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News Media Trust and Sources of Political Information in West Africa: Mainstream vs. New Media in Ghana and Nigeria


Jamiu M. Mustapha¹, Marina G. Shilina^{2,3},
Obiri S. Agyei¹, Carbukie R. Ocansey⁴

¹ Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University),
10 Miklukho-Maklaya St, bld 2, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation

² Plekhanov Russian University of Economics,
36 Stremyanny Ln, Moscow, 115093, Russian Federation

³ Lomonosov Moscow State University,
9 Mokhovaya St, Moscow, 125009, Russian Federation

⁴ University for Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA),
New Rd, Madina, Ghana

 mustafa-md@rudn.ru

Abstract. Like many other developed democracies, most democratic countries in West Africa are facing challenges of trust in news media for political information, particularly with the emergence of the non-mainstream media — new social media. Previous research revealed that alternative news media trust is correlated with lower levels of trust in news in Africa and that the presence of private media have failed to offer alternative sources to government media. This paper for the first time seeks to investigate reasons for the increase in distrust in news media among the mainstream and non-mainstream media in West African Ghana and Nigeria, which is the main source for political information in the region. We conducted the study through online surveys for the audience of news media in Ghana and Nigeria who are interested in political news and are frequent users of both mainstream media and new social media for political information. We found out that even though people in these two countries use social media as an alternative source of obtaining political information, yet, they largely still trust mainstream media news for political information rather than social media.

Keywords: political information, news trust, West African media, mainstream media, new social media, uses and gratification theory

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Доверие к новостным СМИ как источникам политической информации в Западной Африке: признанные vs. новые медиа в Гане и Нигерии

М.Д. Мустафа¹✉, М.Г. Шилина^{2,3}id, С.О. Агьеи¹id, Р.К. Оканси⁴id

¹ *Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, Миклухо-Маклая, 10, корп. 2*

² *Российский экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова, Российская Федерация, 115093, Москва, Стремянный переулок, 36*

³ *Московский государственный университет им. М.В. Ломоносова, Российская Федерация, 125009, Москва, ул. Моховая, 9*

⁴ *Университет профессиональных исследований, Аккра (UPSA), Гана, Мадина, New Rd*

✉ mustafa-md@rudn.ru

Аннотация. Как и многие развитые демократии, большинство демократических стран Западной Африки сталкиваются с проблемами доверия к средствам массовой информации как источникам политической информации, особенно с появлением новых социальных медиа. Проведившиеся ранее исследования показали, что доверие к альтернативным средствам массовой информации коррелирует с более низким уровнем доверия к новостям в Африке и что частные медиа не являются альтернативой государственным СМИ. В данной статье впервые делается попытка исследовать причины роста недоверия к официальным и новым медиа в Западной Африке, Гане и Нигерии, как основным источникам политической информации в регионе. Метод исследования: онлайн-опрос аудитории средств массовой информации в Нигерии и Гане, которая интересуется политическими новостями и использует как официальные, так и новые медиа для получения политической информации. Результаты исследования показали, что хотя респонденты в Гане и Нигерии используют новые медиа в качестве альтернативного источника получения политической информации, однако в целом доверяют политическим новостям не в социальных сетях, а в официальных СМИ.

Ключевые слова: политическая информация, доверие к новостям, западноафриканские СМИ, официальные СМИ, новые социальные медиа, теория использования и удовлетворения

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Introduction

Like many other democratic societies, most democratic countries in West Africa also face challenges of trust in news media for sources of information, particularly mainstream media with the emergence of non-mainstream, new social media for political information. While previous research revealed that alternative news trust is correlated with lower levels of trust in the mainstream (Moehler & Singh, 2011), yet the presence of private media in Africa does not equate to alternative sources to government media. What about the emergence of new media as an alternative for source of political information, since there is no firm trust in the two mainstream media — government and private? Even with the opportunity of alternatives which tend to give citizens choice and are supposed to be a solution to their less trust in existing media, this alternative also seems not to be performing to their expectation, in fact, less than the expectation of government media.

