

# Navigating Apathy: A Data-Backed Analysis of Public Disengagement in Political and Economic Spheres

## Executive Summary

The contemporary democratic landscape faces a profound challenge: widespread public disengagement from critical political and economic discourse. This report argues that this disengagement is a complex phenomenon, driven by the evolving digital information environment, the pervasive influence of corporate interests, and a discernible decline in civic literacy. Analysis reveals that social media platforms, with their algorithms prioritizing sensationalism and short-form content, contribute to shrinking attention spans and a fragmented information ecosystem, eroding trust in traditional expertise. Concurrently, a significant gap in public economic understanding, coupled with opaque corporate lobbying, further alienates citizens from policy-making processes. The rise of digital currencies, particularly the public's skepticism towards state-backed initiatives, underscores a deeper distrust in institutional control over personal finance.

However, this report also highlights promising avenues for reversing these trends. Successful grassroots movements demonstrate the power of community mobilization and strategic communication in achieving policy change. Furthermore, a renewed focus on media literacy and critical thinking education is identified as foundational for equipping citizens to navigate complex information landscapes and engage meaningfully. By providing a data-backed analysis, this report aims to inform policymakers, civil society organizations, and academics on the mechanisms of disengagement and to champion actionable strategies for fostering a more engaged, informed, and resilient citizenry.

## Introduction: The Crisis of Public Disengagement

The contemporary landscape is characterized by a significant and concerning trend of public disengagement from critical political and economic discourse. This disengagement is not merely a passive lack of interest but an active withdrawal, driven by a confluence of factors that undermine informed participation and democratic health. The pervasive influence of digital media, the shifting nature of information consumption, and the entrenched power of corporate interests contribute to a populace that often feels overwhelmed, misinformed, or powerless, leading to a decline in active citizenship and a weakening of democratic accountability. Understanding the architects of this disengagement is crucial for developing effective strategies to reverse the trend. This analysis seeks to move beyond anecdotal observations to provide a data-backed examination of the mechanisms at play and to highlight successful interventions that demonstrate the potential for re-engagement.

This report is structured into three core analytical sections. First, "The Modern Architects of Boredom," examines how social media platforms and their inherent design principles contribute to shrinking attention spans, the gamification and sensationalization of news, and the erosion of trust in traditional expertise. Second, "The New Gold Standards and the Corporate Hand,"

explores the public's understanding of complex economic concepts, the influence of corporate lobbying on policy, and the challenges posed by emerging digital currencies like cryptocurrencies and Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). Finally, "The Antidote to Apathy," shifts focus to actionable solutions, analyzing trends in political engagement, celebrating successful grassroots movements, and emphasizing the foundational role of media literacy and critical thinking in fostering a more informed and active citizenry. Throughout these sections, the report will highlight the interconnectedness of these phenomena, demonstrating how digital media landscapes influence economic understanding, which in turn impacts political participation. By presenting verifiable data and concrete examples, the aim is to provide a comprehensive and actionable framework for policymakers and civil society to combat disengagement and cultivate a more vibrant public sphere.

## **1. The Modern Architects of Boredom: Social Media, Attention, and the Erosion of Expertise**

This section delves into how contemporary digital environments, particularly social media, contribute to public disengagement by altering attention spans, promoting sensationalized content, and undermining traditional sources of expertise.

### **1.1 The Shrinking Attention Span in the Digital Age**

The digital age has brought about a discernible decline in sustained human attention. A 2015 Microsoft study observed that the average human attention span had decreased from 12 seconds to approximately eight seconds since the beginning of the 21st century. This trend is particularly pronounced among younger demographics, with Gen Z individuals exhibiting an average attention span of only about eight seconds, four seconds less than that of millennials. This reduction is largely attributed to their constant exposure to digital content and multiple screens.

Further research from Ahejiant University suggests a direct link between TikTok's content recommendation algorithm and addictive patterns, leading to habits of academic procrastination and shorter attention spans. This phenomenon is posited to occur as users repeatedly check their phones to experience "small pleasures" caused by hormonal shifts. Another study corroborates this, finding that media consumption in general appears to contribute to poor attentional behavior. These studies collectively suggest that social media and short-form videos negatively affect mental wellness.

Gen Z, as the first generation of digital natives, records the highest daily screen time, with many spending up to two and a half hours a day on social media. This generation overwhelmingly favors short-form video content: 73% of consumers and 57% of Gen Z prefer short videos for learning about products or services. Marketers also attest to its effectiveness, with 85% believing short-form videos are the most effective format on social media, receiving 2.5 times more engagement than long-form videos. This trend is set to intensify, with video traffic projected to account for 82% of all internet traffic worldwide by 2025.

The pervasive nature of digital platforms and the dominance of short-form content have fundamentally reshaped how individuals consume information. This shift is not merely a preference but has demonstrable negative effects on cognitive function and mental well-being, creating a challenging environment for sustained engagement with complex issues. The evidence points to a direct causal relationship between the design of social media algorithms,

particularly those favoring short-form, high-frequency content, and observable cognitive changes such as reduced attention spans and increased impulsivity. The initial observation of a decline in attention span is supported by the Microsoft study. The Ahejiant University study then provides a mechanism: TikTok's algorithm leads to addictive patterns and shorter attention spans via "small pleasures" and hormonal shifts. This is not just a correlation but a suggested neurological pathway. The fact that short-form videos garner 2.5 times more engagement indicates that platforms are incentivized to push this content, creating a feedback loop that further entrenches these cognitive changes. The broader implication is that the very architecture of popular digital platforms is actively reshaping human cognitive processing, making sustained engagement with complex, non-sensationalized information increasingly difficult. This creates a fundamental barrier to informed civic participation, as the capacity for deep thought and prolonged focus diminishes.

