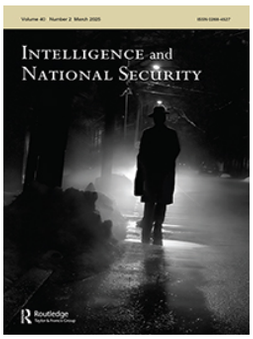

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Trust without knowledge? UK intelligence agencies and the public trust conundrum

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ABSTRACT

Intelligence agencies operating in modern-day liberal democracies are dependent on the public for support. In recent years, the UK's intelligence and security agencies have adopted a public facing role aiming to build 'trust' and developing wider public 'knowledge'. Using a specially commissioned YouGov survey, we offer the first detailed analysis of public trust and knowledge of the UK's agencies, finding that, whilst trust in the agencies is relatively high, levels of trust changes depending on age and political partisanship. Whilst wider public engagement is necessary and should continue, we find that high levels of trust are based on low knowledge of the agencies.

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Introduction

Trust has always been a central concern for the UK intelligence agencies.[1] However, in the twenty-first century, where citizens no longer simply deferentially accept what they are told by government institutions, there has been increasing concern about how to maintain public trust. The politicisation of intelligence around the Iraq War, along with the Wikileaks and Snowden revelations, have heightened concerns about a loss of legitimacy for UK intelligence. In the aftermath of Snowden, the intelligence organisations themselves talked about the need to rebuild public trust[2] and, also, reveal, where possible, some of the dilemmas faced in their everyday work. It has been argued that the public should be involved in such debates so that 'a broad consensus can be achieved and a new, democratic licence to operate can be agreed'.[3] Trust is, therefore, a necessary precondition of this 'licence to operate'.[4] Subsequently, agencies have become more public facing, notably through increasing media engagement by chiefs, wider public advertising campaigns centred on recruitment and the creation of a social media presence.[5] Such initiatives seemed based on a crude, but widespread, notion that releasing more information creates more public knowledge, allows the public to make better judgements about the competence of institutions which in turn helps develop public trust.[6] Yet, as Hillebrand and Hughes observe there 'are rarely any studies or opinion polls which provide quantifiable data' setting out what the public really thinks about intelligence. Indeed, in the UK, there is still only fragmented evidence on public trust towards, and knowledge of, the intelligence community.[7] Whereas, there has the explosion of

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research on trust in a wide variety of other aspects of democracy, government, and the state, including policing. For the most part, academics of intelligence have still to address these questions rigorously.[8] Research tends to focus more on wider security threats, terrorism and surveillance, rather than the intelligence organisations themselves. This contrasts with the growing number of studies in the US and elsewhere which have examined a wide range of public opinion over the last decade,[9] and the publication of polling information on trust by some intelligence agencies themselves.[10] No such official data has been published in the UK.

This article, therefore, seeks to address some of the theoretical and empirical gaps around trust in, and knowledge of, the UK agencies. We examine generic institutional trust models and their relevance to intelligence agencies. We assess knowledge-based institutional trust and question whether the underlying assumptions that openness increases knowledge and, in turn, develops trust. Empirically, we seek to build on an initial assessment of the sporadic polling data,[11] by providing the first major academic study of public trust and knowledge of the UK's agencies. Here, we explore not only generic trust in agencies but also demographic and partisan patterns around trust and knowledge. Additionally, we analyse where citizens access their information to make their judgements about intelligence. To do this, the analysis draws on public opinion data from a bespoke representative survey of 2000 UK adults (18+), designed by the authors and conducted by YouGov. It explores the basic awareness of the different UK agencies, knowledge of their functions, the information sources used and levels of institutional trust, filling a significant gap within the intelligence studies literature and offering a baseline for further studies to build on.

The dynamics of institutional trust

Over the course of the last two decades, there has been an increasing volume of academic research into a wide variety of aspects of trust, both interpersonal and institutional, political and social. In relation to governance and democracy, this growth of research has stemmed from rising concerns about apparently declining levels of public trust in a wide range of government and representative institutions across western democracies,[12] as well as a lack of confidence in the processes of representative politics. Trust is seen as crucial for the functioning and operation of government in terms of both democratic legitimacy and governing effectiveness. Hence, the considerable policy interest from political and governmental elites into the dynamics of public trust and how to maintain or rebuild it.

Our research is primarily concerned with institutional, as opposed to interpersonal, trust although the two areas are often linked. Institutional trust has been defined as 'an attitude toward a specific institution characterised by positive expectations that the institution will appropriately fulfil its functions'.[13] Whilst research has focused on a large array of factors impacting on trust and trust relationships, two interrelated models have come to the fore (openness-based trust and performance/competence-based trust) both implicitly, or explicitly, rely on citizen knowledge to some degree.[14] The former model is built on the idea that transparent institutional sharing of information with audiences and the public is central to developing public trust. Open organisations are regarded as more honest, sincere, accountable and generate

a greater sense of reciprocity and empathy between trustee and trustor. The notion is that greater information supplies can facilitate relationships through greater knowledge and understanding and incrementally build trust over a period of time.[15] It is not surprising, then, that many of the open government initiatives of the late 1990s were centred on the rise of digital technologies providing rapid and extensive amounts of data for citizens to use and respond to.[16] However, as Moore[17] points out, the relationship between openness, knowledge and trust in many of these initiatives is fairly rudimentary. It is often not clear how, or why, one leads to the other.[18] Pytlik-Zillig, et. al'.s experimental study of the impact of knowledge and trust in the US water industry found that increasing specific knowledge does not necessarily support trust by itself.[19] They found that dispositional trust (wider governmental, systemic and interpersonal factors) remained the key bedrock of institutional trust assessments even where knowledge of an institution increased, although those with more knowledge make more nuanced distinctions between institutions. The study concluded that:

> there was 'little support for the idea that (subjectively) 'knowing more' leads to less reliance upon dispositions. Institutions interested in increasing public trust should not assume that providing more and more information will overcome such dispositional influences.[20]

Hence, simply supplying more information does not guarantee that citizens will access it, understand it or, necessarily accept it. Indeed, certain types of information regarding institutional inadequacies may, of course, add to citizens' scepticism rather than trust.

Openness and knowledge have also been linked to a further model of trust, that of competence, or performance-based, trust. Here, citizens require knowledge of an institution to evaluate the information and experiences about the performance and delivery of services by organisations. It is argued that trust centres on citizens assessing whether organisations have relevant expertise, consistently deliver on their promises, provide quality services and respond to their publics. Declines in trust have often been linked to the inability of government to deliver on policy and service promises. Competence-based trust, therefore, is often linked to notions of rational choice theory and consumeristic models of democracy built around citizens making rational decisions based on the information available and providing feedback on government services that institutions respond to. In short, citizens' trust organisations that have clear goals and deliver on their promises in a rational, consistent, and fair manner.[21]

Whilst openness, knowledge and competence may be specific factors in the citizens – institutional trust dynamics, other studies highlight the significance of wider pre-dispositional social experiences and political values in shaping more specific institutional trust. Newton and Norris[22] refer to socio-psychological and socio-cultural models as potential explanations for institutional trust. The former model centres on personality traits built in early life. Whilst some individuals develop optimistic and co-operative outlooks and are inclined to trust others, some are pessimistic, cautious and misanthropic, and are less likely to be trustful. Essentially, interpersonal (social) trust can impact generalised institutional and systemic trust (i.e., people who are more trusting of individuals are arguably more trusting in general).[23] The socio-cultural theory is based more on the idea that trust and cooperative relationships are built on socialisation and social experiences. The importance of higher education, political participation and involvement in voluntary activities, are all seen as central to helping foster trust and reciprocity between individuals

and building confidence in the governing-institutional systems. Hence, individuals with higher levels of education, who are embedded in civic life, are more likely to express confidence in institutions and governing system more generally.

Increasingly, political partisanship and polarisation of attitudes have become the focus of research, especially in terms of declining institutional and governmental trust. For example, an intriguing recent study in the US suggests that polarised partisan assessments of institutions are increasingly shaping public attitudes. Increasing polarisation erodes trust generally, and, in the case of institutions, US citizens have increasingly come to identify what were once regarded as non-political organisations as partisan. The findings show that citizens align higher levels of trust with institutions that accord with their own partisanship, whilst lower trust scores apply to those organisations they perceive to identify with the views of political opponents.[24]

In addition to wider dispositional trust, the way that knowledge and information about institutions are conveyed is also seen playing a role in trust relationship.[25] This is not simply about openness *per se* or institutions providing more information.[26] The idea is that trust is most effectively built through shared and interactive dialogues, rather than simple top-down, broadcast models of information communication. This is often linked to more active models of citizenship and citizen efficacy around participation. In particular, the notion that citizens who are more active and engaged are more likely to express confidence in the institutions and practices of governance.[27]

Connected to this idea that communication is at the heart of the trust process, is the role of the media as the main conduit for information. Media is seen as an important shaper of public attitudes in relation to what issues are given attention (agenda-setting) and how those issues are represented to audiences (framing and priming effects). There is, however, no consensus on how important media effects are. Those supporting a more maximalist position of media impact have suggested that the repetitive, negative and sensationalist media coverage of current affairs and politics[28] has gradually corroded public trust in representative democracy and its institutions. Negative media stereotypes have generally created a perception of an unresponsive, venal elite and distant institutions operating in their own interests. Moreover, such institutions are also incapable of delivering on policy needs, thereby undermining trust and efficacy in the political system. Nevertheless, whilst the media can be an important factor in terms of agenda setting and the framing of stories, others favour a more minimalist impact of the media on trust. Newton,[29] for example, points out that the public are often highly sceptical of media and more than capable of making their own judgements about issues, policies and institutions themselves. Furthermore, Norris suggests that higher levels of media consumption, far from undermining trust and voter efficacy, actually support systemic trust.[30]

Trust and intelligence agencies

In attempting to apply institutional trust models and ideas more specifically to intelligence agencies, there are both theoretical and empirical problems. This may account for why there are few attempts to do so. Hribar, et al.'s, ambitious model of public trust building in intelligence agencies is one of the only conceptually driven attempts.[31] They argue broad trust in the agencies can be measured and maintained by polling, education, oversight functions, open communication, and the input of public experts independent of

the agencies. As the authors acknowledge, though, it is difficult to fully test given the overarching aims of the model, and the concept of trust is, they admit, 'theoretical and has not yet been tested in practice'.[32]

In relation to openness-based trust, there seems to be an obvious paradox of institutions essentially built on secrecy. Despite moves towards more opening up, UK agencies are still significantly limited in the level and types of information they put in the public domain. Hence, from a public perspective, why trust organisations which are built around secrecy, and where information is knowingly restricted and often comes to public attention through so-called intelligence failures? However, McCluskey and Aradau argue that secrecy and trust may not be diametrically opposed.[33] Indeed, they argue high-trust environments may allow intelligence agencies to avoid scrutiny because people simply have an expectation, or assumption, that organisations will act responsibly even when there is limited public information.

