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START AUDIO

Jack: Yes, no worries.

Interviewer: That’s going. Yes, so I’ll get started if that’s alright with you.

Jack: Absolutely, crack on.

Interviewer: Great. So in the book on, I think, page four.

Jack: Page four.

Interviewer: To get it back as a book… I’ll show you the trick to get it back as a book.

Jack: I’ve got terrible hand/eye coordination.

Interviewer: So fold over.

Jack: Half, right.

Interviewer: And then create that.

Jack: Oh, okay, got you, perfect, thank you.

Interviewer: Right, so page four.

Jack: Page four.

Interviewer: There you go. Right, that shows the times of day you sent us stuff, basically. Obviously, we’ve inferred from that, that’s the times of day you read things. It might not have been, you could’ve sent stuff at any time. So, first question is, does that reflect the times of day that you think you engage with online information and news?

The second part of that question is, “Could you, whether that’s correct or not, talk me through the typical day when you’re engaging with information, how, what you’re doing?” Talk us through the day, basically.

Jack: Yes, absolutely. So it looks pretty accurate to me. I was expecting there to be a bit more in the night category because, at the time of the study, it was maybe the month or two before my exams so I was spending a lot of time staying up until ridiculous o'clock in the morning doing my uni reading. I would, pretty regularly, take breaks from doing my uni reading just to scroll or whatnot, usually on something like Reddit where it’s not necessarily all news. I guess maybe, those breaks, I wasn’t reading news when I was expecting to.

But, yes, I think a lot of what I do read is in the afternoon because it’s normally when I get- I find that I read a lot of news when I get back in from work or on my last work break of the day. I’ll read on my commute back home as well. That looks about right to me.

Yes, so a typical day would be, I’d probably get up, get showered, and get straight to work. I probably wouldn’t read, or access the news, that much early in the morning because, typically, I like to have a lie in and I don’t leave a whole lot of time between getting up and going to work.

Interviewer: To just disrupt you and go back-

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: You’re saying you expected more at night? Early morning is, like, midnight until 6AM so that’s probably catching you midnight study time, right?

Jack: That’ll be it, yes.

Interviewer: It’ll be a mixture of night and early morning.

Jack: Got you, right, that makes more sense. Yes, that looks about right then. Yes, okay, yes, that’s fine.

Interviewer: Sorry, go on. So you don’t engage with your phone before you leave the house? You might have a shower, get yourself sorted. Like me, you don’t leave much time, you just leave enough time to freshen up and get out the door?

Jack: Pretty much, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Great, so then you’re on your commute?

Jack: On my commute… My commute isn’t actually that long, thankfully, but I do try to sneak in a couple of shorter articles if I can. Sometimes I just window gaze, so it doesn’t always happen.

I would typically try to engage with something that is an easier read on my commute. I wouldn’t want to have a long-form article or anything like that, so I would probably try to get a bit of local news on my commute because I’m really only on the Metro for about ten minutes. The rest of it is walking. I don’t particularly like being glued to my phone while I’m walking.

So, yes, something, probably, like… I would probably have a look at the ‘Chronicle’, maybe, on the morning, on the way to work, just to see what’s going on in and around Newcastle.

Then when I get to work, obviously, I need to do work. On my downtime, at work, I would probably read as well just to pass the time.

Interviewer: On the mobile as well?

Jack: Usually, yes. Normally I would do it in the breakroom. Sometimes, if I’m comfy at my desk, I’ll just access it from my browser at my desk but most of the time I would probably bring it up on my phone in the staffroom. Again, I would probably go into a platform like Reddit. So like a news aggregate site rather than an actual news website.

I think, in the diary, I did directly access a few websites. I think the ‘Atlantic’ was one because that doesn’t really get thrown up in news aggregates that often and Google doesn’t really seem to throw it up that much, not that I understand Google’s algorithm but… Normally, for my vested interested in politics and international relations and stuff, I’m more likely to go directly to the website. If I’m just trying to pass time at work it’ll probably be just ‘Google News’ or Reddit or something like that. I’ll just browse until something peaks my interest, then I’ll read that.

Interviewer: Great. So, before I move on, a couple of things I wanted to pick up on. You say ‘Google News’, so we’re seeing that from the data you sent us. Some stuff was kind of… Yes, the way we’ve aggregated this, you might want to question. When you say ‘Google News’, are you meaning the aggregated news thing so, kind of, on an Android phone when you swipe right?

Jack: Sometimes it’s on my phone, sometimes it’s on my browser. I think, if I was on my phone, I’d be more likely to go straight to Reddit because I’ve got the Reddit app. I do have the Google News app on my phone but it’s tucked away somewhere, whereas Reddit is a lot more readily available.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you got an Android phone?

Jack: I do, yes.

Interviewer: So you can have it so, on the home screen, if you swipe that way you get-

Jack: Oh, so you mean on the right, I get you. I don’t tend to do that, I tend to access via app on my phone rather than swiping.

Interviewer: And the app is called Google News?

Jack: I think so.

Interviewer: I don’t know. That’s all. I’m not, kind of, trying to…

Jack: Let me double-check because all of my Google apps are in a folder there, so they’re kind of miniaturised and out of the way. Half the time, I forget that they’re there. Oh no, so there isn’t a Google News app. I must have just made that up, so-

Interviewer: Maybe when you’re on your laptop there’s a Google News site but it’s just-

Jack: I think that’s, maybe, what I’m thinking of.

Interviewer: Okay, good.

Jack: Yes. I mainly access Reddit on my phone. I think, sometimes, I’ll go to Google on my phone but I must go through the browser rather than an app.

Interviewer: So when you go to the search page, sometimes, you’ve got it set up so you’ve got news headlines coming up?

Jack: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Right, which is similar to when I just showed you on my phone there, that’s the same thing.

Jack: I mean that’s probably an easier way to get to it but, just out of habit, I’ll go through the browser.