Furthermore, Gen Z's distinct preferences for immediate answers, user-generated content, and authenticity signal a profound and generational shift in information consumption, demanding a radical rethinking of public communication strategies. The detailed findings on Gen Z's shorter attention span and their preference for user-generated content (Reels, TikToks by students) over traditional, high-production value advertisements, emphasizing "authenticity" and "immediate answers" , reinforce the dominance of short-form video. This suggests that traditional methods of public information dissemination, such as lengthy policy papers, detailed news broadcasts, or formal reports, are becoming increasingly ineffective for younger demographics. The implication is that for political and economic engagement to succeed with future generations, communication must adapt to be mobile-friendly, authentic, concise, and highly visual, or risk being entirely overlooked, thus exacerbating disengagement.

Metric	2000	2015	Gen Z (2015)	Millennials (2015)	Daily Social Media Screen Time (Gen Z)	Short-Form Video Preference (Consumers)	Short-Form Video Preference (Gen Z)	Engagement (Short vs. Long-Form Video)	Video Traffic Projection (2025)
Average Attention Span	12 seconds	8 seconds	8 seconds	12 seconds	2.5 hours/day	73%	57%	2.5x more engagement	82% of all internet traffic
Source									

**Table 1: Evolution of Attention Spans and Digital Media Consumption (2000-2025)** This table visually summarizes the core problem of shrinking attention and the overwhelming dominance of short-form digital content. It provides concrete, verifiable numbers to illustrate the scale and speed of this cognitive shift, making the abstract concept of "shrinking attention" tangible and impactful. The comparison between generations highlights a critical demographic trend that policy and communication strategies must urgently consider to remain relevant.

## 1.2 Gamification of News and the Spread of Sensationalism

While direct examples of "gamified news" are not explicitly provided, the available information illustrates how gamified elements are deeply integrated into digital platforms to drive engagement across various sectors. These include quizzes, spin-to-win promotions, scavenger hunts, leaderboards, achievement-based rewards, and interactive challenges. Examples from

fitness applications (Fitbit, Calm, Nike+Fuel) show how streaks, challenges, and leaderboards foster engagement and competition. Social media platforms themselves, like Facebook with its basketball mini-game and Instagram with its likes and comments, incorporate gamified features that provide feedback, rewards, and competitive elements, encouraging repeated use and social interaction. When these engagement mechanisms are applied to news, they can inadvertently incentivize superficial interaction over deep understanding.

The inherent design of social media algorithms prioritizes content that elicits strong emotional responses, effectively acting as a "polarisation engine" that sends the most shocking, outrageous, or emotional comments viral. Research confirms that posts about political opponents are shared or retweeted approximately twice as often as posts about in-group members. Each individual term referring to the political out-group increased the odds of a social media post being shared by a significant 67%. Negative emotions, particularly anger, are significantly more effective in driving information sharing than anxiety. Each word with a negative sentiment was associated with a 14% increase in the odds of a post being shared, while each positive word was linked to a 5% drop. Out-group animosity emerges as a stronger predictor of social media engagement than in-group favoritism.

Sensationalism in news, characterized by exaggerated headlines and an excessive focus on vulgar or shocking content, spreads rapidly because it stimulates people's curiosity and emotional responses, with social media algorithms actively promoting such content. This journalistic practice, often manifesting as "clickbait," is widely employed to lure readers into clicking on links.

The prevalence of sensationalized and outrage-driven content has profound consequences for informed public discourse. Social media platforms have been conduits for significant volumes of fake, sensational, and "junk news," with the rapid spread of misinformation identified as a top 10 peril to society by the World Economic Forum. While TikTok has made efforts to combat misinformation, initial findings revealed a significant presence of hoax news, false claims, and deceptive narratives. The reliance on social media for political news is substantial in the UK, with 27% getting most of their political news from platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and X, only slightly below television (31%). However, a stark contrast exists in perceived reliability: only 53% of these users consider social media a reliable source for political news, with 44% deeming it unreliable. This environment fosters "motivated reasoning," where angry individuals are more likely to engage with and share information congruent with their pre-existing beliefs, contributing to the formation of "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles".

Sensationalism, despite temporarily increasing clicks, can lead to increased skepticism, social media fatigue, and long-term damage to media credibility and societal moral standards.

The intrinsic design of social media platforms, driven by engagement metrics, inadvertently prioritizes content that elicits strong emotional responses, often at the expense of nuance, accuracy, and constructive dialogue. This creates a fertile ground for sensationalism and outrage, fundamentally reshaping how news is consumed, debated, and how public opinion is formed. The data strongly indicates that social media algorithms are not merely reflecting existing political polarization but are actively amplifying it by systematically rewarding and disseminating outrageous and negative "out-group" content. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle detrimental to democratic discourse. The explicit labeling of social media as a "polarisation engine" due to algorithms promoting shocking content is supported by quantitative evidence: posts attacking political opponents are shared approximately twice as often, and each "out-group" word increases sharing odds by 67%. The supremacy of anger in driving information sharing is further confirmed. This demonstrates a clear feedback loop: platforms' business models, driven by engagement metrics, inherently reward divisive content, which then

generates more user interaction, further incentivizing the creation and dissemination of such content. The broader implication is that the current economic model of these platforms inherently works against nuanced public discourse, fostering division and making it harder for citizens to engage constructively or find common ground, thereby eroding the foundations of deliberative democracy.

The pervasive nature of sensationalized, outrage-driven content, combined with the inherent preference for "small pleasures" and the "paradox of choice" , actively discourages deeper engagement and critical evaluation of information, leading to a public less equipped for complex analysis. Sensationalism spreads rapidly because it stimulates curiosity and emotional responses, and algorithms promote it. This can lead to increased skepticism and social media fatigue , while TikTok users encounter funny posts and opinions far more frequently than actual news articles. This suggests that the constant bombardment of high-arousal, bite-sized content trains users away from the patience and cognitive effort required for sustained attention and complex analytical thought. The consequence is a public that is not only less informed but also potentially less capable of engaging with the intricate details of policy, making them more susceptible to misinformation and superficial narratives.

