

RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Anomie in the UK? Can cultural malaise threaten the fruition of the ideas-informed society? [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]

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Abstract

Background: The ideas-informed society represents a desired situation in which: 1) citizens see value in staying up to date, and; 2) citizens regularly keep themselves up to date by actively, openly and critically engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth. As a result, it is hoped citizens become increasingly knowledgeable, better able to make good decisions, and better positioned to support new progressive norms and beliefs. Yet despite these potential benefits, a substantive proportion of the population do not value staying up to date, nor attempt to do so.

Methods: With this research project we seek to identify whether the theoretical lens of anomie can account for why 'ideas refusers' do not engage with ideas, as well as provide clues as to how they might be encouraged to do so. To explore the possible impacts of anomie on ideas-engagement we conducted four online focus groups, interviewing a purposive sample of ten individuals who previously indicated they were ideas refusers.

Results: Our findings identify eleven themes which seemingly account for why ideas refusers do not currently engage with ideas. Of these, ten are related to anomie, including themes which encapsulate feelings of frustration, anxiety, confusion and powerlessness regarding the complexities of modern society.

Conclusions: We also identify three areas of future focus that might help the ongoing development of the ideas-informed society. These are: 1) the more positive and relevant reporting of ideas; 2) supporting 'healthy' face-to-face engagement with ideas; and 3) supporting effective ideas engagement through social media.

Keywords

ideas-informed society; ideas-informed citizens; ideas refusers; anomie; focus group research

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.



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REVISED Amendments from Version 1

This revised version attempts to speak to the substantive and minor points raised by both reviewers. In particular in relation to the potential biases in the sample.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

The ideas informed society

A well-functioning democracy is dependent on a well-informed populace (Lewandowsky, 2020). In this context, the notion of the ideas-informed society represents a desired situation in which: 1) citizens see value in staying up to date, and; 2) citizens regularly keep themselves up to date by actively, openly and critically engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth (Brown *et al.*, 2022a; Franco *et al.*, 2019; González, 2021; Nerlich, 2015). For the purposes of this paper, we use the term 'ideas' to refer to the emergence of new possibilities: for instance, in terms of how we might live, work or organise society (e.g. in recent times, such ideas might include the notion of hybrid working or the concept of 'transhumanism'). The term 'developments' refers to events or happenings of note: which could include political and economic events, but also those such as technological or medical advances. The term 'claims to truth', meanwhile, refers to suggestions for how we might respond to objective, verifiable facts based on notions of causality and/or prediction. For example, claims to truth might encompass proposals for how to tackle the realities of the obesity crisis and climate change (Brown *et al.*, 2022a; Nerlich, 2014; Nerlich, 2015).

Research and other findings suggest that a number of outcomes potentially materialise as a result of 1) and 2) above. These are that: 3) citizens can become more knowledgeable; 4) citizens find themselves in a better position to make decisions that can optimally benefit them and others, and; 5) citizens can align their perspectives with appropriate societal values (Andrino *et al.*, 2022; Brown *et al.*, 2022a; Dijkstra, 2017; Franco *et al.*, 2019; Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies, 2013; Gray, 2019; González, 2021; Hochschild, 2010; Lewandowsky, 2020; Pinker, 2018; Pinker, 2021). With regards to the last of these points (point 5), it is the view of the authors that such values are those which are progressive in nature: i.e. are values which are informed by the concepts of fairness and equality, as well as social and environmental justice. While in an ideas-informed society, outcomes 3) to 5) may not always materialise, nor always result in behaviours that are commensurate with understanding, the higher the values are for 1) and 2), the more likely this will be the case in the longer term. Of primary interest, therefore, are those who neither value staying up to date, nor attempt to do so, since this limits the possibilities of 3) to 5) emerging at all (Brown *et al.*, 2022a).

How ideas-informed are we?

An appropriate way of assessing whether a community is approaching a state of being ideas-informed, is to gauge

general support for the notion of keeping up to date with new ideas, developments and claims to truth; as well as assess support for, or cognizance of, certain key themes we might expect to see proliferate in an informed, progressive democracy. An example of this type of assessment can be found in Brown *et al.* (2022a), who (drawing on a representative sample of 1,000 respondents in England) operationalised the notion of being 'ideas-informed' by asking participants how important 'staying up to date with regards to news, current affairs and new developments (such as, political, economic and scientific developments)' was for them. Brown *et al.* (2022a) also asked the importance to participants of the following topics:

1. Living in a society that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class or ability
2. Supporting physical and mental health, that of yourselves and others.
3. Seeing corporations and businesses adopt more ethical, responsible and sustainable ways of working

Findings from the survey suggested that the vast majority of respondents (70.7 percent) saw staying up to date with new ideas as 'important' or 'very important'. At the same time a sizable proportion (13 percent) actively regarded staying up to date as unimportant, with a similar amount (16 percent) seemingly ambivalent. Overall, then, almost a third of those surveyed (and by extension, a third of the adult English population) failed to perceive the need to stay up to date. Likewise, just over a fifth of respondents (20.8 percent) regarded living in a just and inclusive society as either not important or were ambivalent about it; and almost a quarter (23.9 percent) felt similarly in terms of whether businesses should adopt ethical and sustainable ways of working, despite the current climate crisis. Supporting the physical and mental health of oneself and others was viewed as the most important of the three statements (something that might be expected given that the survey was conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic), nonetheless 15.4 percent of respondents still regarded it as either not important or, again, were ambivalent. Given the importance of the idea informed society, it would therefore seem vital to understand what might be causing this gap between the ideal and the real. While suggestions put forward by Brown *et al.* (2022a) rightly posited a focus on social, social capital and cultural capital-related networks, this paper examines whether the notion of *anomie* can also further widen our understanding of this issue.

Anomie

Anomie represents a social situation in which certain shared social ethics (i.e. previously common norms, values or beliefs) have disappeared. The term is most commonly associated with Émile Durkheim (1897/2002), who believed that anomie often occurs as a result of drastic and rapid social, economic or political change. Those affected by anomie typically feel disconnected from society, since they can no longer see the norms and values they cleave to being reflected back at them (also

described as the social world no longer *resonating* with individuals: Schiermer, 2020). This disconnection consequently presents itself as individual stress, frustration, anxiety, confusion and powerlessness (Powell *et al.*, 2021); or leading to individuals “feeling threatened by the complexities of the contemporary social and cultural order” (Achterberg *et al.*, 2017: 707). It was Durkheim’s (1897/2002) suggestion that anomie is often common amongst those who cleave to *rigid, traditional* notions of solidarity, which materialises when there is a strong homophilic basis for people’s feelings of connection to one another (for instance, as a result of being part of the same ethnic group or holding similar religious beliefs as those around them). When faced with change, however, this type of traditional solidarity can be eroded by the introduction of difference (or an influx of the ‘other’), which lessens the proportion of those to which one feels kinship—hence anomie. Conversely, anomie is less common amongst those who have more organic notions of solidarity and see kinship with others, despite the existence of stark homophilic-related difference.

In addition to a rigid traditional bases for solidarity, level of education can also contribute to anomie. For instance, analysis undertaken by Achterberg *et al.* (2017) (applying regression models to a sample of 2,006 survey respondents from the US) indicates that lower educated citizens, who are more likely to lack knowledge-related dispositions (including a need to inquire, learn and question) and are more likely to feel a mismatch between the momentum of modern society on one hand, and a belief in their own agency to shape and control the world on the other. As a result, such individuals can either opt out, or, if suitably motivated, can actively seek to restore some kind of social order. One potential issue with the latter, however, is that it may lead to another form of anomie; that where individuals use ‘illegitimate’ means to reach legitimate goals (Merton, 1957). In terms of the ideas-informed society, this is because it can be cognitively more attractive for individuals to either: 1) develop new ‘independent’ value systems: for instance, through engaging in, believing and promulgating pernicious and non-helpful notions, such as ‘alternative facts’, fake news, conspiracy theories, and other non-real forms of information (Achterberg *et al.*, 2017; D’Ancona, 2017); or 2) fall foul of idea ‘balkanisation’, which occurs where one fails to challenge oneself to be open minded, to engage critically and be willing to learn (Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies, 2013).