Trust models that focus on competence assessments from the public are even more difficult to apply. Whilst intelligence agencies might be operating in the public interest and delivering for citizens, because of secrecy it is difficult to assess. Nor do the public engage directly with the agencies, as with most other parts of government, or have personal contacts with officials (at least not knowingly), so the scope for direct personal judgement about the agencies' competence levels is severely limited.[34]

Consequently, for the most part, any judgement about trust from a public perspective is more based on perceptions of intelligence organisations which are likely to be even more highly mediated than other areas of government. Some studies[35] have suggested that the agencies, through their protected position, can manipulate public support. This, they argue, is done through the ability of a powerful so-called 'intelligence lobby' (a contested term, as we previously suggested)[36] to control information, privately agenda-set, shape news coverage and propagandise on their own behalf. This ability to 'manufacture consent' via the media is arguably further enhanced by the representation of intelligence agencies and their officers through popular culture. Fictional depictions of spies and intelligence operatives as heroic figures provide further positive support for the real-world intelligence community. Whilst the UK's agencies often disavow such 'spytainment' and especially the Bond myth, it may be useful in relation to providing positive generalised support even if a totally inaccurate picture of intelligence.[37]

The theoretical problems of applying trust models in the intelligence arena are further compounded by the lack of a solid and consistent empirical research base on trust and UK intelligence. Despite the agencies' growing interest in building trust through increasing public information strategies, there is still relatively limited empirical evidence of the UK public's knowledge of, and trust in, intelligence agencies. Although, there is regular polling on surveillance and security questions, generally there is considerably less directly on trust or knowledge in the agencies. Until Davis and Johns' 2012 study[38] we could find no empirical data on public trust in the UK agencies. Whilst over the past decade the frequency of data has increased, it is often fragmented, in response to specific incidents, and conducted by individual polling companies.[39] However, such studies do indicate that the agencies perform comparatively, and consistently, highly in terms of generalised trust, certainly compared to many parts of the government machine. Notably, the agencies often score more highly than the police and even civil servants engaged in security affairs. Scepticism is more pronounced though when trust is contextualised – people are more

dubious about the activities of the state in terms of surveillance, law breaking, personal data and where intelligence is used by politicians. Moreover, the more specific the survey questions, generally, the greater the 'don't know' count amongst respondents indicating knowledge levels to be patchy at best. Indeed, drawing on the available polling, we previously observed that UK citizens – whilst generally trusting of the agencies – had a limited knowledge base of what the agencies do.[40] Denik and Cable's innovative work using focus groups suggests that the public are more resigned, than trusting, when it comes to the surveillance activities of the agencies.[41] In other words, that the underlying assessment of surveillance reflected citizen powerlessness and a lack of alternatives rather than necessarily being positive confidence in surveillance organisations.

Beyond the measure of top-line trust, apart, from a one-off study by YouGov,[42] there has been limited concerted study of the impact of traditional demographic variables (gender, ethnicity and social class), political partisanship or mediatisation on the UK public trust-agency relationship. The YouGov survey did indicate differences around age, gender and particularly partisanship. Older male and Conservative voters were generally more trusting of the Intelligence Services. However, the differences in age and gender were partly accounted for by significantly larger d/k counts for 18–24-year-olds and female respondents. Labour voters, though, were considerably less trusting, with over 30 per cent expressing little or no trust in the Intelligence Services compared to just 12 per cent of Conservative voters. Given this was a one-off survey, though, it is not clear whether the idea of increased polarised partisanship, referred to above, is at work in the UK as there is little specific longitudinal data. In other broader survey work[43] there are hints that patriotic values and English identity are important in strengthening support for security policy, but again this is not specific to the intelligence area. Nor, despite the suggestions that media and popular culture have a potentially stronger role here, has there been much work on where citizens get their information from about intelligence. Some of our previous research found that the amount of press coverage the agencies have received over the past couple of decades has increased significantly, with agency chiefs becoming media personalities. Hence, there is some indirect evidence that so-called openness has at least increased the amount of information in the public domain but there has been no attempt to gauge the impact of media sources.[44]

Research questions, data and methods

Given the above discussion, we set out to fill some of the empirical gaps and create a benchmark for further study. We wanted to go beyond the top-line generalised trust and analyse the theorised relationship between trust and knowledge – the basic idea that increased knowledge of what agencies do, increases levels of trust amongst the public. Moreover, as some studies of institutional trust indicate the importance of demographic factors and a role for political partisanship, we were interested to see whether there were clear demographic and partisanship variations. Finally, given the expectations about the highly mediated nature of the knowledge-relationship in this case, we wanted to assess where citizens gained their knowledge from, to assess the importance of media sources, something which has not been asked previously in the UK.

To do this, the study draws on data from a YouGov administered survey, commissioned by the authors, that included 2,068 respondents from the UK public conducted in

June 2023.[45] Weighting was applied using age, gender, region, education, and political affiliation based on population benchmarks to correct for any sampling biases and ensure the sample reflects the broader population composition of the United Kingdom.[46] Some of our questions deliberately drew on previous YouGov surveys on intelligence to allow for a degree of comparison.[47]

Consequently, we asked questions focused on three areas:

(1) Levels and patterns of trust amongst the UK public – what is the generic level of trust amongst the public? Are there differences in terms of demographics (age, gender, ethnicity and education)? Does political partisanship (party identification) have any impact?
(2) Levels of awareness and knowledge about the agencies – how aware are citizens of the different types of agencies (GCHQ, MI5, SIS) and, also broadly, what do they do? Do the public have more specific knowledge about the range of powers of, and limitations on, agencies and differences between them? Is there then a demonstrable link between knowledge of the agencies and levels of trust?
(3) The accessing of different information sources about the agencies – Where do citizens' access information sources for their evaluations about the UK's agencies? How far are online sources now outstripping legacy media (print, radio and television)? How far does popular culture feature here? Do the extent and types of sources influence levels of trust?

Whilst the results presented here can only provide a snapshot, we also set them in the context of previous research. How do the results here compare to previous survey data on UK agencies? has trust declined since 2013 post-Snowden, and how does trust in intelligence agencies compare to other areas of government/state?

All the analyses were conducted using R statistical software, utilising the 'survey' package to account for the complex survey design and respondent weights.[48] Weighted descriptive statistics, including proportions and Wald confidence intervals, were calculated to provide estimates of population parameters with 95 per cent confidence. For hypothesis testing, differences in continuous variables between groups were assessed using ANOVA via generalised linear models (GLMs) with survey weights applied. Categorical variables were tested for independence using chi-square tests. All hypothesis tests were conducted with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Unless otherwise specified, all results reported are weighted estimates.

Results

Levels and patterns of trust

The survey found that the overall level of trust in the agencies is relatively high, with just under 60 per cent of our sample suggesting they had high or moderate levels of trust and only 6.4 per cent stating they had no trust at all (see Figure 1(a)). This compares favourably to other professions and parts of government, and certainly far outstripping government ministers or politicians. For comparison, according to figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS), just 12 per cent polled said they had 'high or moderately high trust' in

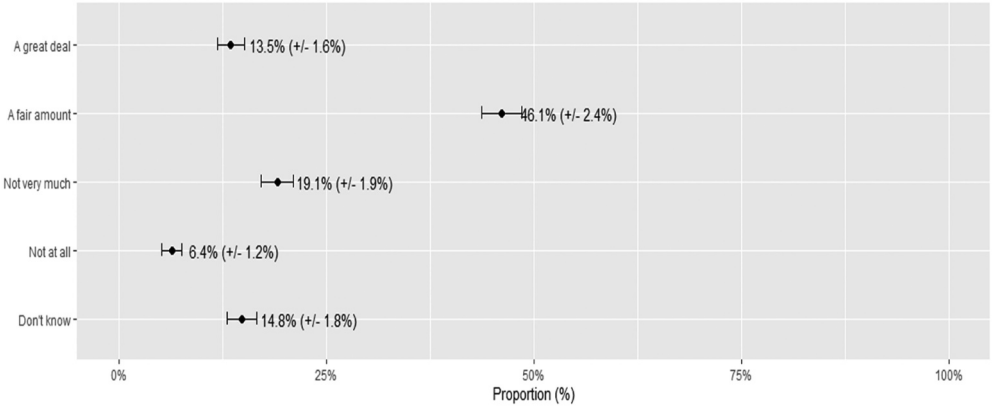


Figure 1a. Self reported trust levels – all respondents. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

political parties, whilst 27 per cent could say the same about the UK government. Figures for low or no trust were 68 per cent and 57 per cent. Other public institutions with relatively high trust included the national civil service (45 per cent), the police (56 per cent) and the courts and judicial system (62 per cent).[49]