Driver of Engagement	Effect on Sharing/Retweeting	Source
Posts about political opponents (out-group)	Shared/retweeted ~2x more than in-group posts	
Each individual "out-group" term	+67% odds of sharing	
Negative sentiment words	+14% odds of sharing per word	
Positive sentiment words	-5% odds of sharing per word	
Anger (vs. Anxiety)	More effective in driving information sharing	
Source		

**Table 2: Drivers of Social Media Engagement (Comparative Analysis)** This table quantifies the mechanisms embedded within social media algorithms and content strategies. It provides a clear, data-backed illustration of how emotional and divisive content is disproportionately rewarded in the digital sphere, offering a compelling explanation for the observed rise in political polarization and the prevalence of sensationalism in online discourse. This is crucial for understanding the systemic challenges to informed public engagement.

### 1.3 Erosion of Expertise and Trust in Traditional Sources

The landscape of trusted information sources is becoming increasingly fragmented. A 2023 Pew Research Center study revealed that among TikTok news consumers in the U.S., there is an almost equal likelihood of receiving news from influencers or celebrities (68%) as from traditional news outlets or journalists (67%). Furthermore, a significant 84% of TikTok news consumers report getting news from "other people they don't know personally". While a UK study indicates that 65.4% of respondents trust journalists over influencers (12.6%), and social networks are generally not viewed as reliable news sources , it also notes that Gen Z is increasingly turning to social media and content creators for their news over traditional media outlets. Intriguingly, a U.S. study found that social media influencer (SMI) followers reported *more* trust in news media than non-followers, and that trust in SMI news content actually *improved* overall media trust, suggesting SMIs can play a complementary and supportive role. Despite the rise of alternative sources, a new international study (2025) across 68 countries

found that most people (mean trust level = 3.62/5) generally trust scientists, with 78% perceiving them as qualified and 57% as honest. The UK, ranking 15th globally, shows a generally high level of trust in science. A large majority (83%) agree that scientists should communicate with the public, and 52% believe they should be more involved in policymaking.

However, this trust is not without challenges. Less than half of global respondents (42%) believe scientists pay attention to others' views, and many feel that scientific priorities do not always align with their own. Public trust in science has been eroded by several factors: a failure by scientists and media to clearly distinguish between hypotheses, initial findings, and accepted scientific understanding, leading to public confusion when reports are later refuted ; the increasing "market orientation" of universities and scientists, who now compete for private funds, potentially "muddying the waters" around findings ; and sustained, often baseless attacks from the "populist right" (e.g., climate denial, anti-vaxxing, lockdown skepticism) that remove nuance and promote false narratives. Broader factors contributing to distrust in science include misinformation, political polarization, poor communication, and instances of scientists jumping to premature conclusions, sloppy research, or using excessive jargon. The perception of science as objective and politically neutral is crucial for maintaining public trust. The COVID-19 pandemic particularly highlighted challenges in science communication for policymaking , and young people exposed to epidemics in their formative years show a lasting lack of confidence in political leaders and institutions.

While traditional institutions like scientific bodies and established journalism generally retain higher public trust than social media platforms, this trust is increasingly fragile. The growing prominence of social media influencers as news sources, coupled with specific criticisms of scientific communication and politically motivated attacks on expertise, creates a complex and challenging environment for citizens to discern reliable information. The data presents a nuanced picture of social media influencers (SMIs), suggesting they are not solely a force for eroding trust but can, in some contexts, play a complementary role in improving overall news media trust. The observation that US TikTok users get news equally from influencers and traditional outlets , coupled with the U.S. study indicating that SMI followers reported *more* trust in news media overall, and that "trust in SMI news content also improved media trust," challenges a simplistic "influencers vs. experts" dichotomy. This suggests that if strategic collaborations or educational initiatives are developed, influencers could serve as a valuable bridge to traditional news sources, helping to disseminate reliable information and foster greater media literacy, rather than being viewed solely as a competing or undermining force.

Public trust in science and journalism is not solely dependent on their inherent accuracy or rigor but is significantly influenced by their perceived political neutrality, responsiveness to public concerns, and effective communication of uncertainty. The high general trust in science globally is contrasted by the observation that a conservative political orientation is linked to lower trust in science in Western countries. The erosion of trust is explicitly linked to "populist right" attacks (e.g., climate denial, anti-vaxxing) and the perception that science is not politically neutral.

Additionally, internal flaws in the scientific community's communication, such as jargon, hubris, premature conclusions, and a lack of attention to public views , contribute to this erosion. This indicates that public trust in expertise is not just about the quality of the information but also about the perceived transparency, impartiality, and alignment of priorities with the public. The implication is that rebuilding trust requires not just better scientific output, but better science *communication* that acknowledges limitations, engages diverse groups (including politically conservative ones), and actively works to depoliticize scientific findings, thereby fostering a more inclusive and trustworthy public discourse.

Source of News/Expertise	US TikTok Users (News Source)	UK Public Trust (Journalists vs. Influencers)	Global Trust in Scientists (Mean Score)	UK Trust in Scientists (Rank)	Scientists Perceived as Qualified	Scientists Perceived as Honest	Scientists Perceived as Concerned for Well-being
Influencers/Celebrities	68%	12.6%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
News Outlets/Journalists	67%	65.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
"Other people" (TikTok)	84%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Scientists	N/A	N/A	3.62/5	15th	78%	57%	56%
<b>Source</b>							

**Table 3: Public Trust in News Sources and Experts (UK/US Comparison)** This table provides a clear, comparative view of public trust across different information sources and expert types. It highlights both general trends (e.g., relatively high trust in science) and specific areas of concern (e.g., the growing role of influencers, partisan divides in science trust, and the perceived uniqueness of TikTok news). This granular data is essential for understanding the complex and sometimes contradictory landscape of public trust in the digital age, informing targeted interventions to bolster credible information sources.

## 2. The New Gold Standards and the Corporate Hand: Economic Understanding, Corporate Influence, and Digital Currencies

This section explores the public's grasp of economic realities, the pervasive influence of corporate interests on policy, and the implications of emerging digital currencies for public engagement and financial stability.

