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Prevalence of Traditional News Media Distrust in Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The news media in many parts of the world are facing challenges of trust from the audience for political information, especially with the emergence of the non-mainstream media – new/social media. Research evidence reveals that growing reliance on social media for information needs satisfaction has led to lower levels of trust in news in Africa and other parts of the world. This study investigates the prevalence of distrust in mainstream news media among audiences in Awka, Anambra State with a view to ascertaining the reasons behind the trend. The research objectives that guided the study are to ascertain the frequency of exposure to traditional news media by respondents, to ascertain if respondents distrust the traditional news media, to find out the respondents' main source for information gratification between traditional news media and alternative media, and finally to ascertain the reasons for distrust of traditional news media. The study was anchored on perception theory while Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method was used to study 72 purposively selected respondents in the Anambra State's secretariat, Awka. The findings revealed that respondents distrust the traditional news media due to political and commercial interference (they are not independent) in the mainstream. Also it was found that exposure to social media negatively affects trust in mainstream news media. The findings indicate that news users who distrust the veracity and honesty of traditional news media may turn to alternative outlets such as the social media for information needs gratification. The study recommended that the traditional news media should strengthen their news and current affairs contents with more credible information devoid of interference by their owners and political office holders, to make more audience members to trust their contents.

Keywords: Prevalence, Traditional news media, Distrust, Alternative media, Trust.

Introduction

When audience members in the society distrust the mainstream media, they have a tendency to withdraw from it and turn towards alternative sources (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Tsfti & Cappella, 2003). One of the major reasons to distrust the news media, and to increasingly use alternative outlets, could be an impression that the information reported in the mainstream media is false or even intentionally misleading (Mustapha, Shilina, Agyei & Ocansey, 2022). Like many other democratic societies in the western world, many 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 trust for alternative news media is correlated with lower levels of trust in the mainstream (Moehler & Singh, 2011; Mustapha, et al., 2022), yet the presence of private media in Africa does not equate to alternative sources to government media. The emergence of social media as an alternative for source of political information increased as a result of lack of firm trust in the two mainstream media - government and private (Mustapha, et al., 2022).

Based on populist discourse, traditional news media are increasingly scapegoated for misleading the people and this resulted to the use of 'Fake News' label to delegitimize traditional news media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Citizens might respond to this by resorting to other platforms for information, especially more alternative news sources online (Müller & Schulz, 2021). At the same time, this online news environment is also argued to be particularly conducive to the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; Tambuscio et al., 2015). Thus, the more citizens perceive the (mainstream) traditional news media as dishonest and inaccurate, the more likely they are to select media content from sources that adhere less to the standards of verified, objective journalism (i.e. news shared on social media), which could in turn intensify perceptions of misinformation and disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022). The lack of trust in professional journalism also makes the public more susceptible to falsehoods, as people's overwhelming distrust of news encourages them to "fact check" the news they consume, which tends to lead them to cherry-pick information that most aligns with their worldviews regardless of the legitimacy of the outlet (Nelson & Lewis, 2023).

In Western democracies, for instance, evidence from studies show 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, especially Nigeria because, according to Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen (2019), 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.

The present study investigates the prevalence of distrust of traditional news media by residents in Anambra with a view to ascertaining what leads to the distrust. The study also investigates how over-dependence on social media influences distrust for traditional news media. 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.

Statement of the Problem

Distrust for traditional news media could lead to distrust in institutions, low interest in political participation, and on online misinformation and disinformation during elections, which continues to contribute to unrest and political chaos, posing a great threat to sustainable democracy (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019). Trust in institutions is strongly linked to a meaningful practice of democracy. Traditional news media perform very essential role in democratic societies. They serve as channels of political information, increase political knowledge, enhance public discourse, initiate informed political participation and determine the level of political trust among the citizens (Akinola, Omar & Mustapha, 2020). However, Lewis (2019) observes that lower levels of trust in the media may deny the public of some of the essential things in a democratic society. If the public do not trust the information source, they will not take the message that comes from it important and might therefore refuse to act on the information received and this might lead to political cynicism, negatively affecting people-based development in that society.