Beyond the headline findings, the survey revealed that those who are more trusting tend to be older, more middle class, with higher educational attainment. Increasing educational levels also decrease the overall 'don't know' responses (d/ks) and increase levels of moderate trust. Male respondents are considerably more likely than females to indicate very high levels of trust whilst women tend to adopt fewer firm responses. Younger people were the most likely to indicate low levels of trust or answer d/k (see Figure 1(b–d)). This aligns with other surveys around trust, where younger age groups tend to be the least trusting over a range of areas.[50]

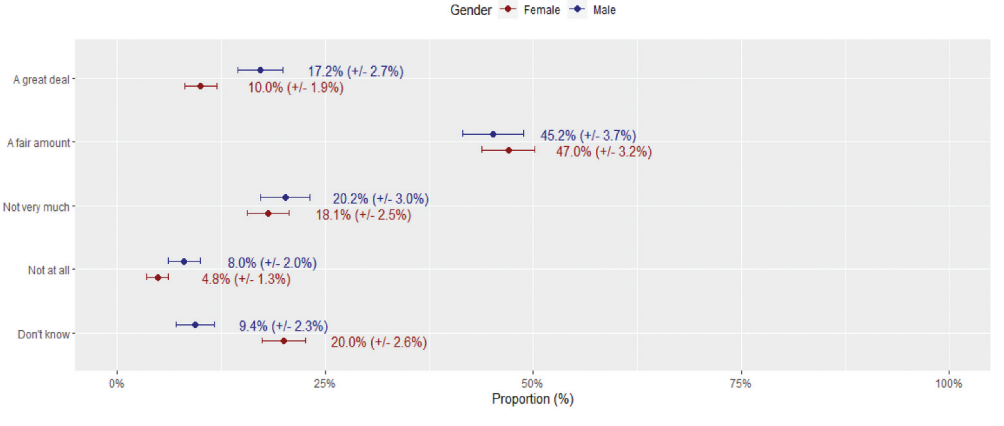


Figure 1b. Self-reported trust levels – by gender. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

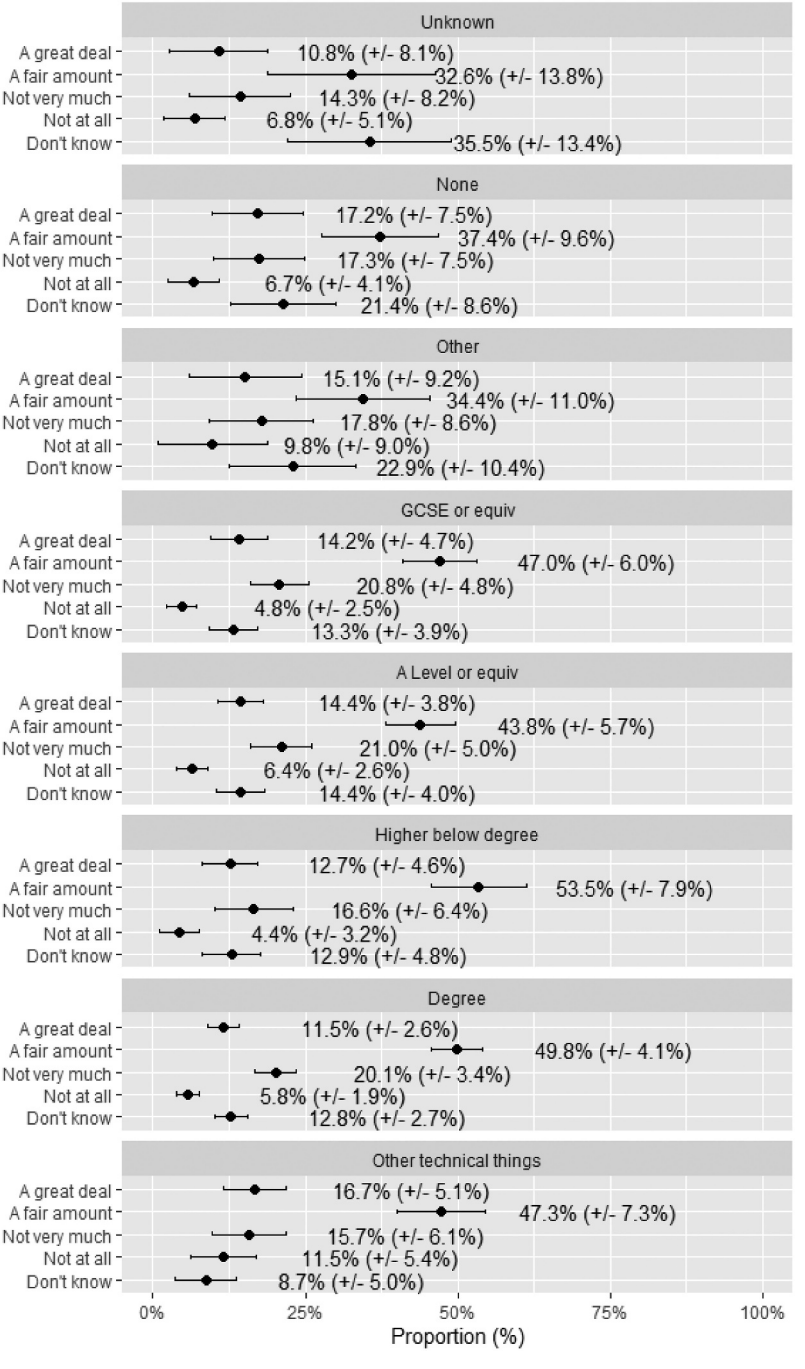


Figure 1c. Self-reported trust levels – by education. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

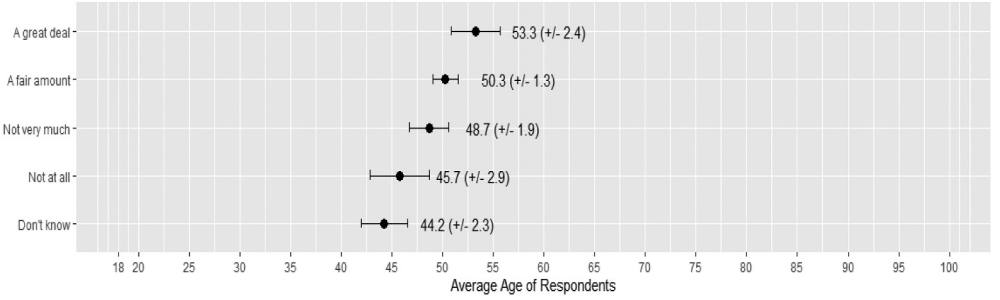


Figure 1d. Self-reported trust levels – by age. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

In terms of party identifiers, as with the earlier 2021 YouGov survey,[51] high-trusters are more likely to lean Conservative, however, differences between identifiers of the main three parties are small, with moderately positive views shared across all groups. Labour supporters, though, were more likely to have 'not very much' trust compared to their Conservative counterparts (21 per cent Labour, 8 per cent Conservative). For those associating with smaller parties of all types, trust levels were, overall, lower. Around 36 per cent of those identifying with Greens and Reform had little or no trust in the agencies – around 9 per cent higher than the baseline.[52] Similarly, those supporting Plaid Cymru or the SNP also gave more sceptical responses. Nearly 40 per cent of SNP identifiers had little or no trust, although outright scepticism was in-line with mainstream parties.

Given arguments around the targeting of ethnic minority groups from government anti-terror legislation and the Prevent programme, and challenges around agency recruitment, it is interesting to note that we found no real significant differences between white/non-white respondents. However, the numbers in the sample are too small to examine ethnicity with much granularity beyond white/non-white.

Levels of awareness and knowledge

We asked a series of questions about how far people had heard of the different agencies and were aware of what they did. Here, there were consistent findings that MI5/SIS had considerably greater awareness than GCHQ, with high levels of recognition.[53] Over a quarter of respondents had not heard of GCHQ, compared to just 11 per cent for SIS and 4.5 per cent for MI5 (see Figure 2(a)), despite GCHQ being the most prominent agency on social media. Whilst patterns of awareness were similar across most demographic categories, older respondents and those with higher educational attainment were more likely to have heard of the agencies and declare some knowledge of what they did. Female respondents are less likely to have heard of GCHQ and SIS but were equally likely as male respondents to know a bit about MI5 (see Figure 2(b)). Those in the younger age group categories were the most likely to suggest they had not heard of any of the agencies at all (see Figure 2(c)).