Interviewer: Yes, no, this is the whole point of asking these questions. We want to know what people’s habits are and how they’re encountering it. So you might just go to Chrome, whatever, bring up Google, not just go, “Oh, there’re some headlines.” but in order to actually look, “What are the headlines I’m getting?”

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: So you’re doing that as a purposeful action to get to news?

Jack: Hmm.

Interviewer: Great. There was one other thing you mentioned. You mentioned, on your commute, you won’t read longer articles, you just window gaze.

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: Could you just explain what you meant by that?

Jack: Oh, so literally window gazing like looking out of the window of the Metro and just sort of like tuning out.

Interviewer: Right.

Jack: Yes. If I do come across a longer-form article on the commute, if it seems very interesting, yes, I’ll sit down and read it even if I don’t necessarily have a whole lot of time. Most of the time, if it’s a longer one or it looks like a longer one, I’ll skip it and move to something that’s a bit more bitesize.

Interviewer: Great. I just checked- I just wondered if you were referring to that process, itself, of scrolling as window gazing and I just thought that’s a really interesting way of-

Jack: Well I think I might start calling it that actually, because I like the sound of that as well.

Interviewer: Right, anyway, you talked a bit about, there… You look at headlines, you’ll delve into longer articles if you feel you have time or it’s the right sort of day. Could you just talk a bit more about the patterns or trends in your news consumption and maybe talk about them over time, has there been an increase or a decrease over time? Also, do you typically just read headlines or do you go into news articles?

Jack: Well something that I’ve started doing more regularly recently, and this was because one of my lecturers recommended it, is… If you’re reading a particularly interesting article, regardless of the topic, if it hyperlinks to other articles in the body of the text, which I’ve noticed a lot more articles have started doing, make a point of clicking through and trying to contextualise that article. That’s something that, I think, I made a note of in the study a couple of times. That’s something that I’ve made a point of trying to do more.

It’s something I’ve really only done the past couple of years, sort of like midway through my degree. So that wouldn’t have been a natural inclination of mine if it hadn’t been for a lecturer telling me, “Actually, it’s a good idea to do it.” My initial thought would’ve been, “Well you’re just reading more of the same.” I’ve always been a big picture sort of person, so I’d rather read… At least once upon a time I would’ve rather read a wide range of articles, whether it be like culture, politics, and whatever, rather than going down the rabbit hole on a single topic.

I think, as my lecturer said, contextualising the articles is very useful because… This is the librarian in me coming up. When you just read one article on something, and take that as gospel, you’re taking onboard all of the author’s biases, omissions, and whatnot. So if you read multiple authors, multiple articles, on the same, or a similar, topic, you start to build out a better understanding of what’s going on. At least that’s my opinion.

So yes, more recently, I have tried to read around subjects rather than just reading one article and then moving onto something else. You know, the next shiny interesting thing. One drawback of that, I’ve found, is that it can be time-consuming. Especially a lot of the articles that I read, with my interest being politics, they do tend to waffle on sometimes. Reading the full article and then moving onto another one and another one on the same topic does take up a little bit of time. I would say that’s, really, the only drawback that I’ve found on taking that sort of approach to reading about the news.

Interviewer: So to go to those topics then… So, I suppose, on page seven of this book we’ve picked out, in the blue squares, some of what we considered your main interests.

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: There’s also that orange word cloud of key words from news titles. Fromm what you’ve said, I’m thinking that’s fairly close.

Jack: Yes, that’s definitely pretty accurate, yes.

Interviewer: So my question is, “What do you think it is that draws you to those topics and interests?”

Jack: I think I like the idea of… You know, everyone has their own kind of agency. One thing that has bugged me forever, this was even before I got into studying politics, is when people say, “I don’t vote, I don’t do this, I don’t do that, because it has no effect on the world around me.” I don’t agree with that.

I think if you’re just going to sit it out then you’re, sort of, abdicating all these options, all these abilities, that you have to influence the world around you. I’m not saying that everybody is going to be able to form the world around them that they want but you can make yourself heard, you can make your opinions known. That’s why I’m interested in politics, in general.

The reason why I’m interested in stuff like China, Sudan, the US is because they’re sort of like the hot topics in international news right now. I mean China especially. I feel like I don’t want to be going out into the world and potentially having conversations with people, these hot topics are coming up, and not be able to have an informed opinion about it.

I think one of my personal flaws is that I really don’t like feeling stupid. A lot of the time, I’m probably being tough on myself thinking, “Why did you say that? That’s stupid.” Really, the other person probably doesn’t care what I said. I would rather have some sort of idea of what I’m talking about, rather than just going into a topic and sort of like spitballing and not really being able to get to my point.

Interviewer: Yes. So do you think, in some ways, the way that you read into topics, rather than get a coverage of loads of things, is to prepare you to have discussions about those sorts of topics? Do you very often have discussions with people about the sorts of topics in here?

Jack: Probably not on a day-to-day basis. I think that would get very tiring very quickly. I think it’s got a lot to do with my social circumstances. My partner is in a PhD programme. A lot of my close friends are doing postgrad, whether it’s master’s or PhDs, so I am surrounded by a lot of argumentative people.

Whenever I get together with them… It’s not all the time because, with me studying and with them studying, we’re not made of time. I’m also working, they’re working, so it’s not… We don’t meet with each other as frequently as I would like or as frequently as we used to before uni but when we do get together, after the initial inane banter, we do tend to stray into the heavier topics. Yes. I think that’s one of the reasons why I tend to go deep on subjects now, because I like being able to keep up with all my intelligent mates.

Interviewer: Yes, and also contribute to those discussions?

Jack: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: Okay. So how often do you encounter online news or information that you think might be fake or misleading?

Jack: It depends on where I look. I tend to find I’m a lot more cautious if I’m scrolling through Reddit because I think… I think it’s got a lot to do with the way that Reddit is structured, because it’s a news aggregate site but it’s also a social site, in a way, because it allows people to comment and form communities and whatnot.