Results from research conducted by Moehler and Singh (Moehler & Singh, 2011) in sixteen countries in Africa, showed that “there is considerable variation across countries in the degree to which citizens think their private media sources are less credible than public sources.” This has led to an increase in distrust in institutions, low interest in political participation, and the new case on online misinformation and disinformation during elections, which continues to contribute to unrest and political chaos in the region, posing a great threat to sustainable democracy and trust in institutions is strongly linked to a meaningful practice of democracy (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019).

Although there have been numerous research on news trust and sources of political information, it is equally important to note that the emergence of new media and the uncertainties surrounding technologies have made it imperative to explore whether people trust the new media as a source of news. The level of mistrust nowadays seems to be much higher than before which calls for special attention to the investigation as to what are the causes and in what best ways can it be mitigated. In Western democracies, for instance, it is believed that trust in the news continues to decline and the role of journalism keeps on changing day by day and particularly, research on media trust is being revisited (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019; Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017).

There is a low level of research conducted in this area in the context of Africa because there are not enough research institutes in the region and these methods in which data are being gathered cannot be compared to other developed countries in the West (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2019); an online survey may not be adequate to gather data in Africa due to limited usage of technologies,

etc. There is no research on the topic of West African media, Ghanaian and Nigerian in particular.

Ghana and Nigeria were chosen because both countries share similar commonalities in their governmental system and are formerly British colonies, thus adopting English as their official language; both countries have similar level on democracy development.

This is the very first research on the problem of trust in political news media, both mainstream and new social. The paper is structured by exploring the problem of trust in news media and its connection with the emergence of new media and media pluralism in Ghana and Nigeria.

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of mainstream and new media as sources of political information in Ghana and Nigeria?

RQ2: What are the parameters of trust in the case of mainstream and new media as sources of political information there?

In answering these research questions, the following are the hypotheses tested through our survey: H1 — the emergence of non-mainstream media is correlated to distrust mainstream media in Ghana and Nigeria, H2 – the political and commercial interference (not independent) in the mainstream media is negatively associated with distrust in mainstream media, H3 – using mainstream or new media as the main source of political information will impact the audience trust.

The study employed the quantitative method grounded on uses and gratification theory and concepts of news trust and choice of media. We questioned people in Ghana and Nigeria (n = 200, 2021), whether peoples' trust in the usage of mainstream media has shifted to online media despite of some limitation problems of research in Africa (Rice, Winter, Doherty & Milner, 2017; Andrade, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Media trust in the digital era and Uses and Gratification theory

While scholars have defined trust in several ways, others believe that the term “trust” is too vague (Otto & Köhler, 2018). Trust is an element of public engagement (Williams, 2012), said to be a belief in a thing or a person (Otto & Köhler, 2018) with an expectation to serve a certain outcome or to serve a need (Park, Fisher, Flew & Dulleck, 2020).

In today's digitalized world, trust has become a significant element of everyday life: Trust in institutions, media, businesses, family, and every area of life. For a very long time, trust and truth have been a strong element of journalistic practice in liberal democracies (Heinecke, 2019; Park, Fisher, Flew & Dulleck, 2020). However, public trust in the media has declined in recent years (Sterrett, Malato, Benz, Kantor, Tompson, Rosenstiel & Loker, 2019). This trust is the key target of the populist politician agenda nowadays to continue attacking just to divert the trust of people to themselves (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris &

Eisenegger, 2019; Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017). Pingree, R.J. et al. noted that media criticism or gatekeeping criticism is one of the many factors that contribute to a decrease or increase in news media trust and choice for political information (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev & Dickinson, 2013). A study also cited bridges in ethics and rules in journalism practice among the reasons for continued mistrust since media trust is perceived to be correlated to the credibility and trustworthiness of mass media (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev & Dickinson, 2013). More so, in less than two decades, trust in news media has experienced a series of changes before and after the internet while digitalization gives room to alternative sources of information (Heinecke, 2019).