Anomie in the UK

If one accepts progressive social, economic or political changes can be a force for good and welcomed (as the research team do), then it can be argued that the presence of anomie in contemporary Britain is potentially observable in a number of recent studies. For instance, that of Goodhart (2017), which suggests that two important groups are now present in the UK population. The first are described as the *somewheres*: those who are rooted in a specific place or community, which is often a small town or in the countryside. *Somewheres* are socially conservative, often less educated. The second group are the *anywheres*: people who are mobile, often located in urban

areas, socially liberal and university educated. *Somewheres* are characterised by Goodhart (2017) as being ill at ease with the modern world and suffering from a nostalgic sense that ‘change is loss’. *Anywheres*, meanwhile, are free of such nostalgia; they are egalitarian and meritocratic in their attitude to race, sexuality and gender. *Anywheres* also value autonomy and self-realisation before stability, community and tradition. Such perspectives are seemingly reflected in a 2022 report by the ‘Global Future’ think tank (Anjeh & Doraisamy, 2022), which found that, while that 80 percent of those surveyed (based on a weighted poll of 2,244 UK citizens) believed it important to be attentive to issues of racial inequality and social justice, 11 percent did not know and nine percent thought that it was not important (this data reflecting exactly the findings of Brown *et al.*, 2022a, above). Vitally, however, the same survey also showed that similar proportions did not feel any change was required to make British society fairer: nine percent feeling that ‘Britain is already fair’ and 15 percent responding, ‘don’t know’. Likewise, nine percent of respondents dismissed racism as a factor that explains disparity between racial groups and 11 percent dismissed the idea that the gender pay gap is caused by sexism. While Anjeh & Doraisamy (2022) found that the importance of being attentive to issues of racial inequality and social justice did not have any Leave/Remain faultline (something posited by Goodhart, 2017), they did find that Leave voters, Conservative voters, C2DE voters (i.e. those of a lower socio-economic status) and those in regional England are more likely than the rest of the British public to think negatively of a political party they perceived as attempting to be politically correct (i.e. one which actively seeks to avoid offending disadvantaged groups or those groups historically treated differently due to their sex, gender, race, or disability).

Furthermore, the findings of a recent YouGov poll (Smith, 2021: drawing on a poll of 1,677 UK adults), would seem to indicate the presence of anomie that is specifically related to ideas-engagement. In particular, the poll indicates that those holding more regressive social stances (i.e. older, once more acceptable ideas) are more likely to avoid expressing their political or social views in case they encounter criticism. For example, those who believe immigration has generally been a bad thing for the UK are more likely to say they ‘always or mostly feel’ they have to hide their views on the subject compared to those who don’t (33 percent vs 10 percent). Likewise, is the belief that ethnic minorities in Britain have things as good as white Britons, with 31 percent holding this view feeling that they ‘can’t ever or mostly can’t’ express it. In addition, 29 percent of those who disagree with the statement that ‘a transgender woman is a woman’ feel they have to frequently refrain from expressing this perspective. In a similar vein, a number of comedians in the UK have also expressed concerns that they are now much more constrained in terms of types of jokes they feel able to tell (Rawlinson, 2021). Humour is proof that groups within society are capable of seeing the world with the same eyes (McCarthy, 2006). Thus, if some jokes, previously viewed as acceptable, no longer are (e.g. because of their racist, sexist or ableist connotations) this seemingly indicates both a gradual societal shift towards a progressive vista, as well as an anomic reaction

against this by those who can't see such joke as anything other than 'harmless fun' (i.e. those not recognising their potentially pernicious consequences of such humour, which also serves as a way of reinforcing homophilic kinship and structural inequalities).

Additional evidence for ideas-related anomie (which also seemingly coheres with Goodhart's analysis) is found in structural Equation Modelling undertaken by [Brown *et al.* \(2022a\)](#) to explore what affects the importance attributed to 'staying up to date with regards to news, current affairs and new developments', as well as the three progressive topics outlined earlier above. In particular, this work found those with lower levels of education are more likely to live in relatively close-knit homogenous communities and that sometimes, in such communities, little importance is placed on staying up to date, nor on values relating to equity and inclusion, supporting the physical and mental health, of oneself or others, or seeing corporations and businesses adopt more ethical, responsible and sustainable ways of working. Conversely, model results elucidated that those in higher managerial and professional roles are both highly educated and more likely to value keeping up to date with news, current affairs and new developments. This latter group is also more likely to: i) use approaches such as social media to actively engage with others regarding new ideas; ii) see importance in values such as those relating to equity and inclusion; and, where they share similar levels of education and political interest, iii) will discuss news, current affairs and new developments with friends, family and work colleagues.

Potentially, therefore, it may be the case that, for some, new ideas entering the public sphere increasingly and collectively represent a corpus of unwelcome or incomprehensible change (as do the values that such ideas ultimately lead to). In line with Durkheim's theory, such developments possibly lead to anomie, with those affected, subsequently retreating from engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth ([McCarthy, 2006](#); [Merton, 1957](#)). For others, new ideas instead seemingly represent new opportunities to think about the world and one's actions: they provide a path to improvement, empowerment and social and environmental progress. We also know, however, that in the five short years since 2017 and the publication of Goodhart's book *The Road to Somewhere* further rapid social changes have taken place, including (amongst many others): i) a global pandemic; ii) a war in Europe; iii) the enactment of Brexit; iv) a shift to a more divisive form of politics; v) an increasing highlighting of racism, Britain's colonial past, sexism and transgender issues and rights; and vi) the emergence of notions such as 'wokeness' and 'cancel culture' (e.g. [Anjeh & Doraisamy, 2022](#); [Brown & Luzmore, 2021](#); [Haight, 2022](#); [Konadu & Gyamfi, 2021](#); [Rawlinson, 2021](#); [Smith, 2021](#)). Thus, if the suggestion that anomie is leading some to turn their back on engaging with new ideas, because of the unwanted/incomprehensible changes they represent, is accurate, and, given the seemingly exponential monumental changes occurring in recent times, we might also expect to reach a point of no return. This potentially occurs when discomfort with the modern world

becomes too great for certain groups to handle, and it is felt that social needs—such as a sense of belonging, having a sense of certainty, or having a basis from which to exercise moral values—are best satisfied through a strengthening of homophilic solidarity (a notion played on by the 2016 Trump election campaign, which repeatedly pushed the narrative that a more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse USA was a threat to both its prosperity and its 'values': [Baer, 2020](#)): regardless of the actual objective benefits of this approach for both individuals and communities ([Lewandowsky, 2020](#)). Further, this type of retrenchment serves to reinforce these perspectives, thus pushing them to the extreme.

Research questions

Given the research team's belief in the potential benefits to individuals and society of citizens becoming better informed, of being better positioned to make more informed decisions and of citizens gradually aligning with more progressive stances (and given the consequences of the converse situation), we feel it is useful to consider how ideas 'refusers' might be bought back into the fold. Our desired outcome is akin to what [Goodhart \(2004\)](#) refers to, somewhat pejoratively, as the 'progressive's dilemma'. This is a desire to achieve both social cohesion—in this case a broad base buy-in to the idea of the ideas informed society—and diversity: that is, an ongoing engagement with new ideas, perspectives and beliefs, some of which may lead to new, more optimal, values and behaviours—despite any reservations, discomfort and initial rejection such ideas might provoke. Since we are interested in whether anomie has a role to play, the research questions that result from this 'progressive's dilemma', and so guiding our empirical exploration, are as follows:

1. What reasons do ideas-rejectors give for not valuing staying up to date with new ideas developments and claims to truth? What reasons do ideas-rejectors give for not valuing progressive societal values such as inclusion?
2. Do these reasons suggest that not valuing staying up to date/progressive societal values might be attributable to the presence of anomie?
3. What implications emerge for closing the gap between the ideal and the real, in order to facilitate the ideas informed society?