99.9% of the people on there are anonymised. It’s very rare that people are open about who they are. Typically, it’s celebrities who are very open about, “This is my account, this is me doing this.” So there’s no way of, at least immediately, knowing what the provenance of this comment or this article is, so you’ve got to do a bit of digging. I’ve tried to make that a habit when I access content from Reddit in particular. So I’m trying to contextualise, not just, the subject material but also the provenance of where that material is coming from

When it comes to Google, I’m a little less cautious because… I don’t know if it’s a default or if it’s something that I’ve set up in the past and have just forgotten about. When you go to the ‘Google News’ aggregate, it does have that sort of fact-checking section. Further down, which is annoying because you’ve got to scroll for it, but there does seem to be at least some built in attempt by Google to combat misinformation or disinformation. Whereas I don’t, necessarily, think Reddit does that as a matter of course. I probably shouldn’t trust Google as much as I do, given that they are a giant corporation, but I feel like, from my own experience, they are relatively reliable.

The only other time I would feel like I’ve really got to watch what I’m doing is if I’m… This is probably my political bias coming in, which is kind of bad given that I’m trying to be as neutral as possible with my degree and whatnot. If I go to… What’s the name of that…?

There’s a conservative newspaper, I can’t remember its name but, it really, really, just gives me the ick because I feel like a lot of what they post is dog whistle rather than actual news. I think it’s the… Is it the ‘Express’? I think it’s the ‘Express’. So unless an article… I don’t think any came up in the two weeks that I filled in the diary but if an article is recommended to me from the ‘Express’ I would probably read it with a lot of caution. If I’m scrolling and see something from the ‘Express’ I think my instinct is just scroll past it. Reading that is no good because they’re just trying to work people up. They’re not actually trying to get across a relatively objective news article.

Interviewer: So you mentioned a slight difference. Seeing something on social media, like Reddit, you would almost certainly just ignore, scroll past, whereas if you were recommended it on an aggregate like Google-?

Jack: No, no, no. So if it was aggregate/social, like Reddit, I would probably scroll past. If it was just a regular old aggregate, like Google, I’d probably scroll past. If someone I knew recommended it to me I would read it.

Interviewer: Right.

Jack: Not just like an algorithmic recommendation, if it was a person I knew who recommended it then I’d read it because I feel like it’s been picked out especially for me in that sort of way. It’s a bit more human.

Interviewer: Okay, thanks for clarifying that. We’ll come back to this sharing between people in just a moment. Just to finish that set of questions I was on… You mentioned this in a kind of vague way, so I wonder if you can go into detail. Have you ever sought out information, intentionally, to crosscheck something you’ve read?

Jack: Yes, absolutely, yes.

Interviewer: How often do you do that, and what’s the kind of-? Yes, talk a bit about that if you can.

Jack: So, again, I think this is something that I’ve started doing more regularly now that I’m doing my BSc. If there is terminology that I’m unfamiliar with, I’m almost certain to check that out on a reputable website whether it’s a simple dictionary like Oxford or… I’ll occasionally go to Wikipedia as well, as long as the article is referenced. If the articles are, sort of like, those poorly put together ones I’ll probably avoid it but, on the whole, Wikipedia is something that I’d go to for terminology as well.

If it’s something a bit meatier, like if it’s a topic or a historical event that I’m not 100% with, I’ll try to look up something a bit more academic. One thing that I’m cautious about when I’m doing that is… Normally I’ll just search for, sort of like, these academic sources through Google because, odds are, I don’t really want to pay for whatever it is that I need to look for.

I do find, in certain cases, you get… I don’t know if ‘pundit’ is the right word but you do get a lot of people who, sort of, colloquially explain these big historical events and these big complex topics online. They don’t all have the same quality. Some lay people can explain these events and these topics very, very, well, others don’t but can still write in quite an interesting way.

How can I better explain that? An article can be interesting but be very thin on facts. Like they’re interesting to read but you don’t really learn anything from them. I’m very cautious of those because, again, I’m not made of time. I don’t particularly want to sink a whole lot of time into these empty calories, in a way. So, yes, I try to find information-dense sources, whether they’re academic or layperson, as long as the information is there, it’s referenced, and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Is there anything else? Apart from this idea of adding context in the way you’ve just discussed, is there anything in terms of things being misleading or fake? Are there any other things, in particular, that would motivate you to then go and cross-reference or check elsewhere for alternative sources?

Jack: Yes, absolutely. I mean, because of my reading habits, I don’t often come across claims that something is fake news. It’s not often that I’ll need to go out into the world and determine, myself, whether something is fake or not but, especially when Trump was still president, there was a lot- Like ‘fake news’ was the buzz phrase at the time, wasn’t it?

So, back then, that was when I first started my degree and was less critical of what I was reading. Back then, I did make an effort to decide, myself, whether these claims, fake news or not, were accurate or not. I found that, a lot of time, fake news was just news that a certain person didn’t like and wanted to discredit. So that was a big thing back then, less so now.

Something else that would make me try to cross-reference what I was reading was if it’s a particularly emotive subject. So someone might not necessarily write something in a misleading way but they’re obviously… It’s not necessarily a polemic either but because everybody has biases, even if you try your hardest to not be biased in your writing, your opinions and your background will almost certainly come out. Sometimes, even if the author doesn’t mean to-

I find that a lot of the time authors do mean to push their opinion. Even in cases where they don’t, I want to read… Not necessarily an opposing opinion but an opinion that is different, just so I’m not getting drawn into this siloed thinking where a group has very set ideas of, “This is fake news, this isn’t, this is a good thing, this is a bad thing.” I want to be able to make those decisions myself, and I don’t want to just take what someone else says at face value. I want to read other opinions, dissenting opinions, opinions that are the same but a little bit more nuanced or whatever, and just piece it together myself.