### 2.1 Public Understanding of Complex Economic Concepts

A 2020 mixed-methods study on public understanding of economics in the UK revealed significant gaps in economic literacy. People generally interpret economic issues through the lens of their "familiar personal economy" rather than the more abstract "national economy". Large segments of the UK public hold misperceptions about how economic figures, such as unemployment and inflation rates, are collected and measured, and crucially, who produces and publishes them. This often leads to the erroneous belief that official figures are higher than actual rates, contributing to distrust in the data. Participants frequently associate economic data with politicians who present them in the news, rather than the independent Office for National Statistics (ONS).

While there is a comparatively better understanding of concepts directly impacting personal finances, such as inflation and interest rates, many participants in focus groups had never considered what a "normal" or "ideal" inflation rate would be. Perceptions are often based on

assumptions and common sense, which may or may not align with economic realities. The economy is widely perceived as "confusing," "complicated," and an "external negative force" beyond individual control, leading to widespread disillusionment.

This limited understanding and cynical perception of the economy significantly hinders informed public debate and engagement with broader economic policies. A foundational understanding of economic principles is crucial for informed civic participation and democratic accountability. The data reveals significant deficits and biases in public economic literacy, making citizens vulnerable to misinterpretations of economic news and less capable of evaluating complex policy proposals. The public's overwhelming tendency to understand economic issues primarily through the lens of their "personal economy" creates a fundamental cognitive barrier to engaging with and understanding national macroeconomic policy. The explicit statements that people understand economics through their "familiar personal economy" rather than the "abstract national economy," and their perception of the economy as "confusing," "complicated," or an "external negative force" , indicate that if macroeconomic issues are not explicitly framed in a way that clearly connects to individual lived experiences and daily financial realities, they remain abstract and disengaging. The implication is that policymakers and media need to bridge this gap by translating complex macroeconomic concepts (e.g., GDP, quantitative easing, national debt) into relatable terms and demonstrating their direct, tangible impact on daily lives. Without this translation, public disengagement from critical economic debates will persist, leaving citizens ill-equipped to scrutinize policy or hold economic actors accountable. Furthermore, misperceptions about the collection, measurement, and source of official economic statistics (e.g., attributing them to politicians instead of independent bodies like the ONS) contribute significantly to public skepticism and cynicism, undermining the very foundation of evidence-based policy discourse. The finding that large parts of the UK public have misperceptions about how economic figures are collected and measured, and often associate them with politicians rather than the independent ONS , directly leads to distrust in official figures. This suggests a critical failure in public communication regarding the independence and methodology of statistical institutions. The implication is that without public trust in the integrity and objectivity of official economic data, policy debates can easily devolve into partisan arguments based on perceived inaccuracies rather than shared facts. This erosion of trust in foundational data sources can lead to a broader skepticism towards government and expert institutions, further fueling disengagement.

Economic Concept/Perception	Public Understanding Level (UK)	Common Misperceptions	Impact on Trust/Engagement	Source
<b>Overall Economy</b>	Understood through "personal economy" lens, not "national economy"	Perceived as "confusing," "complicated," "external negative force"	Disillusionment, difficulty judging performance	
<b>Inflation &amp; Interest Rates</b>	Better understood due to direct personal impact	Many unaware of "normal" or "ideal" rates	Varies, but generally higher understanding than other concepts	
<b>Unemployment &amp; Inflation Data</b>	Misperceptions about collection,	Often associated with politicians, not	Contributes to distrust in official	

Economic Concept/Perception	Public Understanding Level (UK)	Common Misperceptions	Impact on Trust/Engagement	Source
	measurement, and source	independent ONS; believed to be higher than official figures	data	

**Table 4: Public Understanding of Key Economic Concepts (UK)** This table clearly illustrates the specific areas of economic literacy gaps and prevalent misperceptions within the UK public. It provides concrete evidence for the challenge of communicating economic policy effectively and building public trust in economic data, thereby informing strategies for more effective public education and engagement campaigns.

## 2.2 Corporate Influence on Policy and Public Discourse

Corporate lobbying exerts a significant, often opaque, influence on policy across critical sectors in the UK. The UK's lobbying regulations are among the weakest globally, with the official Register of Consultant Lobbyists covering only about 1% of all lobbyists, meaning approximately 85% of "in-house" lobbying activities remain undisclosed. This opacity allows for privileged access for certain interests, potentially undermining public confidence in democratic outcomes and leading to policy decisions that prioritize specific corporate agendas over broader public good.

In the **climate change** sector, lobbying can have a substantial positive or negative impact on the stringency and effectiveness of public climate policy. While some companies lobby in support of climate action, "anti-regulatory" lobbying by other companies and their industry associations has frequently succeeded in impeding the adoption and weakening the stringency of climate policies. A striking example is the approval of the Rosebank oil field off the coast of Shetland, the UK's largest undeveloped oil and gas reserve. This project was approved as part of a plan to "back the UK's oil and gas industry to underpin our energy security," despite its incompatibility with a 1.5°C pathway and official advice from the UK's Climate Change Committee and the International Energy Agency.

In **technology regulation**, the debates surrounding the Online Safety Bill demonstrated the "powerful lobbying of large tech companies", which, alongside concerns from internet advocacy and civil society organizations regarding privacy and censorship, influenced the legislation. In AI regulation, the UK has adopted a "pro-innovation approach," committing to funding regulators to scale their AI capabilities and encouraging innovation through initiatives like "sandboxes". This approach seeks to balance safety with growth, but also raises questions about potential industry influence on regulatory priorities, particularly concerning data use and intellectual property for AI training.

For **financial services**, UK financial regulators, including the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA), are explicitly focused on supporting the government's "growth mission" and reducing "unnecessary burden" by streamlining existing regulation and reducing reporting requirements. Examples include the decision to delay the implementation of Basel 3.1 by one year to align with US plans and simplifying liquidity and disclosure requirements for Small Domestic Deposit Takers. The Greensill Capital collapse in March 2021 brought significant media attention to the weaknesses in the UK's lobbying system, particularly regarding informal lobbying approaches by former Prime Minister Lord Cameron,

leading to calls for reform. Post-Brexit, the UK aims to retain its influence in financial services regulation through enhanced engagement with international standard-setting bodies and by leveraging its FinTech regulatory approach, especially in nascent markets.