Methods and sample

We elected to use focus groups to collect our data ([Beitin, 2012](#)). A qualitative approach, focus groups are advantageous when compared to one-on-one interviews, in that they enable data to be collected in a dialogic. In other words, participants can be facilitated to share, compare, and organise their opinions ([Morgan & Hoffman, 2018](#)). Such an approach enables participants to build on each other's ideas through 'piggybacking'; in this way, focus groups can provide a means to foster rich discussion, so as to deeply explore the issues in hand ([Leung & Savithiri, 2009](#)). Further, purposefully selected groups, which are relatively homogeneous in nature, can also

lead to trust quickly building amongst participants, so enabling them to also be candid when expressing their feelings, or in detailing what matters to them (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018).

To identify a suitable sample for our focus groups, we returned to the original 1,000 surveyed by Brown *et al.* (2022a). Here exploring differences between those attributing low importance or indifference to staying up to date with regards to news, current affairs and new developments (shorthand here to *ideas-ve*) and those who regard staying up to date as important or very important (shorthand to *ideas+ve*), spotlighted a number of behaviour or social characteristics that might be indicative of ideas-related anomie. In particular:

- A much lower proportion of *idea-ve* respondents (9.2 percent compared to 35.8 percent of *ideas+ve* respondents) were educated to degree level or higher;
- A much higher proportion of *idea+ve* respondents (40.8 percent compared to 12.9 percent of *ideas-ve* respondents) had a social economic status of ABC1;
- *idea-ve* respondents were less likely to discuss news, current affairs and new developments with friends, family and work colleagues than *idea+ve*. This can be seen in the following mean scores (from a five point scale) of 2.0 (SD = 1.6) for friends, 2.6 (SD = 1.7) for family and 1.8 (SD = 1.8) for colleagues; compared to 3.1 (SD = 1.5), 3.6 (SD = 1.5) and = 2.9 (SD = 1.8); and
- A somewhat higher proportion of *idea-ve* respondents (6.6 percent compared to 3.2 percent of *ideas+ve* respondents) attributed low importance or indifference to all three progressive society values outlined above (i.e. those relating to inclusion, wellbeing and businesses engaging in ethical behaviour).

Furthermore, when examining the characteristics of those who attribute low importance or indifference to the three progressive societal values relating to inclusion, wellbeing and businesses engaging in ethical behaviour (shorthand here to *values-ve*) we found that this group were also less likely to be degree educated (3.1 percent compared to 42.2 percent of those who are *values+ve*). Likewise, *values-ve* respondents were less prone to discuss news, current affairs and new developments with friends, family and work colleagues than *values+ve* respondents. This can be seen in the following mean scores (from a five point scale) of 1.9 (SD = 1.6) for friends, 2.5 (SD = 1.8) for family and 2.0 (SD = 1.8) for colleagues, compared to 2.9 (SD = 1.5), 3.4 (SD = 1.5) and = 2.7 (SD = 1.8).

These descriptive analyses led us to employ a purposeful sampling approach to identify potential focus group participants from the original survey responders, based on: i) their attributing low importance or indifference to staying up to date with regards to news, current affairs; AND/OR ii) their attributing low importance or indifference to at least one of the three progressive societal values; AND ONE OF

iii) their not having a university degree; OR iv) their being assigned a C2DE social economic status; OR v) their scores for discussing news, current affairs and new developments with friends, family and work colleagues were ≤ 2.0 .

When Brown *et al.* (2022a) undertook their surveyed of 1,000 voting age citizens in England, respondents were asked if they would be willing to take part in future qualitative work and, if so, to provide their email address. Whilst it is recognised that this approach to recruiting potentially introduces bias into our focus group sample (since it can be argued that only those who had particular views on the topic are likely to put themselves forward); the nature of most research studies means that participants 'opt in'. In other words, decide to take part, which is likely informed by a multitude of criteria, including personal interests. Nonetheless, to attempt to overcome this possibility of specific bias in relation to the subject in question, a £10 Amazon voucher was offered to those willing to engage in focus groups.

Survey respondents meeting the above criteria and willing to take part were emailed and invited to take part in focus groups. A total of 17 responses were received and, correspondingly, four online focus groups were organised for the 28 June to 8 July 2022 period. Ultimately, however, seven respondents did not attend (i.e. were 'no-shows'), meaning that only ten survey respondents could be interviewed. An analysis of these 'no shows' and their socio-economic characteristics and responses to our original survey suggests that these individuals did not seemingly differ significantly from those that did attend the focus groups. As such it was not felt problematic that this seven were not ultimately interviewed. The characteristics of these respondents are set out in Table 1, below.

Participants actively consented to take part in the study (i.e. completed a research consent proforma). Detail on the topic guides used can be found in the 'extended data' section of the paper, below. Topic guides were developed by the research team, then pre-tested with colleagues from Durham University. The topic guides were designed to enable participants share and compare their opinions and to build on each other's ideas. Further, the groups were also designed to be broadly homogeneous in nature, thus enabling trust to quickly build amongst participants, enabling them to also be candid in expressing their feelings and beliefs (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018; Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). Overall, given the socio-demographic and attitudinal differences between research team and respondents, we felt that this approach would lead to a more accurate representation of our interviewee's beliefs when compared to alternatives, such as one on one in-depth interviewing. Interviewees were not provided with a copy of the topic guide in advance and transcripts were not provided to interviewees for comment. This is because we wanted participants to provide candid responses, as well as not afford them the opportunity to 'water down' responses post-hoc, to make them more socially acceptable. The focus groups were conducted using Microsoft Teams (now a common feature of life generally in the post-covid research and so nothing unusual for

Table 1. Respondent characteristics.

Participant identifier	Highest qualification	Social economic status	Importance of staying up to date	Value 1: inclusion	Value 2: wellbeing	Value 3: businesses engaging in ethical behaviour	Discussion with friends	Discussion with family	Discussion with colleagues
PERSONA21	High School Diploma/ School level qualifications	ABC1	Somewhat important	Not important at all	Somewhat important	Important	Once or twice a year	Every few months	Never
PERSONA12	Bachelor's Degree	ABC1	Not important at all	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
PERSONA23	High School Diploma/ School level qualifications	ABC1	Somewhat important	Very important	Very important	Important	Once a fortnight	Once a week or more	Once a week or more
PERSONB21	I have no formal qualifications	C2DE	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Important	Very important	Every few months	Once a day or more	n/a
PERSONB12	Bachelor's Degree	ABC1	Not important at all	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
PERSONC31	Master's Degree	ABC1	Not important at all	Somewhat important	Somewhat important	Somewhat important	n/a	n/a	n/a
PERSONC22	I have no formal qualifications	C2DE	Somewhat important	Very important	Very important	Important	Never	Never	Never
PERSONC23	High School Diploma/ School level qualifications	ABC1	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Important	Neither Important or Unimportant	Every few months	Once a fortnight	Every few months
PERSOND21	High School Diploma/ School level qualifications	ABC1	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Very important	Important	Once a fortnight	Once a week or more	Every few months
PERSOND12	Post Graduate Certificate or Diploma	C2DE	Not important at all	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

participants). Furthermore, using Microsoft Teams served both as a means of both hosting the interviews as well as record them. Each group lasted approximately an hour in duration.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this project and the interview questionnaire employed was given by the Durham University School of Education's ethics committee (EDU-2022-05-03T15_26_50). The focus groups were conducted in strict adherence to the Durham University code of research ethics. In particular: i) all research was undertaken with the full written informed consent of participants (who were all aged 18 plus); ii) participants were provided with project information sheets and were also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study; and iii) only anonymised transcripts were produced and used for analysis.

