.

But there seems to be more emphasis put on holding them to account, than there are to the people who should be held to account. I think it’s a clever distraction from that, because it’s more important that someone who has been voted to do a good job and represent the people is taking the mick. That’s more important and people should know about that more than what some celebrity is doing which may or may not be bad, or good.

Interviewer: I think that’s a good bombshell to end on.

Julie: (Laughter) Okay.

Interviewer: I’ll turn that off.

END AUDIO

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