Furthermore, Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) noted that those who trust the media less are also more likely to believe online disinformation. Other studies indicate that citizens in countries with low levels of polarization, populist communication, and high levels of media trust are most resilient to false information (Humprecht et al., 2020). Trust may thus be a crucial factor related to people's susceptibility to disinforming worldviews. To better understand the nature of distrust of traditional news media among residents of Anambra, this study aimed to investigate the prevalence of distrust of these among audiences in Awka and the implications of public distrust of traditional media on consumption of social media and other alternative media contents. It is possible that perceptions of misinformation and disinformation in the traditional news media or political/commercial interference could be responsible for the distrust of these media.

Objectives of the Study

- To ascertain respondents' frequency of exposure to traditional news media.
- To ascertain if respondents distrust the traditional news media.
- To find out the respondents' main source of information gratification between traditional news media and alternative media.
- To ascertain the reason for distrust of traditional news media.

Theoretical Framework

This study was premised on the perception theory. The theory has two concepts which are the self-perception theory, and the cognitive dissonance theory. First, the theory of self-perception, inspired by B. F. Skinner's analyses, refers to when individuals come to "know" or have better understanding of their own attitudes, emotions, and other personal states largely by drawing conclusions from observing their own behavior and/or the situations in which this behavior occurs (Baran, 2013).

The cognitive dissonance theory explains where an individual has two thoughts that contradict each other. A typical example is where

an individual thinks eating red meat is bad but goes ahead to continue eating red meat because they believe that by not eating red meat, it would not change anything, so nothing will change the current health status the individual is in; these are contradictory, almost hypocritical. The existence of dissonance makes the individual to be psychologically uncomfortable, which then allows the individual to try to remain constant in his/her thoughts. In the views of Folarin (1998), perception depends on a complexity of variables such as psychological disposition, past experiences, cultural expectations and social relationships.

The process of media audience perception involves four stages of selective exposure, selective perception, selective attention and selective retention, which falls within the selective process, a postulation of Festinger Leon in 1957 while pioneering this line of thought (Agbanu, 2013; Baran, 2013; Folarin, 1998; Festinger, 1957). Research often emphasizes on the study of these selective process especially in dealing with media audience perception and attitudinal change. Selective exposure entails a process where Individuals expose themselves to selected messages and because of this it is difficult for other messages to have effect on them; the concept of selective perception predicts that people will interpret messages in a manner consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs; selective attention says that because the eye processes information much faster than the brain can interpret, the human brain has to select which information to pay attention to at any given time while the concept of selective retention assumes that people remember best and longest, those messages that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs.

This theory is very essential to this study because it has to do with the perception of the people about traditional news media because how the people view traditional news media could influence how they see them as information sources. Hence, their perception of the mainstream media could influence their lack of trust in these media as reliable information sources.

The Review

Media Trust in the Digital Era

Journalism as a profession has grappled with diminishing public trust for decades. For the first time, more of the country's citizens report having no confidence at all than report having any trust in the news (Brenan, 2022). This credibility crisis is playing out across the globe; the Digital News Report 2022 published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which surveys more than half of the world's population, found that trust in news had fallen in almost half of the countries it surveyed (Newman, 2022). Indeed, the report observed that around 30% of people who actively avoid the news do so because they believe the news to be untrustworthy or biased (Ksiazek, et al., 2023).

Trust has been described as an element of public engagement, said to be a belief in a thing or a person (Williams, 2012; 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 emerged as a significant element of everyday life and it affects trust in institutions, media, businesses, and family, among others.

Public trust in the media has dropped in recent years (Sterrett, Malato, Benz, Kantor, Tompson, Rosenstiel & Loker, 2019). Some scholars argue that the decline in media trust is the key target of the populist politician agenda nowadays to continue attacking just to divert the trust of people to themselves (Mustapha et al., 2022;

Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019). A study explains that bridges in ethics and rules in journalism practice are among the reasons for continued mistrust since media trust is perceived to be correlated to the credibility and trustworthiness of mass media (Mustapha et al., 2022). Furthermore, 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).