Uses and gratification theory suggests that individuals seek out media content to satisfy personal objectives and that they are aware of their motivations for media use (Kim, Jones-Jang & Kenski, 2020) and successfully fulfil them in playing a crucial part in the choice of today's audience trust in news media. People do not follow media just for news again, they follow media for choices like changing channels on TV or radio for particular programs that suit their needs or serve their interests. Thus, some people choose a particular media for politics, entertainment, education, or information. The new media is increasingly used to access political information.

The use of alternative media in this paper refers to the audiences' choice of choosing one particular media over another to serve an intended purpose. Evidence shows that the emergence of non-mainstream media and media pluralism is not the beginning of the rise of trust in news media in Africa, rather it has been in the system from the inception of media in the region (Moehler & Singh, 2011). Moehler and Singh stressed that the case of choice in the media could be related to the era of the authoritarian government versus people's trust. The authors argued that the only media available for people to acquire information was through the government media; the content was censored and journalists had little say in the information being churned out of the government media.

In the research (Moehler & Singh, 2011) in sixteen African countries, only five countries seem to trust private media more than the government. One could argue that people tend to trust media houses that follow these three trust models which most private media in Africa are failing to offer: informing, controlling, and providing a platform for debate (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019). However, after the emergence of private media, people tend to be more comfortable with the government's media more than the private and tend to trust government-owned media than private ones, while in a less democratic society, citizens trust private-owned media more than the governmental (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Methodology

Our study used the quantitative approach which provides a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables (Creswell,

2014). We synthesised the uses and gratification theory with existing literature on news trust and choice of media (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2019).

We used an online survey which is defined as a tool that allows the researchers to distribute and obtain information quickly, easier, allows gathering data anonymously, and reaches larger people regardless of the location in the world compared to traditional survey methods (Rice, Winter, Doherty & Milner, 2017; Andrade, 2020). In this case, we used the One-Click Survey (1ka), a web survey tool that provides advanced support for conducting research and analysis (<https://www.1ka.si/d/en>).

We also adopted some questions from the questionnaire of Kalogeropoulos, A., Suiter, J., Udris, L. & Eisenegger, M. (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019) for the one that applies to the hypothesis adapted. The survey questionnaire comprised eleven questions. The respondents comprised audience members from Nigeria and Ghana, n = 200, 193 males and 7 females. The stratified random sampling technique was appropriate for this research since the participants are distributed across a large geographical area and can easily be reached through this technique.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the primary data obtained from the survey and discussion of findings based on hypotheses formulated. Respondents that completed the survey were 96.5% (193) males and 3.5% (7) females. Forty-three (43%) of the respondents have a bachelor's degree; 18% of the respondents have a postgraduate degree while another 18% also have completed high school. Almost all the respondents were interested in political information.

Hypothesis 1: *The emergence of non-mainstream media is correlated to distrust of mainstream media in Ghana and Nigeria.*

In our first hypothesis, the study sought to find out whether the emergence of new media has led to the distrust of the traditional media in West Africa's political environment. Journalists always strive to gain trust and credibility from the public. For this reason, they always select their news items over other available information and then the judgement is left to the audience to decide which news from the different media to trust or distrust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Thus, the audience shapes the agenda of information as opposed to the agenda-setting by the media. Citizen journalism, to a large extent, has become important and is challenging mainstream journalism (Goode, 2009; Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

The study found that the national media is seen as the best medium through which people still rely upon for political information. It was evident in the study that 37% of the respondents trust the national media. New social media recorded the lowest in this category with 12% of respondents. We found that most people trust mainstream news as compared to online news as in developed democracies

(Osei-Appiah, 2019). Further, the study revealed that when it comes to the frequency of accessing political information, they use social media (47% of respondents) while only 26% of respondents use the national media to access political information.