Whilst baseline awareness (name recognition) was high, the public seem less confident on what the agencies do. Although most of those who heard of the agencies suggested

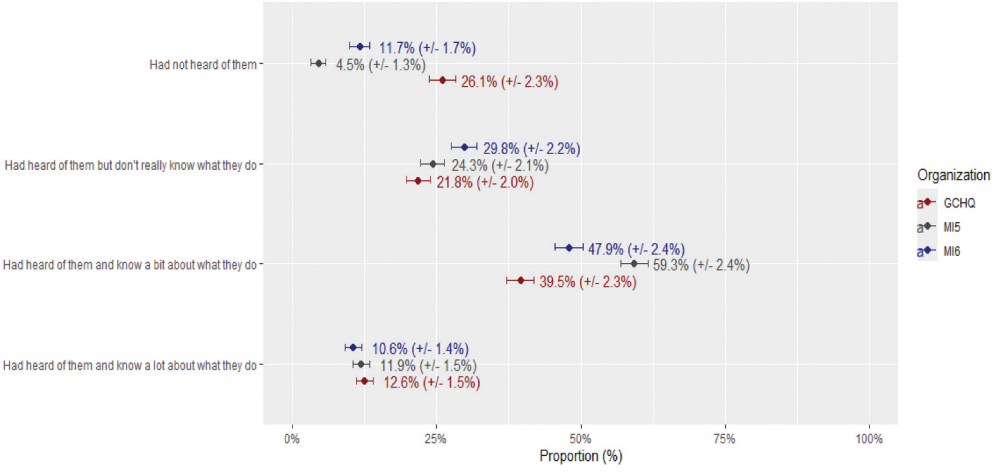


Figure 2a. Self-reported awareness levels – all respondents. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

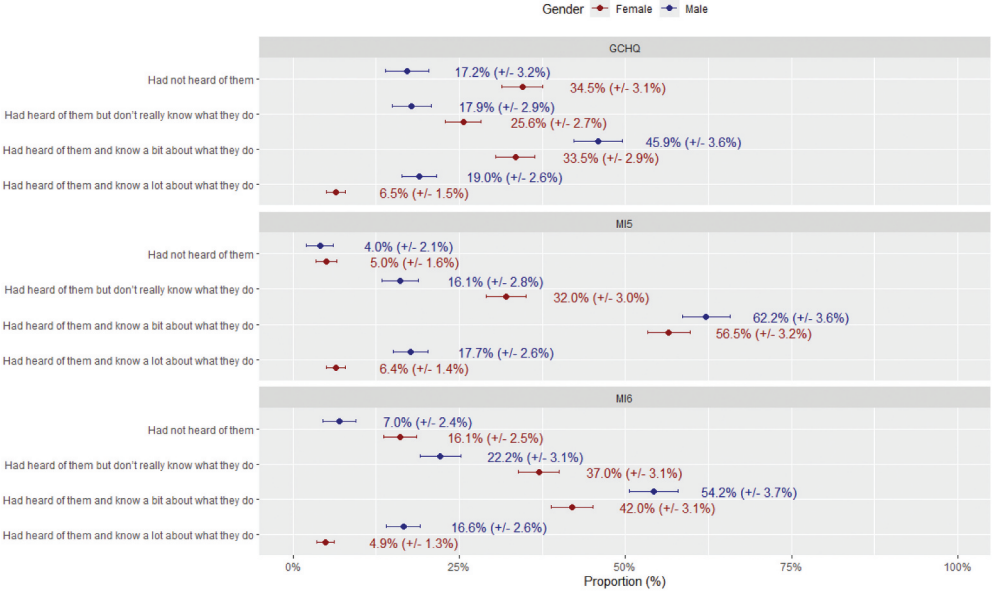


Figure 2b. Self-reported awareness levels – by gender. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

that they knew a little about what they did, few expressed confidence that they had detailed knowledge of what different agencies were responsible for. For example, whilst nearly 30 per cent declared they had heard of SIS, even including the more popular 'MI6', they did not know what they did. The corresponding figures for MI5 and GCHQ were around 24 per cent and 21 per cent respectively. Only between 10 and 13 per cent suggested they had in-depth knowledge of the various parts of the intelligence community.

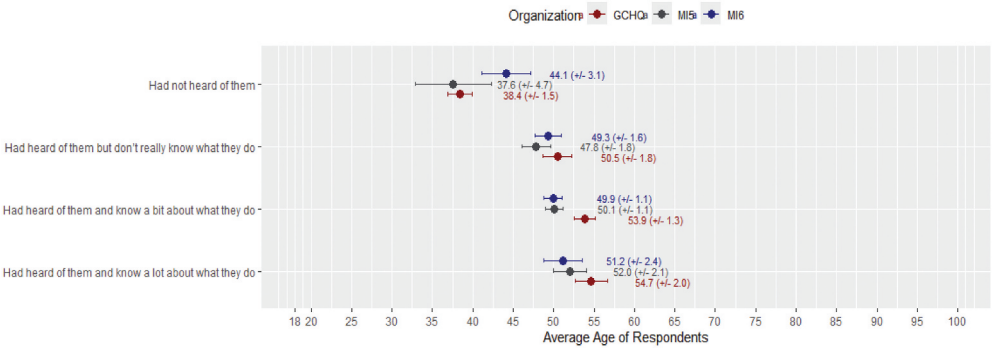


Figure 2c. Self-reported awareness levels – by age. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

Beyond simple awareness of the institutions, we also wanted to test what knowledge the public had about the formal powers of the SIS and GCHQ.[54] Hence, we asked a series of questions about whether the agencies were authorised to conduct the following: break most laws; break into private properties; intercept private communications; conduct torture to obtain information; and kill people, reflecting a YouGov survey from 2013.[55] The inclusion of GCHQ, the UK's signals intelligence agency, also reflected a 2013 poll by Zegart showing that Americans believed the US equivalent, the National Security Agency, engaged in CIA-like activity, though this was untrue.[56]

Here, answers became considerably sketchier with high levels of d/k responses, particularly for GCHQ. Nearly half of respondents indicated d/k in relation to some of the powers for GCHQ, whilst the corresponding figure for SIS was around 5–6 per cent lower for nearly all the questions (see Figure 3(a)). Women were generally less confident in their answers and much more likely to answer d/k than men across the board (see Figure 3(b)). It can be added that the d/k responses were often higher than knowledge/trust questions for other parts of government. Although the number of d/k responses was broadly in line with polling for organisations the public have less contact with,[57] questions on knowledge of the powers of the agencies saw significant d/k responses generally. Thirty-nine per cent said they did not know whether SIS was authorised to kill, with similarly high d/k responses recorded across all questions.[58]

Those that answered correctly tended to be older, whilst there was also a broad trend towards greater educational levels equating with higher levels of agency knowledge (see Figure 3(c, d)). Conservative voters also scored slightly higher in terms of correct answers than their Labour equivalents, but this may be more related to the age factor noted above. Ethnicity was again found not to be of significance in any of the answers around knowledge.

Respondents were more confident (or correct) about the extreme powers listed, covering authorised use of torture, killing people and breaking most laws. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that over 14 per cent of respondents still thought SIS were authorised to kill people in the UK, and over 16 per cent indicated they believed SIS were able to break most laws domestically.

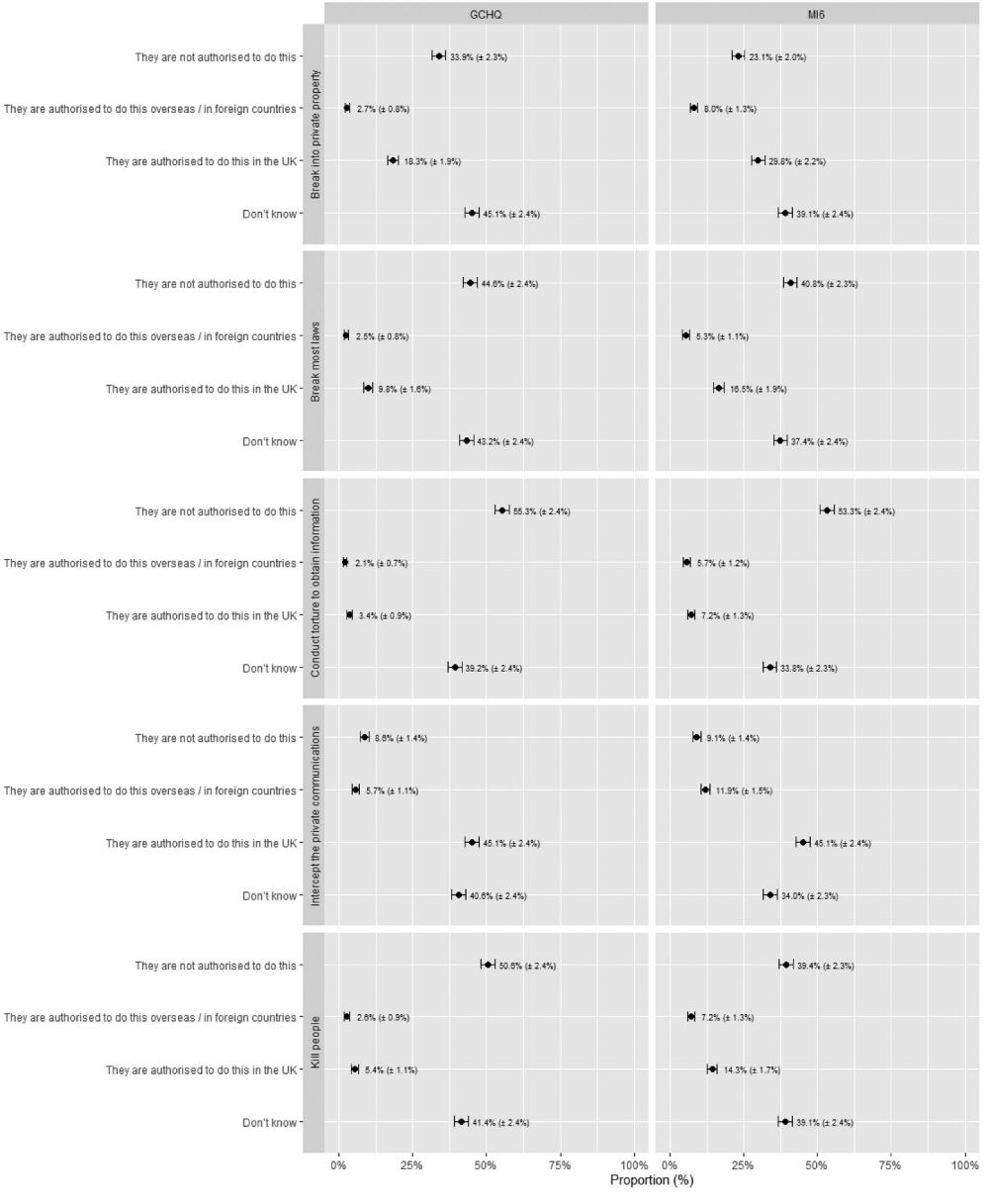


Figure 3a. Knowledge of intelligence agency powers – all respondents. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