Interviewer: So what would prompt you to do that? So you mentioned the idea of something that was an emotive topic, so could you give just maybe one example of a sort of topic that would make you more alert to checking things out?

Jack: Yes. So I think people can get emotive over a wide range of things but just to go… Something that I recently read… I’ve got quite a few Armenian friends. Something that’s happening at the minute is there’s a big territorial dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Obviously, those big international-scale things will cause a lot of grief to a lot of people. Armenian authors are writing one thing, Azeri authors are writing another thing. When it comes to stuff like nationhood, that gets people really, really, worked up, I’ve found, so that’s one of the topics that, almost certainly, I would read about.

Even local stuff like… What do you call the place with all the good bars? I mean, we’re in Newcastle, it could be any place. They’re building that big, massive, ugly, tower by the river and that’s really getting people’s goats as well. A lot of people are boiling it down to, “It’s an ugly tower, we don’t want it there.” but it’s like, “Well there’s also a housing crisis, you want Newcastle to keep bringing in the money, so is it really that bad of a thing?”

I want to be critical about everything, not just like these big events but anything that gets people quite emotive, even if it’s just like a local thing like building a tower in Ouseburn. That’s it.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jack: So, yes, I’m-

Interviewer: Okay, that’s good, really good. So where would you go first, where would be your go-to place to cross-reference, double-check, find an alternative source, etc. Where do you go?

Jack: I think my first inclination, as I mentioned before, would be to follow any hyperlinks in the article I’ve just read, itself, and see if people of a similar mind-set in that publication can contribute to this topic. So I would go for the nuance first, and then I would sort of branch out and go a bit more radical and try to find someone who is on the opposing side.

I think I would… I don’t think I’ve got a go-to place. I think it really depends on where that initial article is. If it’s a local issue, for example, I’m pretty much guaranteed to start off in the ‘Chronicle’ but then I would maybe go to a national tabloid that has a North East section and see if it comes up there. Sometimes it doesn’t, so that gives me the idea that actually people outside of the region don’t really care about it that much.

I try to go to… For local stuff, I try to go to blogs or maybe the webpages of local councils, local politicians. I would go to see if any local businesses had said anything about these local issues. Just try to really cast a wide net.

Interviewer: How would you do that, how would you find out about all these different businesses and policymakers and stuff, what would that kind of process be for you to search?

Jack: So, with me doing politics, I’ve got a vague idea of who is who in the local area. When I moved in- So I’ve recently moved but when I lived in central Newcastle I followed Chi Onwurah quite closely because I just knew, from my educational background, that she was my local MP. If I wasn’t sure about local MPs or local councillors, I would go to their specific websites. So like Newcastle Council would have a list of people. More often than not, they would link to their socials.

As an aside, actually, one thing that I noticed is that, on most politicians’ websites, when I went to read their opinions they would have a sort of sanitised version of their opinion on their official website, I presume because they’ve got certain tick boxes that they need to do with their party. Then, when you go to their socials, they seem to be a bit more conversational and a bit more fast and loose with their opinions. So I would quite often go to the socials to get the raw take from the local politicians.

But, yes, if I wasn’t certain about who a particular politician, in an area, was I would look them up on Wikipedia. Again, this is me trusting Wikipedia. There’s no guarantee that the information on there is 100% accurate but, for the most part, they’ll point you to the right person.

Businesses, I think I would… If it was a local business that I’m familiar with because I go there quite regularly, like Fat Hippo for example, I would just go straight to their website because, you know, there’s that brand recognition. I know who they are. If there’s a local business that’s mentioned by name in the article as being put out by a particular local event or supportive of a particular local event, I would then Google them and see if they had socials or a webpage and then just read around that just to, sort of, build an idea of what these businesses are getting from the event or development or whatever it is that’s happening.

Interviewer: Great. Have you ever used fact check websites such as FactCheck.org, do you follow them on social media?

Jack: I do use them, but probably not as frequently as I should. One thing that I tend to do is I tend to do my own research when I want to fact check. I typically only go directly to fact checking websites when it’s sort of like right in my face. I think I mentioned, earlier, that my Google is set up in a way that the fact checking websites are part of the stream. If there’s something particularly interesting that comes up in those fact checking websites, I’ll click on them to contextualise what I’m reading. I would say, maybe four times out of five, when I’m fact checking it’s me just doing it on my own. It’s not because I distrust fact checking websites, it’s just I forget that they’re there.

Again, it’s because I don’t… When I’m on my commute, or whatever, I don’t search them out. They’re part of the stream for me, so that takes out a little bit of the labour of going to find them. Now that I’m thinking about it, maybe I should be going directly to these fact checking websites and plugging in whatever problem with the facts I have and see if they’ve come up with a response already.

Interviewer: Okay. You mentioned a bit earlier about sometimes being sent articles directly from friends.

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: How often do you get sent things from friends and how often do you share things with other people?

Jack: During the two weeks that I filled in the data diary I didn’t actually get sent any articles, whatsoever, by my mates. I think that was probably a bit of a fluke because I was coming up to my exams and I think people just knew to give me my space.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jack: Under normal circumstances, it’s not something that regularly happens but, I do have groups, on Facebook Messenger, that I’ve put together with my mates. One group has got one chat and another group has got another chat, and so on and so forth. We’ll probably dump an article or two in there every other week. Again, it really comes down to what our schedules are like.

My partner, their viva is coming up so they’re not particularly active on social media at the minute. A lot of my mates are either going for interviews or have just recently been offered jobs so are moving and having big life changes. So our socials, at the moment, are quite quiet compared to usual. As I say, under normal circumstances, we would share articles that we think would interest people, you know, maybe on a weekly basis. Not a very regular thing but pretty regular.