Hypothesis 2: The political interference and commercial (not independent) in the mainstream media is negatively associated with distrust in mainstream media.

The study revealed that people are of the view that politics has infiltrated the media space which undermines the trust that the people have in the media. In Ghana and Nigeria, politicians especially those in government or those who are connected to the government in power have easy access to obtain a license to set up a media house. The journalists, to a large extent, do not unearth the corruption that goes on in the government, this undermines the checks and balances that the news media should have on the politicians or the government.

The respondents (36%) disagree that the news media is independent of political or government influence while 17% agree that the news media is not influenced by any political or government influence.

The business or commercial environment has also infiltrated the media space. 36% disagree that the business or commercial community does not have an undue influence on the media landscape, however; 17% agree that the business or commercial community has undue influence on the media space. The private media are more concerned about making profits that will sustain their business to meeting the needs of the citizens (Osei-Appiah, 2019) in providing them with balanced and trustworthy political news. In effect, people do not trust the media when it comes to political information which will search for other sources for their political news which may either be credible or not.

Hypothesis 3: Using mainstream or new media as the main source of political information will impact the audience trust.

The study sought to find out whether the audience trusts the news media for political information. 37% of respondents tend to agree that they can trust the mainstream media for their political news. Although people use the internet to get information, they still have a bit of trust in the mainstream media as compared to the non-mainstream media. The non-mainstream media is, however, a veritable trove to get access to political information, thus, 62% responded that they used new social media to get access to political news, but when it comes to trusting political news they normally rely on the mainstream media to get a confirmation or an endorsement from the mainstream media whether what they have read or watched is true or false.

Conclusion

While there is large evidence through the literature on declining trust in media, there is still little work on the audience members' choice of media usage in West Africa. This study for the first time answered the key research questions on trust in mainstream and new media in West African Ghana and Nigeria.

It revealed that new media is becoming one of the main sources through which citizens obtain their information on politics which will also help shape the kind of information being shared online by the traditional media.

The study found out that the private media has become more preferable to the government-owned media as the audience view the government media as a tool for the government's statements.

Our research revealed that the audiences have become the centre of the news and they are rather shaping the agenda-setting of the media due to the emergence of the new media.

The research concluded that people use new media as an alternative media to obtain political information, nevertheless, mainstream media still plays a vital role in providing political information in Ghana and Nigeria.

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Bio notes:

Jamiu M. Mustapha, Lecturer of the Department of Mass Communication, Philological Faculty, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), ORCID: 0000-0001-8239-5808; e-mail: mustafa-md@rudn.ru

Marina G. Shilina, Professor, Plekhanov Russian State University of Economics, Lomonosov Moscow State University, ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X; e-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

Obiri S. Agyei, PhD Candidate of the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), ORCID: 0000-0002-7409-7584; e-mail: stephenobiri99@gmail.com

Carbukie R. Ocansey, Lecturer at Department of Communication Studies, University for Professional Studies, Ghana, ORCID: 0000-0001-9740-8894; e-mail: ruth.ocansey@upsamail.edu.gh

Сведения об авторах:

Мустафа Мухаммед Джамуи, ассистент кафедры массовых коммуникаций, филологический факультет Российского университета дружбы народов, ORCID: 0000-0001-8239-5808; e-mail: mustafa-md@rudn.ru

Шилина Марина Григорьевна, профессор РЭУ имени Г.В. Плеханова, МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова, ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X; e-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

Агъеи Стивен Обири, аспирант кафедры психологии и педагогики филологического факультета Российского университета дружбы народов, ORCID: 0000-0002-7409-7584; e-mail: stephenobiri99@gmail.com

Оканси Рут Карбуки, преподаватель кафедры коммуникационных исследований, Университет профессиональных исследований, Гана, ORCID: 0000-0001-9740-8894; e-mail: ruth.ocansey@upsamail.edu.gh