Analysis

Immediately after each group, summary sheets were written up to record initial information relating the participants, the main themes or issues which emerged during the focus group and any suggestions for where the research team should place most focus during the next group. Once data from the focus group recordings were transcribed, they were then analysed thematically. Inductive analysis was initially undertaken by two research team members to provide an individual categorisations of responses; with codes allocated to individual lines or turns of speech, or larger segments of text (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018; Sandelowski, 1993). Following this initial coding, a process of joint discussion, reflection and interpretation was undertaken to enable the research team to consider our growing understanding of the data and to consolidate the codes (Robson, 2011). The relationships between codes were then assessed and mid-level themes built from the aggregation of the initial codes until all of the initial codes could be adequately explained in a conceptually meaningful way (Lincoln & Gubba, 1985). Finally, the research team worked to ascertain: i) whether these mid-level themes were indicative (or not) of anomic behaviours or attitudes (based on the those identified in the literature review above); ii) whether emerging themes were suggestive of other factors influencing respondent's engagement with new ideas; or iii) whether the themes represented both things combined. In total, 11 themes emerged from the analysis, of which ten were possible indicators of anomic behaviours or attitudes. Further, the research team also identified that eight of themes might, simultaneously, also encapsulate other factors affecting ideas engagement in addition to anomie (as with per the transcripts, these themes were not subject to participant checking). The list of these themes, along with brief descriptions of how each affects respondent's engagement with new ideas, can be found in Table 2, below.

Findings

Below we address research questions 1) and 2) using findings from the qualitative analysis. The first of our 11 themes: '*a) More important life considerations*', however, was not linked to anomie. Rather, it pointed to situations in which pressing

life issues were regarded, at least for now, as more important than engaging with ideas and developments. This theme applied primarily to the responses of two focus group participants, and is illustrated by the following examples of their responses:

INTERVIEWER: how important is it for you to keep up to date with current affairs and news and new developments?

PERSOND21: I do like to know what's going on... but I wouldn't say it's my first priority... [rather I am concerned about] food prices, fuel prices, that sort of thing... I do worry... I've got friends who really do live hand to mouth, so that's something [that] bothers me.

PERSONC31: Personal stuff is really sort of at the top of my list at the moment. So things may be going around, like, sort of, I don't know, locally, nationally, internationally are kind of in the back of my mind at the moment... work is quite busy. And I think a lot about my father. He's 93. And he's not been very well recently. So it's like daily phone calls and things like that. So that kind of making appointments and just things like that are occupy my mind quite a lot at the moment.

As we shall see later below, however, while not viewing staying up to date as a current and immediate priority, attitudinally and behaviourally, both of these respondents differed significantly from the other focus group participants in three important ways: i) they liked to actively engage in ideas-related discussion with others; ii) they held very different views from the other participants with regards to the nature of discussing ideas with friends, family and colleagues; and iii), they differed from the other respondents with regards to their opinions on the progressive values of equity and inclusion, supporting the physical and mental health, of oneself or others, and in terms of the importance of ethical, responsible and sustainable business practices. As such, their responses provide good counter points (e.g. see Morse *et al.*, 2002) to the anomie-related themes we now present.

The second theme emerging from the analysis was: *b) Avoiding staying up to date because doing so can be depressing*. Of those involved in the focus groups, five out of ten participants indicated that they felt this way. The theme emerged specifically in relation to staying up to date with news and current affairs, rather than ideas generally. Nonetheless, it signified feelings of anxiety in relation to the complexities of contemporary society—something commonly associated with anomie (e.g. Powell *et al.*, 2021). It also regularly corresponded with the emergence of our third theme: *c) a feeling of lack of control in relation to current events*. In other words, not only did participants feel a sense of depression in relation to the news, but they also felt powerless to act in relation to this feeling. Again, powerlessness and feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world is often symptomatic of anomie (Achterberg *et al.*, 2017; Powell *et al.*, 2021); this code thus hinting at its presence. Further, a corresponding strategy that emerged

Table 2. Themes emerging from the qualitative analysis.

Theme	Signs of anomie	Presence of other ideas-related themes
a) More important life considerations	n/a	More pressing life issues hindering engagement with ideas and developments
b) Avoiding staying up to date because doing so can be depressing	Indicative of feeling frustration, anxiety, confusion and powerlessness in relation to the complexities of contemporary society	
c) A feeling of lack of control in relation to current events	Indicative of feeling: 1. frustration, anxiety, confusion and powerlessness in relation to the complexities of contemporary society 2. unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world	
d) Dipping-in to ideas	Potential strategy to manage feelings of anxiety, confusion and powerlessness or the complexities of contemporary society	Potentially also indicative of a lack of curiosity in relation to the 'bigger picture'
e) The belief that the news [etc.] is fake	Can result from feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world	Potentially also indicative of less sophisticated forms of epistemological belief
f) An inability to accept a plurality of perspectives	Can result from feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world	Potentially also indicative of less sophisticated forms of epistemological belief
g) Avoiding discussions with others to prevent potential conflict [friends & colleagues]	1. Can result from feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world 2. Suggestive that those holding more regressive social stances may be less likely to express political or social views in case they encounter criticism	Potentially also indicative of less sophisticated forms of epistemological belief
h) Avoiding discussion with others to avoid conflict [generally]	Can result from feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world	Potentially also indicative of less sophisticated forms of epistemological belief
i) Limited, passive engagement with social media	Can result from feeling unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world	Potentially also indicative of: 1. less sophisticated forms of epistemological belief 2. Inabilities of social media users to engage in effective debate
j) Progressive values are for the benefit of 'others'	Indicative of feeling: 1. disconnected from society, as respondents no longer see the norms and values they cleave to being reflected back at them 2. a lack of solidarity with other groups in society 3. The 'change is loss' feeling of the 'somewheres'	
k) Other interests than staying abreast of new ideas	Indicative of feeling disconnected from society	Lack of curiosity in relation to the 'bigger picture'

from the discussions was participants restricting their engagement by *d) dipping-in to ideas* as a means of limiting the feelings described by codes *b)* and *c)*. At the same time, dipping in, could sometimes be seemingly indicative of a lack of curiosity in relation to the 'bigger picture' of ideas, or a perceived lack of relevance of ideas to one's lived reality or context. The following vignettes provide illustrations of each of these three themes:

PERSONA12: mostly news is pretty depressing anyway, so there's never really anything good... you kind of switch off for your own good sometimes: *b)*

PERSONB12: I listen to the news once a day. That's it. And I've had enough then. It's just so depressing: *b)*

PERSONB12: all I can do is control my own little bubble: *c)*

PERSONC22: So I don't see my opinion in the news at all... it doesn't feel connected to me in any way whatsoever... I think ohh for God's sake, why doesn't somebody just come along and just go stop it now?: *e)*

PERSONA12: I like generally just skim over the headlines on the BBC News, but if something catches my eye, I'd just press on it and just go down and see a little bit more. But generally, after reading about half of it, you don't really want to know that much more: *d)*

PERSONB21: it depends on the news. If I find out about, like, important news, what might value me for benefits? Like I'm on benefits, right? It might affect me like benefits: *d)*

PERSONC22: It depends on whether or not the it's going to affect me personally or members of my family: *d)*

Our fifth theme: *e) The belief that the news [etc.] is fake*, emerged from one respondent, who made comments, such as the following, throughout their group interview:

PERSONB12: It's so false... but I feel I owe myself, you know, one listen to see what's going on and get the flow. And that's an honest answer.... [but] I just sense the media just feeds us with false information

PERSONB12: I might ask Alexa and odd thing but no...I don't trust all the information I'm getting.

The research team linked this perspective to a further code associated with **PERSONB12**: *f) An inability to accept a plurality of perspectives*. This second code encapsulating this participant's belief that there can only be one truth, or one perspective that can be held to be true, and if different information sources relating to a given topic presented conflicting information, then those sources must be providing 'fake news':

PERSONB12: when you look online, how much of it is a fact you, you drill down and there's different information... And then I come away more confused.

PERSONB12: the news is so false and stuff like that, you don't know. It just keeps swapping. One news is saying like, [Covid] is gone and one place saying it's not gone, and you got another news saying you know we might go into lock down, [and another saying] might not... that I just don't know.