The articles, themselves, range between just memes, almost, like… Not a meme but, like, something that is part of… Like in jokes, like we post news articles that are sort of related to in jokes. So we’re not really consuming it as news, we’re consuming it as, “Haha, that’s funny.” Then we’ll also have principled debates about the next election or Brexit or whatever as well, so there is that range of whether we take the news seriously or not when we send these articles to each other.

I don’t think there’s really any rhyme or reason to it, it’s just as and when we see these things we’ll share them and then either we’ll get a laugh out of it or we’ll have a discussion or we’ll read up on it and talk about it the next time we see each other in person so-

Interviewer: So what would motivate you…? I kind of get an idea from what you said there. What would motivate you to share an article in your group chat, for example?

Jack: Well laughs, for one.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jack: I think the most recent thing that I shared with my friends was from the coronation. It was less to do with the content of the article than the pictures it was including. It had ridiculous pictures of the decorations that people had put up. So there was that visual aspect to it, rather than the actual news. That’s the sort of idea, on the one hand, where I’m trying to get laughs.

Then, on the other hand, one group that I’ve got, there’re four of us. So it’s me, my partner, and then another couple that we are very close friends with and have been for several years. In 2019, I think the last election was, we stayed up until 4:00 in the morning watching the election with pizza and beer, and stuff like that, trying to ease our way through it. Ever since then, we share sort of like, “Oh, there’s been a big change in the polls, it looks like Labour is going to do quite well.” We’ll try to keep each other apprised of the politics of the day-to-day, so that sort of thing. Again, it depends on the group.

Other groups would probably talk more about beer, for example. One of my mates at work, we chat about beer all the time. If there’s an interesting beer- If there’s an article reviewing an interesting beer that’s just come out, we would share those together. It really depends on who is part of that group or who is part of that conversation if it’s just one-to-one. Yes, it’s…

I would say, maybe, one third of the time I’m being a joker and trying to get some laughs but two thirds of the time it’s genuinely to stimulate conversation and share interests and get other people’s opinions on stuff.

Interviewer: Have you ever changed your mind about something based on something you’ve read online?

Jack: Yes. Again, not to sound like a broken record but because I read so much about stuff like politics, when I was a lot younger I was a lot more… I was a lot less calm, I would say, when it came to politics. I was very… I wasn’t an activist, necessarily, but I had very strong opinions, whereas now I’m a lot more willing to listen to the other side because I’ve read so many articles where it’s absolutely clear that this person has no interest in what the other people have to say and, in some cases, don’t really care that much about their wellbeing either. It’s, sort of…

I think it was a very gradual process. I think it finally came to a head when I started studying politics. There was this process where I gradually started feeling like, “Actually, if this is what it looks like if I’m reading it, I don’t want to come across that way.” So, yes, I think it was more sort of like…

It wasn’t something good that I read that changed my opinion. It was something bad that I read, it was multiple bad things that I read, just people not seeming like pleasant, decent, human beings with… Not necessarily radical views, but just like being absolutely convinced that they’re right and not wanting to even consider the other person’s opinion. I just thought that was, not necessarily morally wrong but just, stupid.

Interviewer: So has this changed your mind in the way you feel about and approach the sort of stuff people post online and the sort of stuff that organisations post online?

Jack: Yes. I mean it’s definitely affected the way that I access information. As long as it’s well-written, I would read someone’s post or article or whatever if it was the opposite opinion to what I had because I want to know what other people think even if I don’t necessarily agree. That does feed into me wanting to contextualise what I’m reading and it does provoke me to go and do my research because, you know, I don’t want to fall into that trap of being like, “There is only one legitimate view, nothing else matters.” because I just find that’s like a very narrow way to live your life.

Interviewer: I wonder if you’ve ever then, with the aim of thinking, “I don’t agree with this point of view but I want to read it anyway, for balance.” In that situation have you ever, if not completely changed your mind, slightly changed how you think about something even though you’ve gone into it assuming you were going to think the opposite?

Jack: Yes. I’m absolutely certain that has happened. I’m just trying to think of a recent example. I don’t know, I think… It’s not a recent example but the first thing that came into my head was… Again, going back to election season, I try to read all the different parties manifestos even if I know, for a fact, that I’m of a different cloth than these people.

I remember reading the UKIP manifesto back when they were a thing. This was still when I was, kind of, a bit more rowdy when it came to my political views. I went into reading that, it was almost like a challenge. I was like, “I want to read it just to say that I have.” My initial opinion, going into that, was, “This party is absolutely irredeemable, there’s nothing good about them whatsoever.”

When I read through the manifesto there was one policy, just one, that stuck out to me that nobody else had mentioned. I think it was they wanted to pin the tax free allowance to full-time minimum wage. I was like, “That’s actually a really good idea, and nobody else has come up with that.” So I was like, “You know what, they might not be, from my point of view, the most pleasant of people, they may say a lot of things that I think are really, really, gross, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are completely rotten to the core.” They will have some good ideas, and I’m certain there are some good people in there, so… Yes. That opened my eyes a little bit, just by reading through that manifesto.

Interviewer: So you’re someone that… During the study, you reported a lot more reading from news or aggregated news sites than through social media. Just to think about the sources of news in a more general way, do you tend to rely on certain sources of news more than others and have you noticed any changes in this over time?

Jack: Yes. I do feel like I do rely on certain outlets more than I should. I think, particularly, during the two weeks of the study I was reading the ‘Atlantic’ a lot, which is actually a magazine, journal, whatever, that I don’t necessarily read all that often. I think, during that time period, I was reading it a lot and not really having as diverse a range of sources as I could’ve done.

I feel like, in general, I do read quite a lot of different sources. I don’t just get my news from one place, I get it from several. During the study, I felt like this sort of tension that I do want to sort of… That tension of going deeper versus going wide, sort of like, came back to the fore a little bit because, with me actively noting where I was reading these articles, I kept seeing their logos come up again and again. I was like, “Oh, that’s not necessarily a good sign if I’m starting to fall into the trap of getting all my news from the same place.” I feel like, on balance, it wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been.