In **ESG regulation**, UK regulators have prioritized climate change risk and the transition to net-zero emissions, introducing mandatory disclosure and reporting requirements for financial firms. The UK government intends to adopt Sustainability Reporting Standards (SRS) based on the International Sustainability Standards Board's (ISSB) IFRS S1 and S2 standards, with the FCA consulting on requiring UK-listed companies to report under these standards.

The combination of the UK's exceptionally weak lobbying regulations and a stated "pro-innovation" regulatory philosophy creates a systemic vulnerability to regulatory capture, where powerful industry interests can disproportionately influence policy outcomes at the expense of public interest. The finding that the UK's lobbying register covers only 1% of lobbyists, leaving 85% of "in-house" lobbying opaque, coupled with explicit mentions of "powerful lobbying of large tech companies" influencing the Online Safety Bill, underscores this vulnerability. Concurrently, the "pro-innovation" approach to AI regulation, while economically driven, inherently carries risks of diluted oversight if not carefully managed. The Greensill scandal serves as a concrete example of how informal lobbying can bypass formal scrutiny, leading to problematic outcomes. This suggests that the pursuit of economic growth, influenced by powerful corporate actors, can inadvertently compromise public transparency, robust regulation, and ultimately, public trust in the integrity of the policymaking process.

The climate policy paradox, where corporate lobbying in the energy sector vividly illustrates a fundamental tension between short-term economic/energy security imperatives and long-term climate change commitments, leads to policy decisions that contradict scientific consensus and national targets. The observation that "anti-regulatory" lobbying can impede climate policy is concretely demonstrated by the approval of the Rosebank oil field. This project was justified by "backing the UK's oil and gas industry to underpin our energy security," despite being explicitly incompatible with a 1.5°C pathway and official advice from climate bodies. This demonstrates how powerful industry lobbying can influence government decisions to prioritize immediate economic or energy needs over scientific consensus and stated environmental goals. The implication is that this dissonance between rhetoric and action, driven by corporate influence, can contribute significantly to public disillusionment and disengagement from climate action, perceiving political processes as unresponsive to long-term societal challenges.

Sector	Key Lobbying Issues/Policy Examples	Corporate Influence Mechanism	Impact on Public Interest/Regulation	Source
<b>Climate Change</b>	Approval of Rosebank oil field despite climate advice	"Anti-regulatory" lobbying impeding policy stringency	Prioritizes energy security over 1.5°C pathway; potential public disillusionment	
<b>Technology Regulation</b>	Online Safety Bill debates; "pro-innovation" AI regulation	Powerful tech company lobbying; weak UK lobbying regulations (1% registered)	Concerns over privacy, censorship; balance between innovation and safety/ethics	
<b>Financial</b>	Delay of Basel 3.1;	Regulators	Prioritizes industry	

Sector	Key Lobbying Issues/Policy Examples	Corporate Influence Mechanism	Impact on Public Interest/Regulation	Source
<b>Services</b>	simplified disclosure for small banks; Greensill scandal	focused on "growth mission" and "reducing unnecessary burden"; informal lobbying	competitiveness; undermines public confidence in regulatory integrity	
<b>ESG Regulation</b>	Adoption of ISSB Sustainability Reporting Standards	Industry-led standards; regulatory prioritization of climate risk	Increased corporate disclosure; potential for alignment with public sustainability goals	

**Table 5: Corporate Influence on UK Policy (Selected Sectoral Examples)** This table provides concrete, cross-sectoral examples that illustrate the pervasive nature and mechanisms of corporate influence on UK policy. It allows for a direct comparison of stated policy goals (e.g., climate action, online safety, financial stability) with actual policy outcomes, highlighting potential discrepancies and the significant impact of lobbying on regulatory frameworks and public interest.

## 2.3 The Digital Frontier: Cryptocurrency and Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs)

The UK public's engagement with cryptocurrencies is growing, albeit with significant knowledge gaps. It is estimated that 4.2 million people, or 6.2% of the UK's total population, owned cryptocurrency in 2021, a notable increase from 4.95% in 2020. Public awareness is also on the rise, with 74% of UK adults having heard of cryptocurrencies in 2021. Cryptocurrency ownership skews towards younger Britons (56% are aged 18-34) and those with higher incomes and education. A significant barrier to broader adoption is a "lack of knowledge," cited by 70% of non-owners. Interestingly, cryptocurrency is increasingly perceived as a safe asset and an alternative to national currencies, with over 63% of UK owners holding more than £1,000 in crypto assets.

While central banks globally, including the Bank of England, have rapidly ramped up research and development efforts on Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), their adoption remains slow and limited. This slow uptake is attributed to several key challenges: a lack of public awareness and trust, a strong preference for existing payment methods, and inadequate incentives for intermediaries. Public concerns are primarily centered on privacy protection, with CBDCs being perceived as a potential instrument for state surveillance that could allow governments or central banks to control or restrict payments. These worries persist despite the extensive data access often enjoyed by private sector entities, which is generally more widely accepted.

In the UK, the Bank of England's digital pound project has notably lost momentum, with officials now questioning its benefits given the rapid improvements in private payment systems. Public consultation revealed significant anxieties, with over 50,000 people expressing concerns, and

some groups actively fomenting conspiracy theories and false claims, further undermining public confidence. Furthermore, CBDCs pose a potential threat to the traditional business models of existing financial institutions, particularly regarding deposits and loans, which makes intermediaries reluctant to engage with and support CBDC initiatives.