The answers here tend to reveal confusions about the remit and responsibilities of the agencies. For example, SIS is seen by a significant minority as operating domestically in several of the answers. Notably, for instance, around 29 per cent of respondents thought that SIS had authority to break into private property in the UK, compared to only 23 per cent who said they were not authorised. Moreover, the answers seem to indicate that the public has difficulty distinguishing between agencies. GCHQ was often seen as

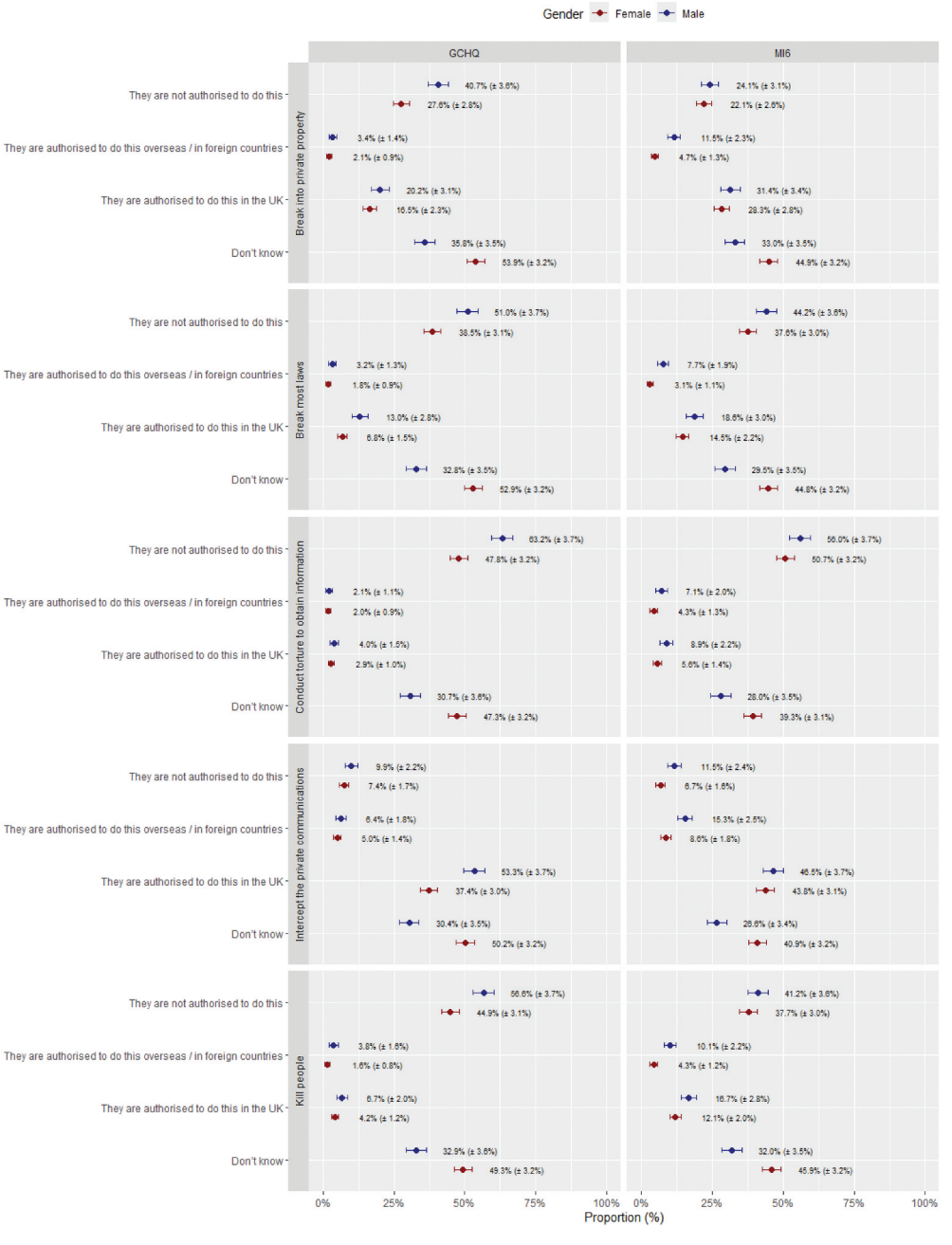


Figure 3b. Knowledge of intelligence agency powers – by gender. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

having similar powers to SIS and operating beyond their communications remit. For example, nearly a fifth of respondents indicated GCHQ were authorised to break into private property in the UK, reflecting similar observations from polling in the US.[59]

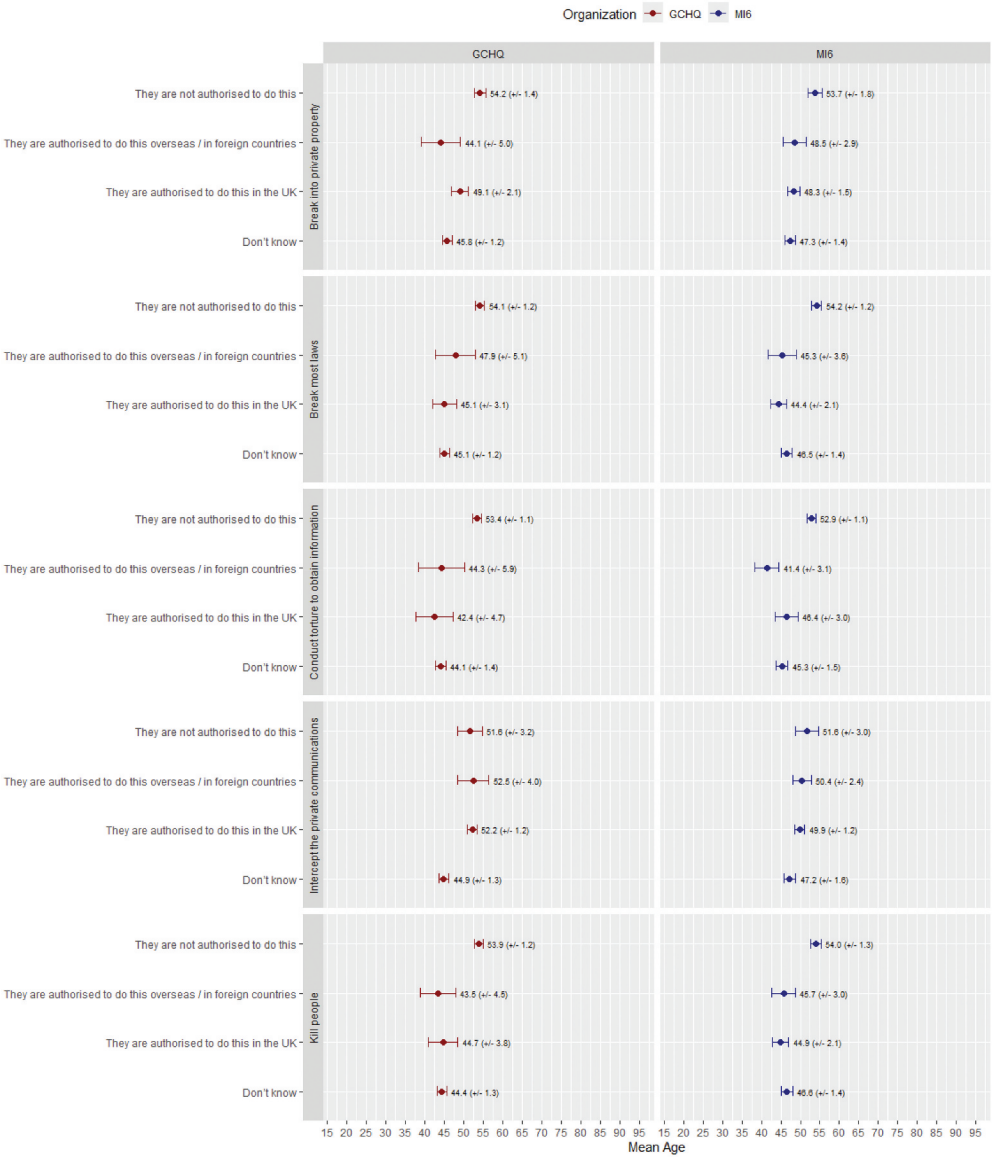
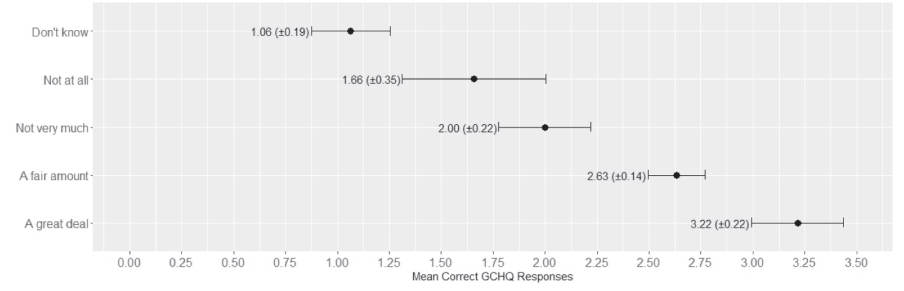


Figure 3c. Knowledge of intelligence agency powers – by age. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

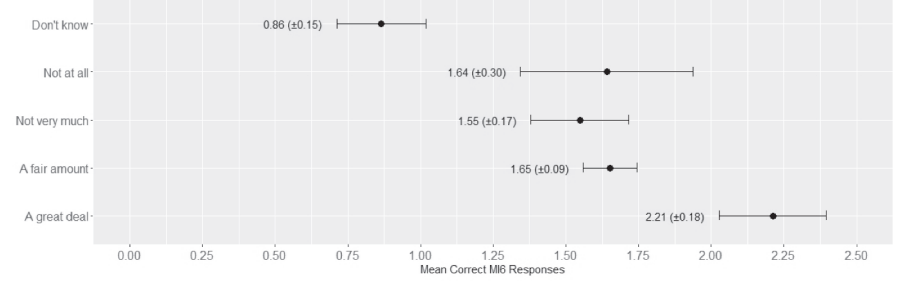
Finally, we linked the number of correct answers given to the levels of trust expressed in GCHQ and SIS. Levels of trust turn out to be a significant predictor of how well people answer questions about the different agencies: lower levels of trust in GCHQ are associated with a significant decrease in correct knowledge about the department, whilst higher levels of trust equate with higher levels of knowledge. Like the GCHQ model, trust in SIS is also significantly associated with correct knowledge about SIS. Higher levels of trust generally correspond to greater knowledge of SIS. For both agencies, those who answered d/k in terms of trust were the most likely to answer questions about powers of agencies incorrectly (see figure 3e).