Once upon a time I probably would’ve been quite happy just reading the ‘Guardian’ and the ‘Economist’ and nothing else whereas now, even if I do have these anxieties about, “Oh no, I’m reading too much from this one place.” My repertoire, if you want, is a lot wider than it used to be. I think there’s always going to be that sort of tension in my head but I think, as time goes on, I am in good habits and trying to get my news from a wide scope of places.

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

Jack: I think it’s a very mixed bag. I like that people, who don’t necessarily have a whole lot of privilege, can use it to amplify their voice and their opinions. They may not necessarily be their own words, they may share a link to an article and then have maybe a line of text just giving their opinion. To me, that’s better than nothing.

My one concern- I say one concern, I’ve got several. My major concern is that, when you see people posting things on social media… Because, anyone who is on my social media, I know them, I don’t just accept random invites and I don’t add people who I’ve met on a night out and had a five-minute chat with in the smoking area in a nightclub. I don’t do that. I know everyone on my socials.

I’m just concerned that if you’re exposed to your news primarily through socials, because it’s coming from people you trust or you think you trust, you’re just going to take the article title and blurb, if there is one, and then not go into it further because you just assume that the person that you trust has sort of got that covered for you. Like, “They’ve read it, they agree with it, therefore this must be true, it must be a good thing, let’s move on.”

That’s my concern because, really, you don’t know if they’ve read it. They could just be posting something without actually knowing what they’re posting about. So, yes, that’s a big concern of mine when it comes to social media but I think, when done sensibly, it is a very powerful and useful way of getting people to share their views and getting people a bit more engaged with the world around them.

Going back, slightly, to what I was saying before, I think, now that socials are so ubiquitous, people who I knew 10 or 15 years ago who were like, “Oh, I don’t really want to get involved in the world around me, what will I do?” They feel like… Maybe they can’t move mountains, but they feel like they’ve got a little bit more say now that they can broadcast their opinions a bit more widely. So I think, fundamentally, socials are a useful good thing but there needs to be that sort of cautiousness where you fact check and you make sure that you know what these articles are saying.

Interviewer: Okay. So you’ve talked about how news encountered on social media affects the way you trust it. How do you determine if something you read, or a source, is trustworthy?

Jack: There’re a few ways I do that. I am very cautious of articles that have anonymous authors because, if I can’t… Not a background check, that’s the wrong way to put it. If I can’t get an idea of what the author is like then I don’t feel as comfortable because I don’t know if I’d be able to navigate their biases, if that makes sense. So that’s one thing that I look out for, whether the author is named or not.

Stuff like hyperlinks and citations, and stuff like that. If the article contextualises itself I trust it a bit more. They’ve gone to the effort to give you this context. It’s up to you to follow it and it’s up to you to trust this context but they’ve, at least, made the effort. If there’re no hyperlinks, no citations, no way to work out what the provenance of this information is, then I’m sceptical.

Also stuff like affiliations, like if this is… If this is an article that’s coming from a newspaper that is quite cushy with the government- I think there was one in the diary that I included. I can’t remember the name of the newspaper but it was a Chinese newspaper that is quite close to the Chinese government. I read it, because it was hyperlinked in another article that I read, but I think it was one of the ones that I trusted the least because it was coming from what was, essentially, a government mouthpiece.

So, yes, authorship, efforts to contextualise and cite, and also affiliations and provenance, those are all really big things for me when it comes to whether I trust an article or not.

Interviewer: Okay. You also mentioned, made reference to, the person who sent you something. Does that play a part in the way you might trust something, who sent you it and what platform they sent you it on?

Jack: Yes, yes, absolutely. So, I think, it affects the way that I would view that information in two ways, I guess. So, I think… I’m not the only one who does this but I think I take shortcuts when I see people posting stuff.

Say, for example, it was one of my mates posting something, like one of my mates who I stayed up until 4:00 in the morning watching the election, I would, by default, trust whatever they posted because I’ve had ridiculously long debates with them about various topics. I know that they’re quite critical, as well, when it comes to reading stuff so I would just assume, if they’re posting it, they’ve read through this article in its entirety and have come to a well-formed opinion themselves.

Whereas if it was, I don’t know, my cousin maybe, he… He’s not stupid but he’s not really that into being that up on the news, if that makes sense. He would probably be more likely to post something if it was emotive.

So, I think, there is that bias on my part. I associate certain people with certain levels of information literacy. Then there is that colder, more analytical, side of me. Regardless of how I feel about that person, whether it’s my blasé cousin or my friend who has got strong political opinions, if I’m in that more analytical mind-set I would think about what it is that person does, not what my relationship with them is.

So I know that a lad that I used to work with… Years and years and years ago, we both worked in retail and got on really well because we were… He’d just finished uni but hadn’t found a job. I hadn’t started my degree. So we were both, sort of, really hankering for a professional career and were a bit huffed that we didn’t have one. I was quite close to him because we had that, sort of, shared experience.

When he posts stuff, I know that he works for the Labour Party or at least he did. I’ve got nothing against the Labour Party but I know that my friend works for them and therefore he is going to be a lot more positive, when it comes to their materials and stuff, than other people would be, probably.

So there is that consideration, as well, when I see people posting. “They work for this organisation.” or that sort of thing like, not my relationship but, what it is that they do objectively.

Interviewer: I’m going to ask one more thing and then I’m going to pause because I need to change my battery.

Jack: Yes, no worries.

Interviewer: You said that, for example, your friend who you stayed up and watched election night with, or at least communicated through election night with, if they sent you something you would kind of use that as a shortcut of, “I don’t necessarily need to do all of my background checks.”

Jack: Absolutely, yes.

Interviewer: You were saying they’ve done that work for you.

Jack: I assume that they have, yes.

Interviewer: You make that assumption?