The emergence of digital currencies presents a complex duality: a growing public appetite for decentralized digital assets alongside deep skepticism towards state-backed alternatives. This landscape necessitates a nuanced understanding of public trust, privacy concerns, and the competitive dynamics within the financial sector. A significant portion of the UK public is increasingly adopting decentralized cryptocurrencies, viewing them as a "safe asset and alternative to national currencies" , while simultaneously exhibiting deep distrust and lack of awareness regarding state-backed CBDCs. The growth in crypto ownership and its perception as a "safe asset and alternative to national currencies" stands in stark contrast to the reported anxieties about the digital pound, explicitly linked to "conspiracy theories and false claims" and privacy concerns. This highlights a critical paradox: the public appears more willing to trust novel, often less regulated, decentralized digital assets than a state-backed digital currency designed for stability and public good. The implication is that public trust in governmental institutions, particularly concerning financial control and privacy, is a major determinant of adoption for new technologies, potentially outweighing technical feasibility or perceived economic benefits. This disjunction reveals a deeper societal skepticism towards state intervention in personal finance, likely exacerbated by broader declines in institutional trust. The slow adoption of CBDCs is not merely a public awareness issue but a complex interplay of public trust, deeply ingrained privacy concerns, and the significant reluctance of existing financial institutions due to perceived threats to their business models. The barriers to CBDC adoption explicitly listed include "lack of public awareness and trust, preference for existing payment methods, and inadequate incentives for intermediaries". The observation that CBDCs pose a "potential threat to the traditional business models of existing financial institutions" , making intermediaries "reluctant to engage," demonstrates that successful adoption of a new financial technology, especially one with systemic implications, requires a holistic approach. This approach must address not only end-user understanding and trust but also the economic incentives and potential disintermediation concerns of the entire existing financial ecosystem. The implication is that top-down policy initiatives, even if technically robust, will struggle without broad stakeholder buy-in and a clear strategy to overcome ingrained preferences and vested interests, highlighting the political economy of technological adoption.

Metric/Perception	Cryptocurrency (UK)	Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC - UK)	Source
<b>Ownership (2021)</b>	6.2% of population (4.2 million people)	Slow and limited adoption	
<b>Ownership Growth (2020-2021)</b>	From 4.95% to 6.2%	N/A	
<b>Public Awareness (2021)</b>	74% of adults heard of it	Lack of public awareness	
<b>Demographics of Owners</b>	Younger (56% 18-34), higher income/education	N/A	
<b>Reason for Non-Ownership</b>	70% cite "lack of knowledge"	N/A	
<b>Perceived Benefit</b>	Safe asset, alternative	N/A	

Metric/Perception	Cryptocurrency (UK)	Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC - UK)	Source
	to national currencies (63% hold >£1k)		
<b>Key Barriers to Adoption</b>	Lack of knowledge	Lack of public awareness & trust, privacy concerns, preference for existing methods, inadequate intermediary incentives, conspiracy theories	
<b>UK Project Status</b>	N/A	Digital pound project losing momentum, benefits questioned	

**Table 6: Public Engagement and Perception of Digital Currencies (UK)** This table provides a side-by-side comparative analysis of public engagement with decentralized cryptocurrencies versus state-backed CBDCs. It quantifies the awareness gap for CBDCs and highlights the specific concerns (especially privacy and trust in state control) that significantly hinder their adoption, offering crucial data for central banks and policymakers to tailor their communication and design strategies to address these fundamental issues.

### 3. The Antidote to Apathy: Think, Question, and Act

This section pivots to solutions, examining how political engagement can be revitalized through grassroots efforts, and the foundational role of critical thinking and media literacy in fostering an active, informed citizenry.

#### 3.1 Reversing Political Disengagement: Trends and Challenges

Political disengagement in the UK is evidenced by declining voter turnout. The 2024 general election saw a turnout of 60%, a decrease from 67% in 2019, and significantly lower than the 83.9% recorded in 1950. This places the UK in the middle range compared to European Union member states. Local elections consistently record even lower participation, with May 2025 figures showing 34.3% for county council, 35.2% for unitary council, and 30.8% for Combined Authority Mayoral elections. Turnout for mayoral elections has failed to reach 30% in half of the 27 elections held since 2017.

A critical demographic disparity exists: voter turnout is at least 20 percentage points lower for 18-24 year olds compared to those over 65 (e.g., 47% vs. 74% in 2019). Common reasons cited for not voting include being "too busy / busy at work" (19%), "away on election day" (11%), and "not interested in politics / fed up with politics" (10%). For youth, underlying problems include procedural barriers to voting, low political literacy and efficacy, and perceived community disengagement. Major political events, such as the UK's involvement in wars and increasing higher education costs, have contributed to youth disillusionment with the government. Broader public concerns about elections include low turnout (69%), perceived media bias (60%), and political misinformation/disinformation (56%).

Despite these challenges, several strategies show promise for re-engagement. Electoral systems employing proportional representation (PR) are associated with higher voter turnout

(77% average in PR countries since 2000, compared to 67% in non-PR countries). Postal voting has proven effective in increasing participation, with a 69% turnout among postal voters compared to 27% for in-person voting in the May 2025 local elections. Voters also consistently express a desire for more information about candidates and parties. Proposed interventions specifically for youth engagement include reducing registration barriers, implementing civic and political workshops to enhance literacy and efficacy, organizing field trips to polling stations to foster community connection, and graduation initiatives to encourage first-time voting. The significant and persistent gap in voter turnout between young and older demographics, coupled with evidence that young people who experience epidemics during their "impressionable years" develop a lasting lack of confidence in political leaders and institutions, points to a deep-seated, intergenerational trust deficit. The consistent 20+ percentage point gap in turnout between 18-24 year olds and over 65s is a stark indicator. The attribution of youth disengagement to procedural barriers, low political literacy, and perceived community disengagement , along with the lasting impact of major political events and epidemics on youth confidence in leaders , suggests that this is not merely a transient phase but a fundamental challenge to the representativeness and legitimacy of democratic institutions. The implication is that addressing youth disengagement requires more than superficial outreach; it demands systemic reforms that rebuild trust, enhance political education, and create tangible pathways for meaningful participation, acknowledging the historical and psychological factors that have shaped their attitudes.