GCHQ



Trust	Mean Number of Correct Responses (GCHQ)	95% Confidence Interval (+/-)
A great deal	3.22	(±0.22)
A fair amount	2.63	(±0.14)
Not very much	2	(±0.22)
Not at all	1.66	(±0.35)
Don't know	1.06	(±0.19)

MI6



Trust	Mean Number of Correct Responses (MI6)	95% Confidence Interval (+/-)
A great deal	2.21	(±0.18)
A fair amount	1.65	(±0.09)
Not very much	1.55	(±0.17)
Not at all	1.64	(±0.30)
Don't know	0.86	(±0.15)

Figure 3d. Trust – knowledge relationships.

Sources of information: mediatisation and popular culture

Whilst previous surveys have asked about trust and knowledge, outside the US, few have asked citizens where they get their information from about the agencies. We asked our respondents to check off sources they use from a list. We wanted to assess the range and balance of sources, notably between online and traditional sources, and to see how far popular culture might feature (as indicated by some of the literature), as a reference point for some citizens.

It is worth noting that on the question of whether the agencies should engage with the public more or less, the overall picture was that engagement was necessary. Just

9 per cent believed the agencies should engage less, whilst almost half (48 per cent) believed the current balance was correct. Twenty-three per cent wanted more engagement. Over half of respondents said that whilst most of the work of the agencies should be secret, it was necessary to provide more information in a few cases – the approach now taken by the agencies.

On information types, it should be noted, firstly, that nearly 30 per cent of respondents indicated they received no information from any of the platforms listed. Here, the youngest age category (below 20) and those over 70 were less likely to use any sources, as overall were women (see below). The dominant information platform remains television news, with around 40 per cent of respondents listing it as a source. Online news is the second most popular (though of course this may include legacy media sources such as BBC News Online), and the internet more generally was close behind. Social media, though, lagged significantly below these two categories, with only 11.6 per cent listing it as a source of information. Just 8 per cent of our sample suggested official sources helped form their views. Popular culture in the form of films and TV was regarded as an important source by around a fifth of respondents whilst, additionally, 10 per cent also list fiction as a source of information. Therefore, there does seem to be basic evidence that popular culture potentially plays a role in shaping some of the outlook about intelligence (see Figure 4(a)).

When breaking down the results by demographics and political affiliation, many of the patterns were like the overall population profile (notably educational attainment and ethnicity), whilst social status indicated that those in lower categories were less likely to access any information. Party identification patterns were again broadly similar, though Conservative voters were more likely to use tabloids (in line with age profiles) whilst Labour voters were more likely to use social media and film/drama sources. Outside of large parties, identifiers with three of the four minor parties (SNP, Reform and the Greens) who had low or no trust, also had higher levels of accessing no sources.

Gender and age produced some differences in terms of sources (see Figure 4b, c). Men were more likely to access news from a range of channels (9/13 platforms listed) and were more likely to use the standard news sources (TV, newspapers, internet and online particularly). Whereas women were less likely to access any sources (37 per cent as against 21 per cent of male respondents) but notably more women listed magazines, films/drama and fiction, if only marginally more than men. Not surprisingly, age plays a role in the type of sources people listed, with online sources being prominent for younger age groups. 20–30-year-olds tend to gravitate towards social media, whilst teenagers are less likely to use any sources, even online ones. Indeed, online news as a source tends to be used more by middle-aged respondents, with the mean age around 50 for users of this source. As expected, older voters over 55 are more likely to use traditional news sources particularly tv news and tabloid newspapers.

Finally, we tested the relationship between trust and the number of sources respondents reported.[60] Overall, we found that there is a statistically significant relationship between trust and the number of sources respondents reported accessing ($p < 2.22e\text{-}16$). Respondents with 'A great deal' of trust accessed 59.3 per cent more sources, with an estimated mean of 2.65 sources. Similarly, those with 'A fair amount' of trust accessed 47.5 per cent more sources, with an estimated mean of 2.45 sources. Those with 'Not very much' trust accessed 23.2 per cent more sources, with an

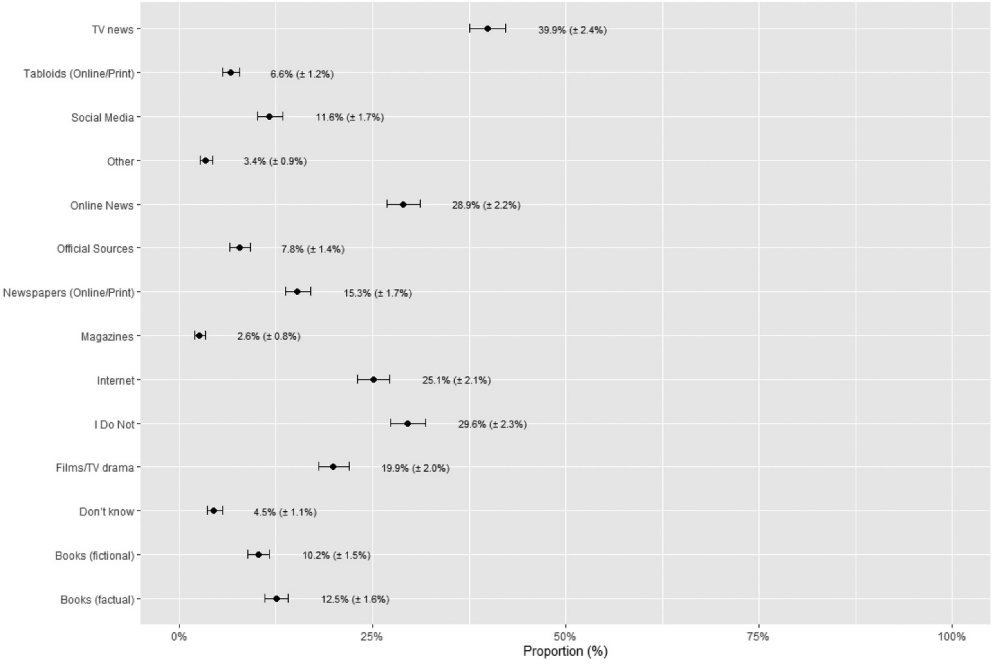


Figure 4a. Information sources- all respondents. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

estimated mean of 2.05 sources, while respondents with 'Not at all' trust accessed 24.5 per cent more sources, with an estimated mean of 2.07 sources. These results highlight the trend that, as trust increases, the number of information sources accessed also increases, with substantial differences between the highest and lowest trust levels (see Figure 4(d)).

In terms of trusts and types of sources, those least trusting tended to get their information online, or via social media, or simply do not get information about the agencies. On the other hand, those indicating high levels of trust, tend to be news omnivores, where about half use traditional TV news, but also have high levels of internet, and online news consumption. Nevertheless, we need to be cautious about implying any causal relationship here, as the data does not allow analysis of the direction of any causal relationship, and the mediating effect of additional variables (such as age and gender) have not been examined.

Discussion and conclusions

Empirically, we set out to fill some of the gaps about public trust, provide a benchmark for future studies, as well as investigating the potential link to knowledge and information sources. Overall, we found that trust levels are comparatively high, certainly in relation to other government organisations. When comparing our findings to previous survey evidence, trust levels seem to have remained consistent over the past decade. Fears about the decline of trust, particularly following the