The concept of alternative media in this paper is used to refer to the audiences' choice of 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 further stress 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 medium 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. After a study of sixteen African countries, Moehler and Singh (2011) found that only five countries seem to trust private media more than the government. It could then be argued 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).

Trust in Media and Partisanship

A well-informed citizenry that is sufficiently abreast of public affairs is one of the most indispensable elements of democratic system of government (Splendore & Curini, 2020). It is pertinent to note that the source of information and how they perceive the information determine the success of democratization of a nation. Thus, there is a connection between the members of the public and the representatives of the political institutions like the executive, the legislature and the judiciary (Fink, 2019; Splendore & Curini, 2020). This connection is usually the mass media which function as a connection between the people and the government (Jones, 2004). Since trust is the basis for the genuineness of political institutions and the media are regarded as one of them, trust in media is therefore imperative. In relation to this, Jones (2004, p. 60) asserts that "where citizens get their information and particularly how they view their information sources is a crucial element of understanding the health of a democratic system". Consequently, it is vital to be concerned about the peoples' trust in the media (Lewis, 2019). Trust has to do with the faith people feel towards various media. This refers to the belief that both print and electronic media are competent, fulfill their obligations, and act in responsible ways (Mustapha et al., 2022).

Mustapha et al., (2022) state that low level of confidence in the media may prevent the public from getting some benefits of democracy. Jones (2004) concludes that there is a statistically significant relationship between partisanship and media trust. In relation to the relationship between partisanship and trust in the media, it is believed that citizens trust private media more than public ones. Kebede (2013) found that most opposition parties do not trust government media while the ruling party does not also have full confidence in the private media.

Selective Exposure and Avoidance among Distrustful News Consumers

In today's society, citizens largely have the freedom to avoid channels that they distrust and select those they trust. In general, trust in the media and mainstream media exposure are positively related (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Tsfati & Peri, 2006). This implies that audience members who distrust the media are less likely to be exposed to mainstream news sources. There is also evidence that citizens with lower levels of media trust or higher levels of media skepticism choose to follow non-mainstream, alternative news sources (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), and specifically also social media and blogs (Fletcher & Park, 2017). Much as research evidence has not established the causal relationship between media trust and media use, this indicates that selective exposure could be based on user's trust in different types of media outlets (Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022).

The fact that audiences perceive the media to contain higher levels of misinformation in general is not necessarily comparable with encountering challenging or incongruent information (Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022). Based on previous findings on the relationship of media trust and use, it is expected that those who believe that the media in general disseminate false information tend to avoid news coverage by the mainstream media. Regardless of causal order, citizens with higher levels of perceived misinformation and disinformation are less likely to be exposed to mainstream news coverage. Online media can be part of the mainstream media (i.e. the websites of established news companies such as Fox News or the New York Times in the US). Alternative media, then, are understood to be all online sources that are less centrally organized, and more focused on addressing certain segments of the news audience that identify less with the mainstream news institutions (Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022).

Mainstream vs. Alternative Media

If citizens do not trust the mainstream media, they have plenty of alternative media options at their disposal (Haas, 2004; Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022). Alternative media, in contrast to mainstream media are typically published online, but not by a bigger media company. Most importantly, alternative media sources offer contents, opinions, and interpretations of events that are not as present in mainstream media (Haas, 2004; Harcup, 2005). Of course, not all media can be clearly categorized into either group and routines of mainstream and alternative journalists can overlap considerably (Harcup, 2005).