The multifaceted nature of voter disengagement, encompassing practical barriers (e.g., being busy, away on election day), informational deficits (desire for more candidate information), and deep-seated disillusionment (fed up with politics, perceived media bias, misinformation), underscores that no single solution will suffice. The common reasons for not voting, such as being "too busy" or "fed up with politics" , alongside concerns about media bias and misinformation , indicate a complex interplay of practical obstacles and a crisis of confidence in the political system itself. The observation that postal voting significantly increases turnout addresses a practical barrier, while the desire for more information points to an informational need. However, the deeper disillusionment suggests that simply providing more information or easier access may not overcome fundamental skepticism. This indicates that a comprehensive strategy for re-engagement must be multi-pronged, addressing both the logistical ease of participation and the underlying issues of political literacy, media integrity, and the perceived responsiveness of the political system to citizens' concerns.

Election Type	2024 General Election Turnout	2019 General Election Turnout	1950 General Election Turnout	May 2025 Local Elections (County)	May 2025 Local Elections (Unitary)	May 2025 Local Elections (Mayoral)
Turnout Percentage	60%	67%	83.9%	34.3%	35.2%	30.8%
Source						

**Table 7: Voter Turnout Trends and Reasons for Non-Voting in UK** This table provides a clear overview of declining voter turnout in the UK across different election types, highlighting the significant disparity between general and local elections. It also summarizes the primary reasons cited for non-participation, offering crucial context for understanding the multifaceted nature of political disengagement and informing targeted re-engagement strategies.

## 3.2 Successful Grassroots Movements and Their Impact on Policy

Despite the challenges of public disengagement, numerous grassroots movements in the UK have demonstrated remarkable success in mobilizing communities and influencing policy change. These campaigns often leverage direct engagement, compelling narratives, and sustained pressure to overcome apathy and achieve tangible outcomes.

One notable example is the **#CrimeNotCompliment campaign**, spearheaded by sisters Gemma and Maya Tutton, which successfully made public sexual harassment a criminal offense in the UK. Their strategy involved utilizing art, illustration, and petitions to significantly raise the profile of the issue, culminating in the Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Bill becoming law in 2023. The campaign gained substantial public support, with a Change.org petition garnering over 464,000 signatures. Even after this legislative success, the sisters continue their work in schools and universities to advocate for broader cultural change, recognizing that legal change alone is insufficient. This campaign demonstrates the power of framing a pervasive social issue in a way that resonates emotionally and provides a clear call to action, transforming a normalized experience into a recognized crime.

Other successful campaigns include:

- **Mothers Rise Up/Insure Our Future:** This group targeted Lloyd's of London to stop firms from insuring climate-damaging projects, using creative stunts like a Mary Poppins-themed flash mob.
- **Anti-Traveller wide injunction challenge:** Campaigners collaborated to challenge wide "persons unknown" injunctions against travelers in the Supreme Court, arguing they prevent a traditional nomadic way of life.
- **Free Bus Travel Campaign:** This initiative successfully pushed the Scottish government to provide free bus travel for asylum seekers, highlighting the experiences of those in the asylum system.
- **Justice for Omisha Campaign:** Following a child being billed for NHS care, Omisha's parents campaigned for an NHS free for all, leading to the CEO of the NHS trust agreeing to wipe out the debt and review its charging policy.
- **Saving the Oyster Card:** In October 2023, Transport for London backed down on plans to phase out the Oyster card due to public pressure.
- **Humanists UK campaigns:** This organization has achieved significant policy changes, including the legalisation of same-sex marriages across the UK (2013-2020), decriminalization of abortion in Northern Ireland (2020), and making Relationships and Sex Education compulsory in English schools (2020). These successes highlight the long-term impact of consistent advocacy and community organizing.

These examples underscore the power of authentic community mobilization as a counter-narrative to digital apathy. The success of campaigns like #CrimeNotCompliment, which achieved legislative change through art, illustration, and petitions, demonstrates that when individuals feel a direct connection to an issue and are provided with clear avenues for collective action, they are willing to engage. This contrasts with the passive consumption often seen in digital spaces and suggests that effective movements build genuine, empathetic connections that transcend online interactions. The implication is that fostering engagement requires creating platforms for collective identity and purpose, where individuals can see their contributions translate into tangible social and political outcomes, thereby rebuilding a sense of agency and shared responsibility.

The strategic use of narrative and emotional appeal is a critical element in these campaigns'

ability to make public issues engaging and actionable, leading to policy change. The #CrimeNotCompliment campaign's focus on personal testimonies and illustrations to highlight the impact of public sexual harassment exemplifies this. By transforming an abstract problem into a relatable human experience, these movements tap into collective empathy and moral indignation, which are powerful drivers of social action. This contrasts with the often-dry, data-heavy communication from official sources. The effectiveness of this approach suggests that for policy issues to gain public traction, they must be communicated not just as facts or statistics, but as compelling narratives that evoke shared values and emotions, demonstrating how policy changes can alleviate real-world suffering or achieve collective aspirations. This approach bridges the gap between complex issues and public understanding, making engagement feel personally relevant and impactful.

### **3.3 The Foundational Role of Critical Thinking and Media Literacy**

Equipping citizens with robust critical thinking and media literacy skills is foundational for fostering an active, informed citizenry capable of navigating the complexities of modern information environments. The National Literacy Trust emphasizes that media literacy education in the UK should empower children and young people with the skills, knowledge, and resilience needed to thrive in today's complex digital world. Its overall aims include strengthening critical thinking and information evaluation, enhancing digital and media competency, and supporting civic engagement and democracy.

Research highlights a strong correlation between news literacy and civic engagement, meaning that individuals who can critically assess media are more likely to participate in democratic processes. Programmes like NewsWise and Behind the Headlines demonstrate that strategies such as lateral reading, source verification, and fact-checking can significantly improve students' ability to evaluate digital content. Addressing disparities in information literacy, particularly among disadvantaged groups, is crucial to ensuring equal access to reliable information. The rapid rise of digital media and generative AI necessitates education that goes beyond traditional literacy skills to include digital and multimodal literacy, supporting vulnerable groups in developing digital resilience and safe online engagement.

The National Literacy Trust's work also indicates a strong link between declining civic engagement and a lack of media literacy, suggesting that this deficit may lead to disengagement from democratic processes, reducing informed voting and critical engagement with societal issues. Conversely, better media literacy helps students think critically about media, improve their political knowledge, and contribute to social change. Media access not only enables access to political information but also promotes political efficacy among young people.