This perspective contrasting strongly with those participants who were able to triangulate information effectively. For example:

PERSOND21: I would say I would rather take on board the opinions of several publications than just the one. Yeah, it's like making a decision based on sort of two or three reports of the same thing, because it's quite interesting to see the differences, how they report it.

When considering themes *d)* to *f)* in more detail, it appears possible that themes *d)* and *e)* represent a specific strategy in

response to education-related anomie. For instance, **PERSONB12**, feeling unable to use make sense of the world, seeks to restore social order by dismissing anything confusing as fake news. This would also cohere with **PERSONB12**'s seeming tendency to accept populist accounts of the world: those which are easy to grasp and present a singular, concrete perspective, regardless of the nature of objective reality underpinning this perspective (for instance the admission by **PERSONB12** that 'I am on Telegram and do see things from GB News': both media outlets that are criticised for their partiality and bias). Likewise, minimising exposure to ideas might represent 'opting out' strategies by **PERSONB21** and **PERSONC22** to minimise their exposure to the complexities of contemporary society. Themes *d)* to *f)* may also, however, be indicative of naïve epistemic beliefs: something also related to level of education, but not indicative of anomie. Rather, epistemic beliefs represent the maturity of our approach to knowledge: with those holding more sophisticated epistemic beliefs viewing scientific knowledge as tentative, and theories as revisable; with others holding more naïve beliefs typically regarding scientific knowledge as certain and theories as immutable (Grossnickle Peterson, 2020; Post *et al.*, 2021). Epistemic beliefs are also linked to curiosity. For instance, those who are more curious tend to believe that scientific knowledge can change over time (Grossnickle Peterson, 2020). Likewise, more curious individuals tend to believe that claims to knowledge should be justified via scientific inquiry and the critical evaluation of multiple sources of information (Grossnickle Peterson, 2020; Shultman & Harrington, 2016).

Our seventh, eighth and ninth themes were also linked, and concerned participants' unwillingness to engage in discussion regarding ideas, current affairs and developments, or the progressive values detailed earlier. The first two of these three themes were *g) Avoiding discussions with others to prevent potential conflict [friends & colleagues]* and *h) Avoiding discussion with others to avoid conflict [generally]*. Here, typical responses for these themes included:

PERSONA12: There's one friend I'd probably try to avoid talking about things with because she's got such a different view... she'll say one thing and I'm just totally opposite to what I think. So yeah, it's just easier to try and divert the topic to something else.

PERSONA23: I mean, I definitely spoken about money sort of bills going up, gas prices etcetera with my friends a lot. I'd say probably recently because we've all got the same issues. But for anything like politics etcetera, then definitely not, no.

PERSONA21: I wouldn't instigate the conversation... I wouldn't wanna get into an argument with friends over something.

PERSONA23: No...just because with most people at work, you don't really know them on that level. And I think. You know, in case your views are completely different than it can cause quite an atmosphere and so yeah, just not something that I discuss.

Yet a desire to avoid conflict wasn't universally felt, and some respondents were open to engaging as well as, in some cases, learning and having their views challenged; thus sitting outside what the theory of anomie can offer ideas engagement. Interestingly, as we highlighted at the beginning of this section, it was those in situations where pressing life issues, not anomie, that was preventing them from engaging with ideas and developments, that responded in this way. For example:

PERSONC23: [I'm the] type of person to actually talk to someone else about it. Advice and just. Peer learning, peer support and things like that from family.

PERSOND21: No, we don't always agree. We do disagree. But it's a healthy discussion when we disagree, and it's quite nice because sometimes you can have your opinion and then you listen to somebody else, and you actually think she they might have a point. So yeah... I like talking to other people about stuff like that. I think it's healthy and I think it's interesting to see other people's point of view. Some of them I'll come away and think, 'no'. But I will listen and I'd never say to someone what a load of rubbish. And even if I think it, but yeah, we do have discussions about current affairs and things. I'm more than happy to, to have my opinions changed and to listen to different views on things.

An unwillingness to engage also featured in relation to social media: leading to the theme of *i) Limited, passive engagement with social media*. Here respondents were happy to engage passively with content but to not actively participate in on-line discussion (with this code equally applying to those who were happy to actively engage with friends and colleagues – e.g. **PERSONC23** and **PERSOND21**, above):

PERSONA23: I think I'd have to have strong views about something to post something really.

PERSOND12: ..there were so many offensive arguments over Brexit [on Twitter]. I just think, well, I'm not getting involved. I'm not talking about it.

PERSOND21: I think it was the same with COVID because you've had the Boris is doing a terrible job, Boris is doing a really good job, you know, and I'm not brave enough to stick my head above the parapet and say what I thought about it and be shot down. Because I know that if somebody trolled me, it would personally affect me.

A number of reasons seemingly exist for the emergence of codes *g)* to *i)*. The first is the regressive nature of the views many participants held on the societal values relating to inclusion, wellbeing and businesses engaging in ethical behaviour. This is encapsulated by the code: *j) Progressive values are for the benefit of 'others'*. With the comments falling under this code, revealing feelings of disconnection from society, as respondents begin to believe that the embracing of 'difference' means that the norms they are used to are no longer reflected back at them (whilst also feeling less and less solidarity with

other groups in society because of this 'difference'). As such it is also possible to determine elements of the 'change is loss' feeling which typified Goodhart's (2017) 'somewheres' group amongst the responses associated with this code. For example:

PERSONA21: I think [the progressive values we asked about] they're addressing the issues of the minority of people, rather than the majority.

PERSONA12: [in terms of inclusion] There seems to be an overemphasis of trying to get people of different colour in adverts and on TV programs... It's just it's being rammed down your down your throat all the time. I don't have an issue with people of any colour, but the fact that we have to keep having all the adverts and programs you have to have your right number of gays, blacks, whatever. So...

PERSOND12: [what has] has annoyed me lately is the Black Lives Matter thing. I think that's gone a bit too far because I never did agree with that because I think all lives matter including those of animals. I'm a big animal rights thing, and I think it's gone too far the other way because I think all lives matter.

At the same time, these participants (in keeping with the findings of Smith, 2021) often recognised the 'out of date' nature of their views, making them reluctant to express them to others.

PERSONB12: Yes [these days] you can't say anything or you're upset somebody... you've all gotta watch what you say in your pees and queues all the time...

However, as per the findings of Brown *et al.*, 2022a, those who engaged in debate with friends, family and colleagues about ideas and, as identified earlier, did not seemingly suffer from anomie, provided responses indicating an acceptance of the themes:

PERSOND21: Very important, particularly in today's society where we are, we are mixed very much mixed. We're not just an island sitting on our own anymore and we are more accepting of sexual orientation, all sorts of sexual orientation.

Religion or beliefs? There are an awful lot now in this country that aren't necessarily the same as mine, but as much as I would want them to accept mine, I expect to accept other religions as well, and same with, age class or ability. It's you. You've got to be inclusive, you've got to accept that we are not all the same, and neither of us are right or wrong in in what we believe.

PERSONC31: Yeah, I think all of the [progressive values presented] are very important. And I would say maybe one and two [living in a just inclusive society and supporting physical and mental wellbeing] slightly more than three [Seeing corporations and businesses adopt more ethical, responsible and sustainable ways of working]. And just because of you know, like what's going on in the world. But I also am quite into like sort of sustainability

and being eco-friendly and things like that. So three is also quite important to me, but I think maybe one and two are slightly more.

Other potential reasons for a lack of interaction with others included respondent's low levels of confidence in their ability to engage in effective debate (e.g. '**PERSONA23**: I don't think I know enough about any topic probably at the moment to have a deep conversation about it'). This lack of confidence may again also be indicative of the presence of more naïve epistemic beliefs, since it seemingly implies that debate needs to result in definite conclusion, rather than a process in which one can learn. Lastly is the feeling that social media spaces are not places where calm, measured debate can safely occur. This reflects a growing understanding of the detrimental consequences of how social media platforms have been constructed for the effective exchange of ideas (Haight, 2022).