Previous research shows that citizens who are more skeptical of the news media's credibility tend to seek alternative media sources more (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Haas, 2004), possibly in search of more reliable information. In reversed causal order, exposure to alternative, non-legacy outlets may increase perceptions of misinformation and disinformation as such outlets often delegitimize mainstream media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Indeed, content analyses show that non-journalistic news coverage, such as Tweets, blogs, or alternative news sources, often contain attacks on the legacy media (Craft et al., 2016; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Audience members who distrust mainstream news sources tend to consume news from non-journalistic online outlets that offer an alternative to mainstream coverage and this could be based on perceptions of misinformation and disinformation about the traditional news media.

Perceived misinformation and disinformation may not influence media choices in identical ways. Study shows that perceptions of disinformation correspond to a stronger tendency to approach alternative media outlets than perceptions of misinformation, as disinformation implies deliberately misleading news consumers (Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022). The tendency to avoid mainstream media and approach alternative media is stronger for those with stronger perceptions of disinformation than misinformation (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Hameleers, Brosius & de Vreese, 2022).

What Causes Media Distrust?

Despite widespread agreement among journalism researchers and practitioners that public distrust in journalism is a growing problem for the profession, there is no clear consensus when it comes to overcoming it, nor is there even much in the way of consensus when it comes to defining "distrust" in the first place (Ksiasek, et al., 2023). The conceptualization of "distrust" in this work comes from Markov and Min (2022, p. 1101), who observed: "Scholars commonly treat the concept of media trust as a continuum comprising distrust and trust at opposite ends without explicitly defining media distrust".

In addition to arguing that distrust typically appears on a continuum, Markov and Min (2022, p. 1103) distinguish between "media distrust" and "media cynicism" by arguing that both distrust and cynicism entail negative expectations of the public towards the media, but cynicism is characterized by a lower degree of reflexivity compared with distrust. Cynical citizens a priori reject the news media because they are certain that journalistic conduct is exclusively the product of journalists' selfish interests. It is pertinent to note that distrust, however, is not necessarily cynical. Distrusting citizens can have different beliefs about media motives and may consider additional criteria (such as competencies) when evaluating the traditional news media (Ksiasek, et al., 2023).

Some scholars believe the biggest contributor to distrust of journalism is the widespread perception of liberal bias among journalists, leading them to advocate for journalism to maintain its ties to objectivity and the "view from nowhere" approach to reporting (Ksiasek, et al., 2023). On the other hand, those who believe the pursuit of objectivity has left marginalized communities feeling alienated from and disdainful of the press advocate for the rejection of objectivity in favor of a more self-reflexive and open form of news production (Callison & Young, 2019). Scholars have observed rising populist, anti-elitist sentiment among the public, combined with a lack of media literacy, which have resulted in many citizens believing the news media to be under the influence of powerful, political actors (Obermaier et al., 2023). This has led some to argue that the path to more trust in news is more transparency in news production while others believe it is more engagement with readers (Robinson, 2023), and more diversity in newsrooms (Wenzel, 2021). The range of approaches to improving trust in journalism is indicative of both the multifaceted nature of journalism's credibility crisis and uncertainty throughout the field when it comes to understanding the root causes of that distrust.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method was adopted for this study. According to Nwodu (2017), FGD is a research method that involves organizing and conducting series of group discussions with the objective of better understanding the attitudes, beliefs,

practices and values of sample elements on a specific subject. The beauty of FGD lies in the fact that, under proper guidance by a discussion moderator, participants are encouraged to spontaneously express opinions that may have been missed in structured questionnaire. According to Owuamalam (2012), it allows the researcher to find issues that are often missed (such as subtleties and complexities) by the scientific, more positivistic inquiries. The population of this study comprised of civil servants in Awka, the Anambra State Capital. The study focused on civil servants working in Ministries at the State's Secretariat. The ministries are Information, Health, Housing and Urban Development, Judiciary, Education, and Science and Technology. Since this is an exploratory study the researcher randomly selected 72 civil servants from the six State Ministries located at the secretariat; 12 civil servants from each Ministry. The selection was based on the researcher's discretion. A 12-item interview guide was used as tool for data collection. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the 72 civil servants; this figure was then used as the sample size. Six (6) FGD sessions were held altogether, one each for the six (6) ministries that were randomly selected from the State ministries. The FGDs lasted for an average of 50 minutes per session with a distribution of 12 participants in each session. The FGD sessions took place between the hours of 12noon and 4pm on week days within the period of research. The choice of timing was so designed to fit into the break periods of the workers and the time they said they could take excuse from their offices to be part of the study.