The "Digital Competence Gap" represents a significant challenge requiring comprehensive educational reform. The National Literacy Trust's findings that media literacy education should equip individuals with critical thinking, digital competency, and informed civic participation skills underscore a fundamental deficit in the current educational landscape. This is particularly relevant given the rapid evolution of digital media and the emergence of generative AI, which necessitates skills beyond traditional literacy. The observation that a lack of media literacy may lead to declining civic engagement and reduced informed voting suggests that without a concerted effort to bridge this competence gap, citizens will remain vulnerable to misinformation and disengagement, unable to effectively participate in democratic processes. This indicates that educational systems must adapt to prioritize digital and media literacy as core competencies, integrated across all subjects and educational levels, to prepare citizens for an increasingly complex information environment.

The "Empowerment through Evaluation" principle suggests that fostering critical thinking and media literacy shifts individuals from passive consumption to active engagement. Programmes that teach strategies like lateral reading, source verification, and fact-checking significantly improve students' ability to evaluate digital content. This approach directly addresses the problem of misinformation and the erosion of trust by empowering individuals to independently assess information reliability. The correlation between news literacy and civic engagement further supports this: when individuals feel capable of critically engaging with media, they are more likely to participate thoughtfully in discussions and make informed decisions. This indicates that education focused on evaluative skills, rather than just content delivery, can cultivate a more resilient and engaged citizenry. By enabling citizens to discern credible information and identify misinformation, it strengthens their capacity for informed civic participation and democratic accountability.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis presented in this report reveals a multifaceted crisis of public disengagement, rooted in the evolving digital landscape, opaque corporate influence, and deficiencies in civic and economic literacy. The pervasive nature of short-form, sensationalized content on social media, driven by algorithms that prioritize emotional engagement, actively diminishes attention spans and fosters a polarized information environment. This digital architecture, coupled with a shifting landscape of trust where influencers gain parity with traditional journalists and experts face politicized attacks, creates significant barriers to informed public discourse. Furthermore, a fundamental misunderstanding of economic concepts, viewed primarily through a personal lens, and the pervasive, often untransparent, influence of corporate lobbying on policy decisions, deepen public cynicism and detachment from governance. The skepticism surrounding Central Bank Digital Currencies, contrasting with growing acceptance of decentralized cryptocurrencies, highlights a profound distrust in state control over personal financial data.

However, the report also identifies clear pathways for reversing these trends and fostering a more engaged citizenry. The successes of grassroots movements demonstrate the enduring power of community mobilization and emotionally resonant narratives in achieving policy change. The critical role of media literacy and critical thinking education emerges as a foundational antidote to apathy, equipping individuals with the tools to navigate complex information landscapes and participate meaningfully.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to cultivate a more engaged and informed public sphere:

### 1. **Reform Digital Platforms for Public Good:**

- **Incentivize Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability:** Policymakers should explore regulatory frameworks that mandate greater transparency in social media algorithms, particularly concerning content amplification and user engagement metrics. This could involve independent audits to assess the societal impact of algorithms and hold platforms accountable for the spread of misinformation and polarizing content.
- **Promote Diverse Content Formats:** Encourage platforms to diversify their content promotion beyond short-form, high-arousal videos, potentially through incentives for long-form, educational, and nuanced content that fosters sustained attention and deeper understanding.
- **Support Authenticity over Sensationalism:** Develop industry standards or

regulatory guidelines that reward authentic, fact-based content over clickbait and sensationalism, potentially through partnerships with credible news organizations and content creators.

2. **Enhance Civic and Economic Literacy:**

- **Integrate Media Literacy into Core Curricula:** Mandate comprehensive media literacy education across all educational levels, focusing on critical evaluation, source verification, and understanding algorithmic biases. Programs like NewsWise should be scaled nationally.
- **Translate Complex Economic Concepts:** Public institutions (e.g., ONS, Bank of England) and media outlets should adopt communication strategies that translate abstract macroeconomic concepts into relatable terms, demonstrating their direct impact on citizens' daily lives and personal finances. This requires moving beyond jargon and employing clear, accessible language.
- **Strengthen Trust in Official Data:** Implement public awareness campaigns to educate citizens on the independence and methodologies of national statistical bodies (e.g., ONS) to counter misperceptions and rebuild trust in official economic figures.

3. **Increase Transparency and Accountability in Lobbying:**

- **Strengthen Lobbying Regulations:** Implement comprehensive reforms to UK lobbying laws, expanding the register to include "in-house" lobbying activities and increasing transparency around all forms of corporate influence on policy decisions. This should include stricter rules on "revolving door" practices between government and industry.
- **Prioritize Public Interest in Regulatory Frameworks:** Re-evaluate regulatory philosophies, particularly in rapidly evolving sectors like tech and finance, to ensure that public interest, safety, and ethical considerations are explicitly prioritized alongside economic growth and innovation. This requires robust oversight mechanisms to prevent regulatory capture.

4. **Rebuild Trust in Institutions and Experts:**

- **Improve Science Communication:** Scientists and journalists must collaborate to communicate scientific findings with greater clarity, distinguishing between hypotheses, preliminary results, and established understanding. Scientists should be encouraged to engage with the public, acknowledge uncertainties, and demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns, including those from politically diverse groups.
- **Strategic Engagement with Influencers:** Explore partnerships between credible news organizations, academic institutions, and social media influencers to disseminate accurate information and promote critical thinking, leveraging influencers' reach and perceived authenticity to bridge trust gaps, rather than viewing them solely as competitors.
- **Address Youth Disillusionment Systemically:** Implement targeted interventions to address the root causes of youth political disengagement, including reducing procedural barriers to voting, offering civic and political education workshops, and creating direct, meaningful opportunities for youth participation in policy discussions.

By systematically addressing the architects of disengagement and actively cultivating the antidotes of critical thought and collective action, societies can foster a more informed,

engaged, and resilient citizenry, essential for the health and vitality of democratic processes.

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