Our final theme was *k) Other interests than staying abreast of new ideas*. As with theme *d) dipping-in to ideas*, this theme indicated of a lack of curiosity in relation to the 'bigger picture' of ideas; with individuals instead being governed by micro-level intrinsic interests, such as:

PERSONB21: Celebrities. OK, some time if something happens to celebrities who are important I wanna find out about the relationship which is very very important. And like they might have split or something, I might go and like, check that out. You know what I mean?... like Beyoncé and Jay-Z split then that's me. I'll be watching, like, you know, those types of stores they've have been in relationship for long time, you know?

PERSONC22: I worry about traffic jams and that kind of thing.

PERSONC22: Facebook - I love it - I absolutely love it and [if I see] a story like missing cat or something like that, I share it: missing animals, that kind of thing

Schütz (1946) associates theme *k)* type behaviour with level of education (with higher instances of *k) Other interests than staying abreast of new ideas*, occurring in individuals where level of education is low). Furthermore, Schütz (1946) suggests that individuals with low levels of education are also more likely to hold the view that the world beyond such micro-interests functions in ways that are both beyond their control and operate without need of their input. This perspective thus suggesting a link between theme *k)* and theme *c) a feeling of lack of control in relation to current events*, above.

Discussion

Our third research question sought to identify insight into how to close the gap between the ideal and real. In particular, as a first step, to identify insights that an anomic lense might provide in terms of helping re-engage certain groups with ideas. As shown above, our findings hint at the existence of anomie amongst our respondents. In particular, participants' responses suggested: feelings of frustration, anxiety, confusion and

powerlessness in relation to the complexities of contemporary society (themes *b* & *c*); that they felt unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world (themes *c* to *i*); elements of societal disconnection (themes *j* & *k*); tactical behaviors such as avoiding discussion (themes *g* to *i*) and limited, passive engagement with social media (theme *i*). These findings also, simultaneously, spotlight three areas of future focus that might help the future development of the ideas informed society. These are:

1. More positive and relevant reporting of ideas
2. The promotion of, and support for, 'healthy' face-to-face engagement with ideas
3. Finding ways to promote effective ideas engagement via the use of social media.

Each of these is now explored in more detail below.

1) More positive and relevant reporting of ideas: As noted in the findings section above, many respondents felt a sense of depression when engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth (in particular, as reported on via news outlets). As Pinker (2022) observes, journalism is often biased toward the negative, because bad things are sudden and newsworthy, whereas the good happens more gradually and typically does not lend itself to sound bites. In an age of 24/7 news media, and the investment that has been made to secure its existence—where media providers have to continually supply content that interests and excites in order to attract and retain viewers/potential clicks—this bias invariably results in an overemphasis on the reporting of crime and sensationalism; scandal; conflict; celebrity; disaster; power; celebration; suppression; satire and chaos (with only one of these categories—*celebration*—likely to be unrelentingly positive) (British Library, 2022). The result is to make people less likely to want to engage with such content, since it appears disproportionately threatening (Haight, 2022); consequently, many respondents retreated from the news as an act of 'self-preservation'. Yet, conversely, it also appears to be the case that receiving positive news leads to media consumers feeling good (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016). What's more, positive news tends to spread further since it is more likely to be shared within social networks (Gable & Reis, 2010). Such sharing can also result in increased positive emotions, subjective wellbeing and self-esteem, as well as improved levels of commitment, trust, and closeness within social networks (as well as improving their stability) (Gable & Reis, 2010). Thus, an increased supply of up-beat content seemingly results in more sustained ideas mobilisation: something needed for the ideas-informed society to flourish. A potential approach to re-engaging ideas 'refusers', therefore, might be to find alternative and more positive approaches to presenting ideas. For instance, the use of science cafés or 'pint of science' type activities, which seek to switch the focus from passive engagement and a value emphasis on audience *size*, to interactive engagement and a value emphasis audience *interaction and learning* (Brown et al., 2022b). Further, given behaviours such as *d) dipping-in*

to ideas are potentially indicative of a lack of curiosity in relation to the ‘bigger picture’, as well as putting a different spin on ideas, more interactive approaches such as science cafés can also potentially present new ideas in a more tailored way. Thus, by relating content to people’s lived realities and contexts, such approaches might hopefully also spark increased interest and curiosity.

2) The promotion of, and support, for ‘healthy’ face-to-face engagement with ideas: A democratic society and so, by extension, an ideas-informed society, must necessarily be grounded in the understanding that there are different ways of perceiving and understanding the world. Afterall, in a democracy we must choose between competing visions: typically, between the views of those on the left and right of centre. This means it is the art of rhetoric—of persuading others that one pathway is likely to lead to better outcomes than another—that moves democratic societies towards some form of consensus; with those holding alternative viewpoints needing to present sufficiently persuasive perspectives and/or evidence for there to be any shift in this consensus (a process referred elsewhere as the ‘marketplace of ideas’: [Milton, 1644](#)). Correspondingly, therefore, threats to the ideas informed society can emerge from two sources: 1) when there is a rejection of plurality; and 2) when there is an acceptance of relativism. The ideas-informed society can only function when ideas emerge and we engage with them. But, at the same time, the ideas informed society cannot flourish in an environment of ‘anything goes’. Rather, we can, for the most part, only be meaningfully ideas-informed when we are critically interrogating a multitude of ideas for their veracity, the logic of their position and their relationship to our values and norms. In the absence of both ideas and critical engagement, we tend instead to be more likely to accept populist accounts of the world: those which are easy to grasp and present a singular, concrete view, which feel intuitively right and play on our fears—albeit accounts that are not necessarily grounded in any objective reality. From the data presented above it is clear that, although diversity of perspectives was not seemingly rejected outright by respondents, many respondents were unwilling to put themselves in situations with friends, family and colleagues where different perspectives were surfaced, and disagreement openly acknowledged: especially so when the views expressed by those respondents were more ‘regressive’ in nature. Further, one respondent felt that if a multitude of ideas was present, then the concomitant absence of a singular concrete ‘truth’ must equate to the representation of something false or ‘fake’. We also note that other respondents reported that they sought to cope with ideas overload by just ‘dipping in’, which also potentially represents a reaction to plurality by not attempting to view the entire ideas horizon, just that which one most likes the look of. This trio of behaviours can be considered problematic since it is likely to mean that beneficial or progressive ideas only spreading only slowly amongst certain groups ([Haight, 2022](#)): this becomes apparent when contrasting the views of these respondents with those who more actively engage with others. The research team also, however, saw a link to the need to focus on effective ways to engage with social media. As such, we now explore this third

aspect before considering in more detail the insights that emerge from both 2) and 3) combined.

3) Finding ways to promote effective ideas engagement via the use of social media: the majority of respondents expressed a reluctance to engage actively with social media. For example, they were unlikely to tweet, post comments or engage in online debate. Most commonly, this passive approach to social media was driven by a concern for how other users might respond, and a reluctance to fall foul of trolling or becoming the victim of online abuse. This feeling is seemingly widely felt: for instance, research by [Anjeh & Doraisamy \(2022\)](#) suggests some 71% of the British population believe that social media creates unhelpful division. And yet a “democracy cannot survive if its public squares are places where people fear speaking up and where no stable consensus can be reached” ([Haight, 2022](#): online). Conversely, the more civil online discussions are, the more likely they will facilitate behavioural change ([Jennings & Russell, 2019](#)). Further, research also suggests that online discussion amongst heterogeneous groups can be beneficial. This is because closed social networks can lead to a lack of exposure to new ideas or perspectives, whereas the more ideologically plural one’s friends and contacts are, the more diverse the information one will be receive ([Erisen & Erisen, 2012](#); [Masip et al., 2018](#); [Thomas & Vinnuales, 2017](#)). In other words, diverse social networks (when they work well) can provide a powerful means through which to promote ideas engagement.