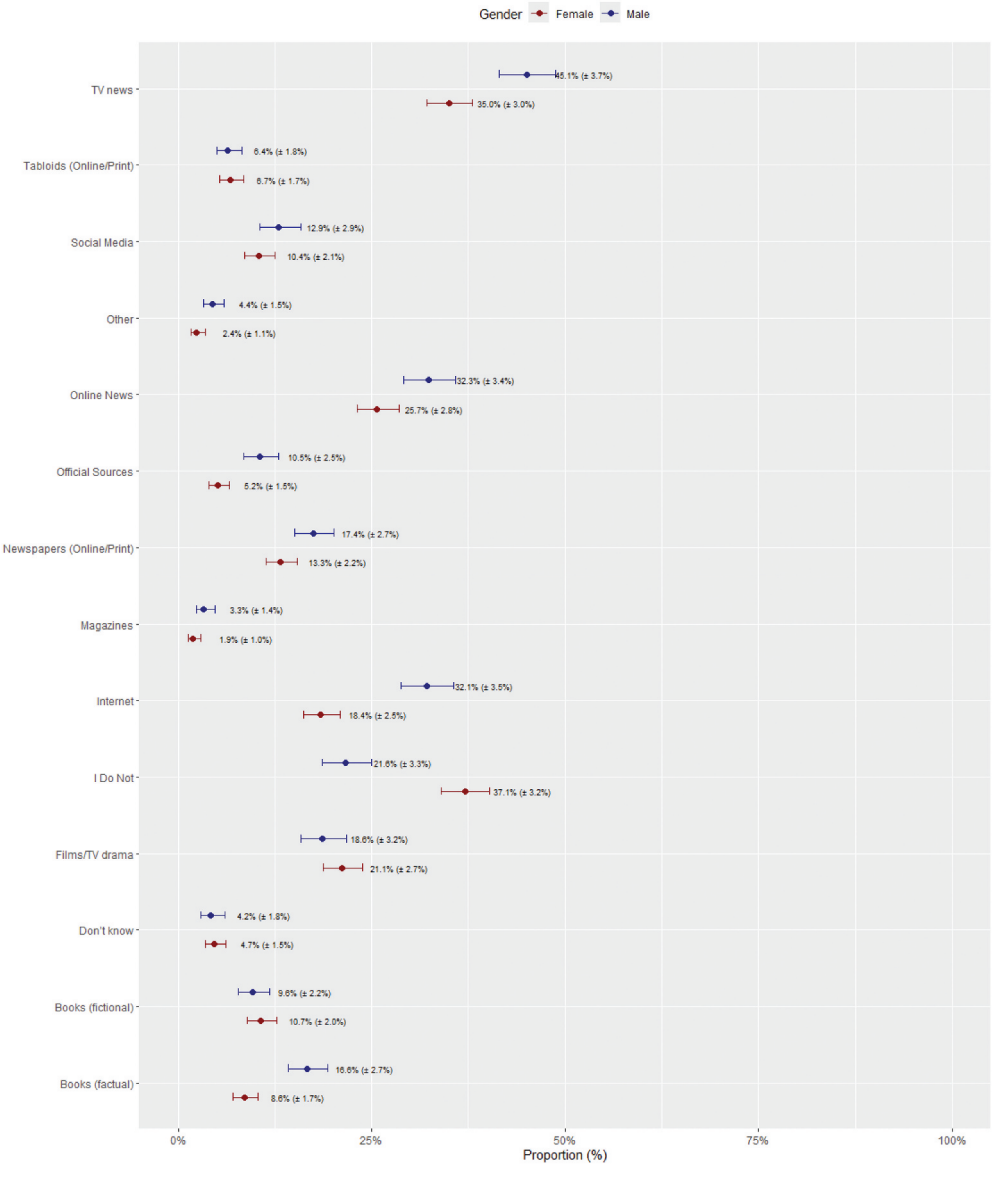


Figure 4b. Information sources – by gender. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

Snowden leaks, appear to be unfounded and any short-term negative impact has now dissipated. Beyond the overall generic trust score, there are some demographic differences, most notably around age. Younger age groups are less trusting of the agencies overall, a finding which mirrors other studies of trust in government organisations and institutions more broadly. Hence, the age factor is part of a wider trend, rather than specific to the intelligence arena. Other demographic factors seemed to play a minimal role, surprisingly in relation to race and ethnic minority groups, where any differences were minimal.

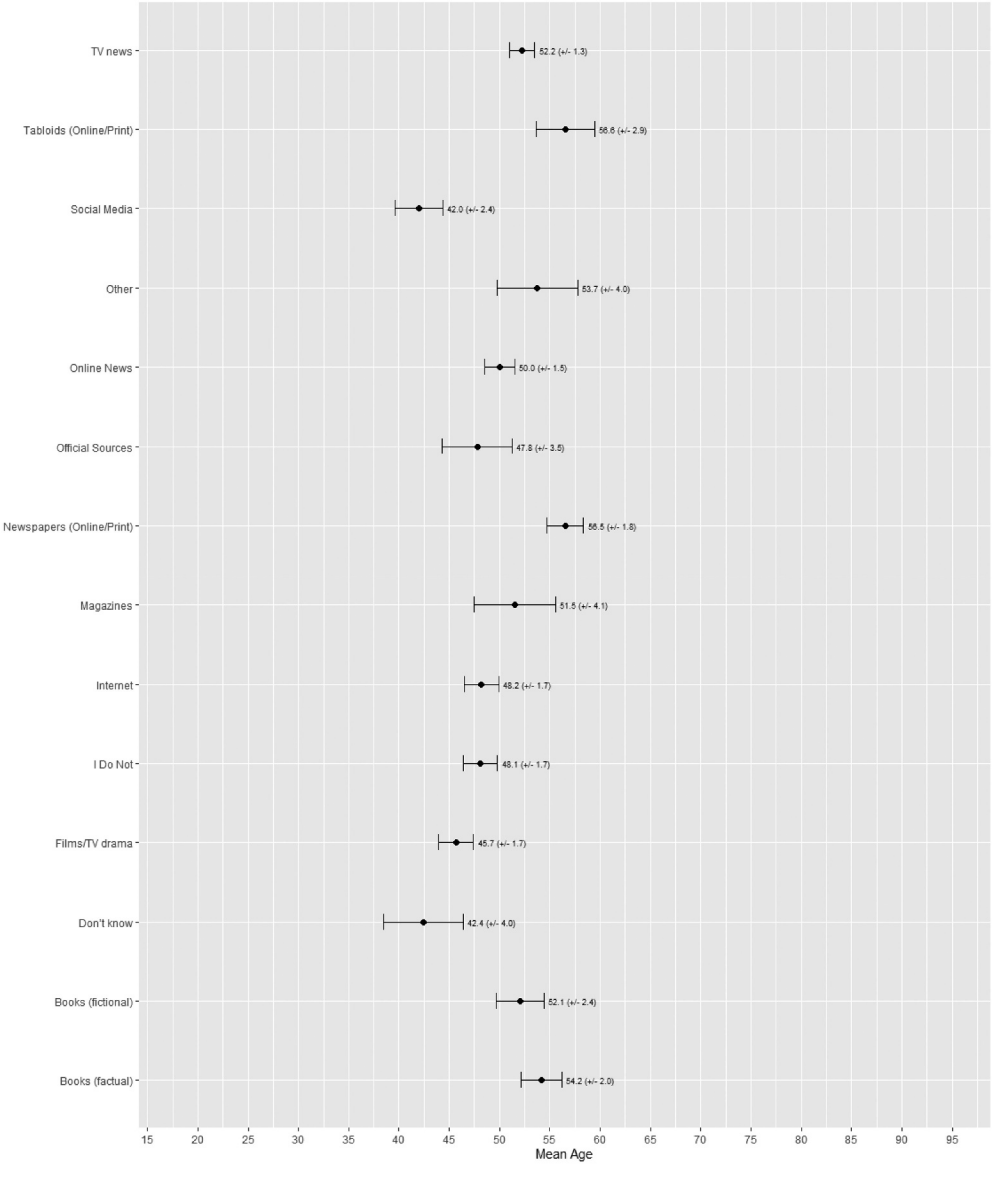
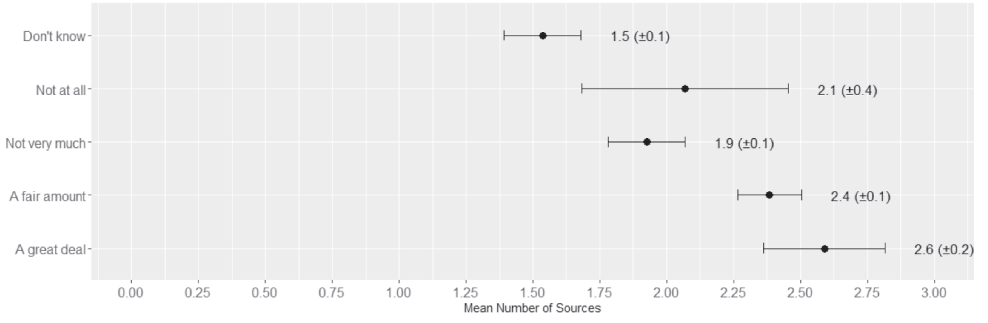


Figure 4c. Information sources – by age. (Weighted counts and proportions, 95 per cent Confidence Intervals computed using Wald Method/Normal Approximation).

In terms of partisanship, whilst we found differences between Labour and Conservative voters in terms of distrust of the agencies similar to previous survey data.[61] Additionally, it was also noticeable that supporters of the smaller political parties were also less trusting of the agencies. The pattern conforms to other observations, notably, that the UK's agencies are seen as part of the wider establishment, or, in the case of nationalist parties, the Westminster/English establishment.[62] The findings on Reform voters being less trusting than the baseline for other mainstream parties mirror 2016 polling of UKIP members.[63]



Trust	Mean Number of Sources	95% Confidence Interval (+/-)
A great deal	2.59	0.23
A fair amount	2.38	0.12
Not very much	1.93	0.15
Not at all	2.07	0.39
Don't know	1.54	0.15

Figure 4d. Information sources-trust relationship.

Hence partisanship clearly plays a role in the trust's agencies but requires further exploration and linkage to questions about wider political values. Overall, therefore, empirically our study largely confirms previous findings but also aligns with wider trust studies elsewhere in government.

Beyond creating the empirical data-set, we wanted to examine whether the generic idea of greater knowledge equates with more trust. A notion which is seemingly at the heart of some the agencies recent public engagement strategies. Here we found a partial contradiction. Firstly, the public remains relatively ignorant about what the different agencies do and the powers they have. Beyond basic name recognition, knowledge is limited. Hence, whilst there is now more information about intelligence agencies in the public domain than previously this has not translated into significant increases of specific knowledge for most citizens. Nevertheless, there is a relationship between those who have the greatest specific knowledge also being the most trusting. Although this may relate to more generic educational or interest effects, since we found that those who consumed more information from a range of diverse sources, were unsurprisingly better informed and more trusting. This is similar to Norris' idea of a virtuous circle in relation to media consumption and political engagement.[64] Higher education levels and civic skills combined with greater pre-existing interest lead to more information consumption then providing a more specific knowledge base. However, how this then translates directly into trust is more difficult to assess. In other studies of trust, higher civic skills and efficacy generate more trust since arguably the governing system delivers for these types of citizen.