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: So, just to turn that round, if you send something to that friend, or someone else, would you ever do that without having done some checks yourself?

Jack: I think I probably would if I was confident that we both had a similar level of knowledge on that topic anyway, but… I don’t know. I think it’s something that I haven’t really thought of actually, now that you mention it, but I think I… I would like to think that I would do my usual of trying to contextualise before sending it off to my friend but maybe that shortcut of, “Oh, they know this stuff, it’s fine.” Maybe I wouldn’t, I’ve never really thought about that before.

Interviewer: But, I mean, would you…? You might not do your full bells and whistles. Would you at least read the full article before you send something, have you ever sent something just on a headline?

Jack: If it’s something that is not a major issue, I might send the article without reading it fully. So like ugly tower that I mentioned before, the local issue, I might just send that without reading all of it. If I attach a lot of value to this event or this topic or whatever, yes, I would read through the entire article but I wouldn’t necessarily do the bells and whistles, as you say, if it was my friend who I felt would probably be inclined to do that themselves.

Interviewer: Okay. I’m going to press pause. Okay, so just for the sake of me when I listen back, we were just talking about your friend sharing stuff with you and you sharing stuff with your friend. You talked about… You said, if your friend sends you something, you might, at times, use that as a shortcut to think, “They’ve checked it out for me.”

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: But you might not always do that yourself because you might also think, “I don’t need to check because, when I send that to someone, they’ll check themselves.”

Jack: Yes. So they may also think the same about me which, therefore, presents an issue, yes.

Interviewer: I didn’t mean to get you down that…

Jack: (Laughter)

Interviewer: But yes, okay, that’s really interesting actually, isn't it?

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: I wonder if that is the same for a lot of people.

Jack: Yes, like-

Interviewer: You’re looking to your friend as, “That guy is smart, he’ll do it.” Are people also saying, about you, “That guy is smart, I can send him stuff, he’ll do his own checks.”?

Jack: I think that’s the issue. I feel like… Maybe, if I was made of time, I would do those checks anyway, even if I trusted the person but you just don’t know. I feel like it’s very easy to share stuff nowadays, especially through social media, and it’s very quick. You feel like, “Oh, well I don’t want to make those…” Yes, I just feel like there is that expectation of these interactions being very quick and, therefore, you’re… It puts me off, I think. Yes, I don’t know. I’m waffling now, sorry.

Interviewer: No, it’s really interesting, it’s great. I mean I can’t believe how quickly the time is going. I’m going to skip some stuff, just so we can cover everything.

So I’m going to move onto, now, algorithms and personalisation. How comfortable are you with the use of algorithms to personalise, as you were calling it, aggregated news?

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: How comfortable are you with algorithms used to personalise that news for you?

Jack: I think, in general, I’m comfortable but the two things that I dislike about it is sometimes I’ve found that it’ll pick up on a very niche thing that I’ve, maybe, searched for once and then will really push this topic. It’s like, “Well I’m not really interested in that.” So I don’t feel like it’s a precise art of customising it to my exact tastes.

The second problem I have with it is… Again, this is because of my information professional background working in a library for the past few years. When results are personalised, it becomes a lot more difficult to reproduce them. If you’re trying to… Say, for example, when I go onto postgrad, I’m going to be doing relatively large lit review. If a search engine, or whatever, throws up different results for different people, because it’s been customised, it becomes just that one step more difficult to reproduce these hits that people have had. So, in certain circumstances, I feel like personalisation isn’t the best way to go.

I know, from experience, that, for example, healthcare databases don’t have that sort of personalisation approach so everybody gets the same results if you put in the same search terms. If you’re using professional databases, rather than just Google or whatever, then you probably won’t run into that problem. Common commercial ones, like Google, one set of results is going to be different for someone else so, yes, there is that concern.

Interviewer: Have you ever been concerned about the use of your personal data by these websites?

Jack: Yes and no. Every time I get asked to fill in my data, I try to provide as little as possible. At the same time, I’ve never had issues arising from sharing my details. I’ve never had my personal details leaked. I do get spam into my email but everybody does, as far as I know, and they’re easy enough to filter out. Yes, I would prefer it if I wasn’t constantly bombarded with, “What is your email, what is your date of birth, this and that.” but I feel like, as long as you’re sensible, it’s not dangerous.

Interviewer: What about the kinds of inferences we’ve made in this data book and how things like that might be used, for example, to target advertising or send you junk email?

Jack: I don’t think it is, in and of itself, a bad thing. I think building these profiles of people can be very useful as long as it’s not politicised. So, you know, I think I used the phrase ‘siloed thinking’ earlier. I don’t want only articles that are of a similar opinion to appear to me. I want everything that is of interest, whether it’s conservative, not conservative, whatever. I want to be able to read everyone, just so I get the balance.

If, for whatever reason, I’m only getting very, very, conservative news articles, opinions, in my feed, I would be concerned because that would strike me as trying to manipulate my own opinions. Personally, I don’t think it would have much of an effect on me because, as I said, I come from that political science background. I’m argumentative anyway, so that’s fine, but… Yes, I don’t want that sort of data being used to narrow the sort of view that I have out onto the world because a lot of people, myself included, rely on the internet to get information and build that sort of worldview.

Being able to see what my interests are, I find that interesting. I think, in and of itself, it’s not a bad thing but, in the wrong hands, it could be.

Interviewer: So you mentioned a couple there but, just to ask you outright, what do you think are the main impacts of personalised news feeds and, as such, the types of information different people are exposed to?

Jack: Yes, so the personalised news feeds, I think it’s… I think one part of it is it tries to keep you clicking so that you go through more adverts, assuming you don’t have an ad blocker. So, I think, personalisation could have a negative effect of only showing you a very narrow kind of news, or whatever, to keep you clicking because that’s the sort of thing that you like to read, and therefore seeing more adverts. I don’t think that is a good thing. Was that the sort of answer that you were looking for?