When we consider points 2) and 3) in the round, therefore, they seemingly point to the need for a program of democratic or ideas-related education (that occurs both within and beyond schools), which specifically grows societal capacity in relation to each of these areas (this is aside from any onus on social media companies to promote constructive debate on their platforms). Building on from recent systematic review undertaken by [Brown et al. \(2022b\)](#), the potential focus of such a program could be to ensure that citizens join society ready able to do three things: i) to critically engage with ideas; ii) to interactively engage with ideas; and iii) to productively engage with ideas. The first of these—criticality—is required as a bulwark against an ‘anything goes’ (i.e. relativistic) approach to ideas engagement. Here then, citizens should be able to both understand that a multitude of perspectives can and should exist, but that only a subset of these will likely represent objectively based and well-reasoned sets of arguments which have any likelihood of resulting in positive change. The second—interactive engagement—means that citizens share and discuss ideas with others to ensure they regularly encounter or offer new perspectives. As above, this means accepting that beliefs differ but also providing, defending or deconstructing arguments to suggest why one set of ideas might lead to more beneficial outcomes than others. Finally, a productive engagement means approaching ideas with an open but critical mind: being prepared to learn (and to learn about new things), to allow one’s beliefs to be challenged, to embrace alternative perspectives—but to not be fooled by rhetoric alone, and to offer up respectful challenge when this is warranted: with

‘respectful’ equating to engagement where the purpose is to persuading others to consider an alternative (as opposed to seeking to ‘win the argument at all costs’ or engaging in the type of trolling or pile-ons that are too often seen on social media). Having the skills to adjudicate is also important, yet if participants finish their engagements on different sides of the debate, understanding how to accept the existence of differences with good grace (while reserving the right to try, and try again—perhaps armed with better evidence and more persuasive means of presenting it) is also a key life skill (Haight, 2022).

Conclusion

“Society” observed Devlin (1965: 10) “means a community of ideas; without shared ideas on politics, morals and ethics, no society can exist”. But knowledge advances and ideas can and should change over time. As such, an ideas-informed society represents the notion of an upward trajectory of societal progress: one in which we continually engage with new ideas, developments and claims to truth, so as to perpetually build upon past social, scientific, health-related, artistic, environmental and technological advances. This process should ideally lead us to happier, healthier, enriched, productive, more sustainable and more equitable futures. Yet it is vital that progress is also inclusive and that, as society moves forwards, it does so as a whole; without leaving people behind, discontent and disengaged. As well as the findings presented above, our previous findings (Brown *et al.*, 2022a), which are in line with Anjeh & Doraisamy (2022) suggests that disengaged and malcontent groups do exist; further, one in three 18–24 year olds expected their views to be seen as unacceptable by future generations of young people—with half of older Britons feeling the same (Smith, 2021). And while Socrates might be thought of as one of the first victims of ideas anomie, having been forced to drink hemlock in the midst of Athenian social change, the danger in more modern times ranges from individual or group ‘self-harm’ caused by the rejection of ideas which could be beneficial, to the fragmentation of society into various groups each of whom believes various alternative version of the truth, whilst being unable to accept the validity of perspectives held by the ‘other’ (Haight, 2022).

Societal cohesion requires that all voices are respectively heard, while progress requires that only the most beneficial ideas are taken forward (Goodhart, 2004). Yet, if we also consider progress to mean that ideas are taken forward in the most beneficial way, this allows us to reach a situation of both cohesion and progress (not as a dilemma, but as a desirable state), as a multitude of voices help shape ideas, so ensuring their broad acceptability; ultimately leading to positive change for as many people as possible. So how do we resolve the progressive’s dilemma such that we have strong social cohesion

and engagement with a plurality of perspectives? As a first step, we need to re-engage people with ideas. With this paper we explored how the theoretical lense of anomie might support such a re-engagement. A major limitation to our study is its small-scale qualitative nature. This means its findings cannot be generalised to a wider population (and in this regard, a quantification of our themes would be helpful). Nonetheless, what our findings suggest is that is that an anomic approach helps us better understand: i) the need for more positive reporting of ideas; ii) the encouraging and supporting of ‘healthy’ face-to-face engagement with ideas; and iii) finding ways to maximise purposeful ideas engagement via social media. These findings dovetail nicely of those of a recent systematic review, which suggested potential approaches to enable citizens to engage effectively with new ideas as well as a desire to do so (Brown *et al.*, 2022b). For instance, findings from the review include the potential development of school curricula or ideas-related heuristics, making ideas available and open for interaction—such as via the use of science cafés and festivals and through the development of social capital networks (online and face to face)—as well as the piquing of curiosity. As such, moving forward, we suggest the findings we have presented in this paper can be the starting point of for usefully informing, and helping shape future research and initiatives in this area; with the focus of such research/interventions seeking to maximise engagement with ideas by those who have, for the moment, lapsed into being ideas ‘refusers’.

Data availability

Underlying data

Given the nature of the questions, and of the responses provided (which could cause harm to respondents if made widely available), the full qualitative data set has not been made publicly accessible (as per Durham University ethics guidelines). Readers may apply to the corresponding author for access to this data. Access will be granted subject to applicants providing completed ethical approval documentation which guarantees respondent anonymity in any future publications.

Extended data

OSF: Facilitating the ideas-informed society: Anomie in the UK. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XA46Q> (Luzmore, 2022)

This project contains the following extended data:

- Topic guides for the focus groups

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Zero “No rights reserved” data waiver](#) (CC0 1.0 Public domain dedication).

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Lars Qvortrup 

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I appreciate the changes and improvements - I have no further comments.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Education research, social theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 04 November 2022

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Felix Schreiber 

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The article aims to answer the question of whether anomie can be seen as a threat to the ideas informed society. To do so, the article begins with an in-depth theoretical foundation and operationalization of "the ideas informed society". Such a society is characterized by specific attributes its citizens share: "1) citizens see value in staying up to date, and; 2) citizens regularly

keep themselves up to date by actively, openly and critically engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth" (p. 3). The central terms "ideas", "developments" and "claims to truth" are defined in a broad sense.

The idea informed society is furthermore introduced as having several desirable effects that are brought about by 1) and 2), these being: "3) citizens can become more knowledgeable; 4) citizens find themselves in a better position to make decisions that can optimally benefit them and others, and; 5) citizens can align their perspectives with appropriate societal values" (p. 3). While outcome 5) seems to point towards a specific political telos, the authors are fast to point out their perspective: "With regards to the last of these points (point 5), it is the view of the authors that such values are those which are progressive in nature: i.e. are values which are informed by the concepts of fairness and equality, as well as social and environmental justice." (P. 3). The authors hereby make their position transparent and debatable.

The next chapter "How ideas-informed are we?" (p. 3) tackles the question of how to further operationalize what is introduced as attributes of an ideas informed society in the proceeding chapter. Measuring importance to the topics of just society, individual health, and corporate ethics seems like a valid proposal and has proven feasible in other works (Brown et al., 2022). How does this now relate to "anomie"?

The chapter "Anomie" (p. 3-4) introduces the concept of anomie as "a social situation in which shared social ethics (i.e. previously common norms, values or beliefs) have disappeared" (p. 3). Historical background is given, which allows a more in-depth understanding of the context of the rise of the concept of anomie. It is at this point that one could raise the question of how the operationalization of the ideas informed society as an individual ("citizen") driven concept can be further explained by individual attitudes toward "shared social ethics". The interplay of individuals' beliefs regarding the importance of certain topics and the prevalence of anomie as a societal situation-introduced rather en passant-could possibly be expanded on in the future. Several factors that may favor anomie are introduced, while what is meant by "organic notions of solidarity"-a counterpart factor-is not further deliberated.

In "Anomie in the UK" (p. 4-5) several studies are introduced that underpin the thesis of the paper specific to a UK context.