The results also raise wider questions about the UK intelligence agencies' public communication strategies. Knowledge amongst the public remains relatively limited. Notably, for example, despite a more proactive approach to media/social media than other agencies, and relatively high-profile public recruitment campaigns, the UK public

remain only dimly aware of even the abbreviation GCHQ, let alone what it does. If agencies are serious about increasing public awareness and knowledge, then a more targeted approaches might yield greater results, especially given some of the knowledge gaps amongst younger audiences. However, one should not realistically expect that increased knowledge will necessarily increase trust levels. As Pytlik-Zillig, et al., found elsewhere, increased knowledge may allow some citizens to make more nuanced judgements, but the public are likely to continue to fall back on wider pre-dispositional values around trust, especially where the bulk of the information is mediated. Nevertheless, it does not mean that agencies should abandon public communication, there is now an expectation that government institutions in democratic societies should be as open as possible and should regularly communicate. In the digital era of instant news, a massive growth of information networks, and particularly with increasing levels of misinformation and conspiracy theories, it is more important than ever that institutions explain what they do and provide rationalisations for their activity. Institutional trust building is therefore an ongoing continuous process that requires constant maintenance.

Finally, as we noted above, this survey represents a snapshot of current public attitudes. Much more is still needed on how citizens come to their judgements about the agencies, given their sketchy direct knowledge and the secrecy that still abounds in the intelligence area. Are citizen attitudes more shaped by resigned acceptance than trust per se?[65] How far do trust levels in intelligence organisations relate to wider trust in the political and democratic system? Here, we need to move beyond quantitative survey data towards more in-depth qualitative understanding of public attitudes via, for example, focus groups, experimental tests or content analysis of public discussion around intelligence issues. This could then shed more light on how people make judgements about important organisations with which they have little direct experience or contact.

Notes

1. West, "The UK's Not Quite So Secret Services", 23–30; and Phythian, "Still a Matter of Trust,"653–681.
2. Omand, *Securing the State*; Omand, "Into the Future" 154–156; and McLoughlin, et. al., "'Hello, World'," 233–251
3. *A Democratic License to Operate*, x.
4. Lomas, "More Open to Stay Secret."
5. Ward and Lomas, "Fact or Fiction?" 1–38.
6. Intelligence Agencies are not the only organisations to put faith in the increased openness and knowledge solution. The Bank of England has also pursued similar ideas in its outreach and educational work (Starkey, "How Education Can Help to Build Trust and Understanding").
7. Lomas and Ward, "Public Perceptions of UK Intelligence," 10–22.
8. Tudor, "Police Standards and Culture"; Pickering, et. al., "London, You have a Problem," 747–762; and Lelii, "Trust in Government."
9. Slick, et. al., "2022 Public Attitudes on US Intelligence"; Del-Real and Díaz-Fernández, "Public Knowledge of Intelligence Agencies," 19–37; Zegart, "Real Spies, Fake Spies, NSA, and More." The Reader's attention should also be drawn to the work of the "Intelligence Studies Project" at the at the University of Texas, Austin, which has run consistent polling over several years assessing levels of US public trust in the agencies. See, "2021–2022 Public Attitudes on US intelligence." For other surveys, see Busby, et. al., "Public Attitudes on Intelligence in 2020"; and "Public Attitudes on US Intelligence 2020."
10. See note 7 above.

11. Ibid.
12. Quilter-Pinner, et. al., "Trust issues"; and Citrin and Stoker, "Political Trust in a Cynical Age," 49–70.
13. Pytlik-Zillig, et. al., "Study of the Impact of Knowledge on the Bases of Institutional Trust."
14. Ibrahim and Ribbers, "Competence-Trust and Openness-Trust on Interorganizational Systems," 223–34.
15. Grimmelikhuijsen, "Linking Transparency, Knowledge and Citizen Trust," 50–73; and Auger, "Trust Me, Trust Me Not," 325–343.
16. Dunleavy, et. al., "New Public Management is Dead," 467–94.
17. Moore, "Towards a Sociology of Institutional Transparency," 416–30.
18. Bannister and Connolly, "Trouble with Transparency," 1–30.
19. PytlikZillig, et. al., "Study of the Impact of Knowledge on the Bases of Institutional Trust."
20. Ibid., 26.
21. Schmidthuber, Ingrams, and Hilgers, "Government Openness and Public Trust," 91–109; and Auger, "Trust Me, Trust Me Not," 325–343.
22. Newton and Norris, "Confidence in Public Institutions?" 52–73.
23. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*; Grönlund and Setälä, "In Honest Officials We Trust," 523–542; and PytlikZillig, et. al., "Study of the Impact of Knowledge on the Bases of Institutional Trust."
24. Brady and Kent, "50 Years of Declining Confidence and Increasing Polarisation," 43–66.
25. Quilter-Pinner, et. al., "Trust Issues," 49–70.
26. Welch, Hinnant and Jae Moon, "Linking Citizen Satisfaction," 371–91; and Moreno, et. al, "Does Social Media Usage Matter?" 242–53.
27. Kumagai and Ilorio, *Building Trust in Government through Citizen Engagement*.
28. Lloyd, "What the Media are Doing to Our Politics," 209–214; and Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*.
29. Newton, "It's Not the Media, Stupid", 543–552.
30. Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies.*
31. Hribar et al., "A Model of Citizens Trust in Intelligence Services," 226–247.
32. Ibid.
33. McCluskey and Aradau, "From Abuse to Trust and Back Again," 130–151.
34. Díaz-Fernández and Arcos, "A Framework for Understanding the Strategies," 259–280.
35. Lashmar, "Spies and Journalists: Towards an Ethical Framework?," 4–14; Lashmar, *Spies, Spin and the Fourth Estate*; Bakir, "News, Agenda Building, and Intelligence Agencies," 131–144; and Bakir, "Veillant Panoptic Assemblage," 12–25.
36. Lomas and Ward "Public Perceptions of UK Intelligence."
37. Zegart, "Real Spies, Fake Spies"; and Lomas, "Forget James Bond?"
38. Davies and Johns, "British Public Confidence in MI6 and Government Use of Intelligence," 669–688.
39. Dinic, "The YouGov Study on Spying"; and See note 36 above.
40. See note 36 above.
41. Dencik and Cable, "Surveillance Realism: Public Opinion," 763–781.
42. See note 39 above.
43. See, British Foreign Policy Group, *UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs*.
44. See note 7 above.
45. The full questionnaire and list of tables are available on request from the authors on request.
46. Information on YouGov's general methodology and sampling can be found at: < https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology.
47. For an overview, read Lomas and Ward, "Public Perceptions of UK Intelligence."
48. "The R Project for Statiticalk Computing".
49. "Trust in Government, UK: 2023." Ipsos found a broadly similar pattern in date published in December 2023. Politicians generally and Government Ministers polled 9 per cent and 10 per cent respectively on trust. 51 per cent trusted civil servants with high levels also for

the Police (56 per cent), the Armed Forces (74 per cent) and the judiciary (74 per cent) (see, Ipsos Veracity Index).

50. Chevalier, "Political Trust, Young People and Institutions in Europe," 49–70.
51. See note 39 above.
52. A 2016 survey suggested that 46 per cent of UKIP supporters believed MI5 had been "working to undermine" them (Kentish, "Half of Ukip Supporters"; and Smith, "Profiled for the First Time.")
53. The term "MI6" was used over the official name of the service – the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) – to account for the dominant use of "MI6" in wider society. SIS emerges from the Secret Service Bureau, formed in 1909. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the name Secret Intelligence Service officially appears. "MI6" is a cover name appearing in the Second World War.
54. We did not ask these questions about MI5 to reduce repetition of the questions and risk of confusing respondents. SIS and GCHQ also represent contrasting types of agencies with distinctive remits and functions, focusing on foreign targets. The division between SIS and GCHQ also reflected the CIA/NSA division from Zegart's 2012/13 polling, which sought to assess whether American's believed the US SIGINT agency acted in the same way as the CIA (see, Zegart, "Real Spies, Fake Spies, NSA, and More").
55. de Waal, "Public Opinion and the Intelligence Services."
56. See note 37 above.
57. YouGov's 2024 trust survey found university academics had a 10 per cent d/k response, UN officials 16 per cent, and people running major pressure groups as 17 per cent (Difford, "Who do Britons trust to tell the truth?").
58. See note 36 above.
59. Zegart's 2012/13 US-based polling found that a sizable number of Americans believed that the NSA could do CIA-like activity (see, Zegart, "Real Spies, Fake Spies").
60. This was done using a survey-weighted generalized linear model (svyglm) to perform an analysis of variance (ANOVA), where the dependent variable was the log of the number of sources predicted by the levels of Trust. Formally this was testing:.H_0 : *Themeannumberofsourcesisthesameforeachlevelof'Trust'*
H_1 : *Themeannumberofsourcesdiffersforatleastonelevelof'Trust'*
61. See note 42 above.
62. There is, nonetheless, a resilient (if fringe) view that MI5 spied on the SNP. See, for example, MacKay, "Did MI5 Spy on the SNP?"
63. Kentish, "Half of Ukip Supporters."
64. See note 30 above.
65. Dencik and Cable, "Surveillance Realism," 763–781.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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