Interviewer: I wasn’t looking for anything in particular but yes.

Jack: Could you just repeat the question because I feel like I didn’t quite get it?

Interviewer: I think you did, I think you answered it well. I just said, “What do you think are the impacts of that?” So you mentioned, for example, people see a limited amount of things and, as such, they might-

Jack: Yes, yes. I feel like that may be taking it to an extreme. I don’t think it’s as simple as you only see what you want to see but, I feel like, that is potentially one aim that advertisers have. Yes, yes, I stick by that, yes.

Interviewer: Do you often take the time to adjust the cookie settings when you get the pop-ups on websites and stuff like that?

Jack: Yes. I try to avoid that sort of stuff if possible. It comes up, doesn’t it? I try to flush out cookies if they’re causing me bother. It’s been a while since I’ve done it but, every now and then, I’ll just clear my entire history just for a clean slate because… Why not?

I find most of the time- Again, I think it comes from my cautiousness on filling out forms and stuff online. I feel like, a lot of the time, the cookies do work well for me but, if I notice any particular issues, I will go in and clear out the awkward ones that cause the pop-ups or what have you.

I’m confident enough doing that. I know that some people might not have… Like my mother, for example, wouldn’t have the tech-savvy to know, “Oh, I’m getting pop-ups from Boots or wherever, I need to go into my cookies and clear them out.” She wouldn’t know what a cookie is, I don’t think, but I do so I’m pretty confident in being able to get rid of those if I’m being annoyed by them.

Interviewer: Okay. So final couple of minutes, do you think your trust in news and online information has been affected by technologies like deep fakes and AI-generated content?

Jack: Again, yes and no. I feel like a lot of the deep fakes that I’ve come across, at least the ones I’m aware of, are really, really, obviously fake. Like the pope in a puffer jacket, for example, that’s obviously fake. I feel like I’m sensible enough to recognise fantasy when I see it but, obviously, we’ve got to this point where technology can make things look very realistic.

If there’s even an inkling that something might be fake, I’ll do a background check. Just like, you know, see if somebody has had the same idea as me, “Oh, this looks fake, is it?” If yes, great, I can go from there. If not, then I’ll fall back onto my usual. I’ll do my research and see if this is legit or not. It’s just one more thing to think about, I think. As I say, I feel like I’m sensible enough to spot a fake but if they constantly get better at fooling people then… You know, I’m not infallible. So I’ll have to keep that in mind, going forward.

Interviewer: Okay. A couple of quick ones to finish, what…? Well first, actually, do you think that national broadcasters like the ‘BBC’ should be subject to different regulations or standards than other news outlets, privately owned?

Jack: I do think that they should have a special set of regulations, but I don’t think they should be preferential. My concern with the ‘BBC’ is that, with them being a state broadcaster… You know, obviously, the reality on the ground is it’s not like that state broadcaster from China that I mentioned earlier. It’s not just a government mouthpiece but there are ties between the ‘BBC’ and the government, for example.

Like I know that… I think he’s recently quit actually, but the guy who was the director for the past few years was part of a conservative society when he was in university, I think, and he had a lot of close personal connections with the Tories. I feel like there needs to be, if not a hard and fast rule, at least some sort of code that binds these people from doing certain behaviours like having chats in a back room and being like, “Oh, I want you to broadcast this and not this.”

As far as I’m aware, they’re not bound by any such code, they can… As long as they’re not breaking the law, they can essentially do what they want as their role as this director even though they have these political ties. I feel like public broadcasters definitely need to have that sort of code, if not a law, but… Yes, I think that needs to be on top of a baseline code of ethics that every broadcaster has.

I remember growing up during the ‘News of the World’ phone tapping incident. That was a very formative thing in my opinion on the media. I’m not the sort of person who is like, “Oh, all media is bad.” but there does need to be this oversight that doesn’t present freedom of speech, because that would be just as bad, but there needs to be this sort of honour code where they don’t limit what it is that the public can access in terms of information. There needs to be that freedom of information as well.

Interviewer: Great, and just on time so I’ll try to sneak in one more.

Jack: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: So in this age of personalised newsfeeds, people seeing different things, distrust in the media, media scandals, what do you think broadcasters can do to maintain their credibility and trustworthiness?

Jack: I think a really good thing would be making them a bit more democratic. So that’s not to say that anybody off the street can just suddenly waltz into the ‘BBC’, to use an example, and work with them and force their opinions, almost, but there needs to be a lot more openness, I think.

There needs to be a lot more transparency about who decides what the funding processes are like. Where is the money coming from, who is talking to who? And there needs to be a lot more public consultation as well, I think. Obviously I don’t want, you know, creativity and standards to be sacrificed.

You could say that David Attenborough is part of the media establishment because he’s quite ubiquitous but like… There just needs to be more of a two-way communication between broadcasters and just the general public. You know, if the broadcasters listen to what the public want then… I don’t think they should be giving the public exactly what they want, because that leads to the siloed thinking, but they need to listen and think, “Oh, well this is what their concerns are.” and then produce something that allays those concerns, I think.

Yes, I think a problem that a lot of the public have with the established news networks is that they feel like there’s a lot of elitism. It’s just a matter of they need to make the public feel like they’re actually on the same level and like the broadcaster is not up here with a different worldview and the public is down here, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: It does.

Jack: Yes.

Interviewer: Great. Is there…? That’s the last question from me. Is there anything that I should’ve asked but I didn’t?

Jack: I can’t think of anything. I think you were pretty thorough. I do apologise for being a bit of a windbag.

Interviewer: No, no, not at all. It’s been good, it’s been really interesting. I can turn this off now, if you’ve got nothing else to say about the process at all.

Jack: No, that’s great.

Interviewer: I mean you, kind of, talked about that a bit already, I suppose, but… Yes, nothing else to declare?

Jack: No, that’s great.

Interviewer: I’ll turn this off.

END AUDIO

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