"Research questions" (p. 5) poses a trias of questions that guide the analysis of the empirical findings in the later chapters of the paper. The authors implicitly position themselves in "the fold" by posing the question of how to bring "ideas 'refusers'" back. It doesn't seem implausible that the authors are themselves "better informed, [...] better positioned to make more informed decisions and [aligned] with more progressive stances" (p. 5), the claim is simply put forth without evidence. Introducing certain positions or people as being in "the fold" remains irritating as it connotes the (legitimized) desired positions with a flock or established group without addressing the possible reasons for the "outsiders" leave in the first place.

"Methods and samples" (p. 5-6) and "Ethics" (p. 6) aptly describe the used focus group method and introduce the larger sample from which the interview partners for these groups were selected and how/why they were selected. The selection process, along with the "no show"-trouble is to be expected, the group size of 10 participants seems large enough to draw tentative conclusions in the context of qualitative analysis.

The chapter "Analysis" (p. 6-8) remains rather shrouded behind the description of "a process of joint discussion, reflection and interpretation" (p. 6). Regarding transparency, the reader is not informed if first frameworks of themes in this context were used to reach the final 11 themes. Here, cross-references to other works could have been helpful—for the readers and possibly also for the authors. The resulting 11 themes, split into different subgroups in the following chapter, are presented very systematically; adding "signs of anomie" (p. 8) to the table helps readers keep an overview.

"Findings" (p. 9-12) delivers examples of each theme outlined in the proceeding chapter and adds possible interpretations. The interpretations seem presumptuous at times. One such interpretation is that lack of confidence [to take part in (public) debate] may again also be indicative of the presence of more naïve epistemic beliefs, since it seemingly implies that debate needs to result in definite conclusion, rather than a process in which one can learn". It is not a given that a lack of confidence implies naïve epistemic beliefs; this is not supported by further evidence, nor is it difficult to present alternative interpretations. Overall, this section could have benefited from a more in-depth presentation, interpretation, and a more systematic presentation of the answering of research questions 1. and 2. ("Below we address research questions 1) and 2)" (p. 9)).

"Discussion" (p. 12-13) tackles the third research question, "how to close the gap between the ideal and real" (p. 12). The themes introduced through qualitative analysis of the focus group interviews are presented again. Three possible "solutions" to anomie (as operationalized through these themes) are presented: "1) More positive and relevant reporting of ideas" pertains to possible alternatives to the "negative bias" of the media: "alternative and more positive approaches to presenting ideas. For instance, the use of science cafés or 'pint of science' type activities" (p. 12). "2) The promotion of, and support, for 'healthy' face-to-face engagement with ideas" addresses the possibility of making (public) debate more inclusive while not enabling an "anything goes" (p. 12) mentality. "3) Finding ways to promote effective ideas engagement via the use of social media" attempts to diversify social networks.

The paper closes with "Conclusion" (p. 13-14) where the findings are summarized. The article ends with a plea "to maximise engagement with ideas by those who have, for the moment, lapsed into being ideas 'refusers'" (P. 14).

With its sound introduction of anomie and the presentation of 11 themes that may support anomie, the paper promises to shed more light on research regarding "ideas-refusers" and ultimately how the bringing about of an ideas-informed society could be supported.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: systematic science research, content analysis, teacher education

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 09 Nov 2022

Chris Brown, Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

We thank the reviewer for their helpful comments and have attempted to address some of these valuable critiques in the next iteration of the paper

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 16 September 2022

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**Lars Qvortrup**

Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Review of Anomie in the UK? Can cultural malaise threaten the fruition of the ideas-informed society? Chris Brown, Ruth Luzmore, Jana Groß Ophoff

Lars Qvortrup

Summary

The article aims at realizing a so-called ideas-informed society, i.e. a society in which: 1) citizens see value in staying up to date, and; 2) citizens regularly keep themselves up to date by actively, openly and critically engaging with new ideas, developments and claims to truth. However, according to the article the realization of this ideal society is threatened by the existence of so-called 'ideas refusers'. Thus, the intention of the paper is to identify these 'ideas refusers' and to analyse the reason for their existence in order "to consider how the ideas 'refusers' might be brought back into the fold" (p. 5). Therefore, based on an earlier review with 1,000 respondents, 17 ideas refusers have been identified and invited to participate in four online focus groups. However, seven respondents did not show up, and only ten respondents could be interviewed in the focus group activities.

The article makes a distinction between citizens who are positive concerning staying up to date (the so-called 'anywheres', who are mobile, living in urban environments, high level educated) and citizens who are sceptical concerning staying up to date (the so-called 'somewheres' or 'ideas refusers', who live in specific places, often in small towns or the countryside, low level educated). The article further argues that the existence of the 'ideas refusers' is the result of a social anomie, and, in general, it looks with scepticism at the 'ideas refusers'.

Based on detailed analyses of the focus group interviews 11 themes are identified, and "signs of anomie" and "presence of other ideas-related themes" in relation to each of the themes are presented. Finally, three areas of future focus that might help the future development of the ideas informed society are suggested. They are:

1. More positive and relevant reporting of ideas
2. The promotion of, and support for, 'healthy' face-to-face engagement with ideas
3. Finding ways to promote effective ideas engagement via the use of social media.

Evaluation

Relevance:

The article is highly relevant. Most of us are concerned with the new social divides in many Western countries: The Trump-supporters in the US vs. the cultural elite, the "gilets jaune" in France vs. the French cultural elite etc. etc. It is indeed important to understand the reasons for these social divides and to identify relevant efforts to reduce the social contradictions and support constructive interactions across the divides.

Method:

There are big problems with the representativeness of the analysis. Only 17 respondents were invited, and of these only ten showed up. Furthermore, the potential bias of the analysis should be considered. The respondents were selected from a survey with 1,000 voting age citizens in England. The respondents in the survey were asked if they would be willing to take part in future

qualitative work and, if so, to provide their email address. As such, willing survey respondents meeting a number of criteria for being members of the 'ideas refusers' group were emailed and invited to take part in focus groups. As mentioned, only ten showed up. These problems are only addressed in two sentences: "A major limitation to our study is its small-scale qualitative nature. This means its findings cannot be generalized to a wider population" (p. 14). It should be considered and discussed what it implies:

- that the respondents should actively indicate that they wanted to participate
- that more than 40 % did not show up (is there a bias in the no show?)
- that answers were the result focus group activities (does this influence the answers and in which way? Nothing is said about the structuring of the focus groups)
- that focus groups were online (Team-meetings)

Theory and analysis:

The theory informing the analysis and the conclusions is extremely biased. The distinction between the 'anywheres' and the 'somewheres' (the 'ideas refusers') is obviously made from the position of the 'anywheres'. They are the constructive, open-minded and well-informed citizens, while the 'somewheres' are described as having "naïve epistemic beliefs", being "regressive", having "low level of confidence". This leads to distinctions such as: sophisticated/naïve, able/unable, curious/lack of curiosity etc. Consequently, it is of little surprise that according to the article the existence of 'ideas refusers' is the result of a social anomie. This also affects the conclusions: the 'ideas refusers' should "...be brought back into the fold" (p. 5) (which is obviously our fold), they should be educated, they should be provided with more "healthy" (p. 12) opportunities.

The analysis is clearly made from a first order position, that is from one side of the distinction between us and them, and the article seems to be blind in relation to this position. This implies that in the table 2, summarizing the results of the qualitative analysis, concerning "signs of anomie" it is six times repeated that a sign of anomie is the 'ideas refusers' are feeling "unable to use one's own agency to shape and control the world", and that concerning "presence of other ideas-related themes" it is five times repeated that the problems are the result of "less sophisticated (!) forms of epistemological belief" and twice repeated that it is the result of a "lack of curiosity (!) in relation to the bigger picture.

I accept the theoretical position chosen by the authors, but I highly recommend that it is made explicit, and that the theoretical bias is discussed. If a second order position were chosen (which is recommended), it would be possible to consider whether it is the distinction made by the authors (between the so-called open-minded and the close-minded etc.) which is problematic and the result of a social anomie.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

No

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Education research, social theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 09 Nov 2022

Chris Brown, Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

Thank you for your detailed critique. We have attempted to respond to each point in a substantive way and believe the work is now improved as a result

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.