Findings

This study set out to investigate prevalence of traditional news media distrust in Anambra State. A total of 72 respondents were selected for the study using the purposive sampling technique. Out of the 72 participants, 47 were women while 25 were men. They were aged between 24 and 56 years. Selection of the age bracket was to ensure that respondents were old enough to understand the study they were participating in. The responses are presented and discussed below based on the research objectives.

The first research objective was structured to investigate respondents' frequency of exposure to traditional news media. All the respondents agreed that they were exposed to traditional news media but not very often. They said they rarely watched television but that most of the information they got from stations like Channels TV and Arise TV were from their social media handles of clips of videos shared on WhatsApp. Many of them said they had not read newspapers in months. Most of the participants also said they mostly got news from their Facebook and other social media platforms. According to one of the participants by name Madam Chinwe, from Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, "News is everywhere on Facebook. I see it every time I go on my Facebook to check for updates from friends. I used to enjoy some of the stories." Her position was corroborated by other participants in the various FGD sessions who said they were frequently exposed to news on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and blogs like Linda Ikeji blog, Gist lover and Nairaland forum. Respondents were generally more exposed to social media than traditional news media.

The second research objective was designed to ascertain if respondents' distrust the traditional news media. Majority of the respondents said they had different levels of distrust for the traditional news media. Some said that they had very high distrust while few others had low distrust for the traditional news media.

Their basic reasons are that there was political and commercial interference which they said affected the quality of news coming from most of the mainstream media. They said that while some of the media like TVC News were afraid of offending their owner who is President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, many others did not want to offend commercial interest of their owners. According to Nneka from the Ministry of Education, "I used to enjoy stories on TVC News and Arise News but I suddenly realized that they had limits to what they could report as news. Even Arise TV that is owned by Nduka Obaigbena is supposed to be a neutral person but it seems he also has political and commercial interests that his media establishments like This Day newspapers and Arise TV have to protect". Another participant, Philip of the Information Ministry said, "During that period of the presidential election, I noticed that the information from the social media was more punchy than the ones from television and radio stations even though you can't guarantee the authenticity of the stories from these alternative media. I still prefer getting my news from blogs and social media that wasting my time to buy newspapers especially when it has to do with news about politics."

In all, participants gave a number of story categories that attracted them when they came up as preference for social media and other online news platforms. The story categories in order of popularity are politics and governance, celebrity stories, and all kinds of crime stories. Not that the participants were not interested in other stories but these were the stories they preferred to get from social media than mainstream news media.

The third research question set out to examine respondents' main source of information gratification between traditional news media and the alternative media. Participants generally agreed that they rely on alternative media such as social media platforms, blogs, forum like Nairaland, and other online platforms for news. They said that their distrust for the traditional news media is largely responsible for their preference of the social media. Though they said one cannot completely rely on the social media in terms of credibility but that they were better off with the social media since these platforms are easily available and accessible. Participants indicated that the interesting nature of the stories from alternative media motivated them to click to read their contents. They also said that headlines or stories accompanied by photographs also made them to read the contents. According to them, the alternative media offered news that kept them up to date with happenings in the society even when they did not set out to intentionally look for such stories on their social media platforms. Some others said they just read the content of the stories just to know what was trending on social media. One participant identified as Alex, with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, said, "I don't want to get to my office the next day where people will be discussing an issue trending on social media and I will be the only one keeping quiet. I have to read some of the stories just to belong and socialize, even if it means reading them unintentionally". It was concluded that socialization was also a factor that motivated exposure to alternative media more than traditional news media. In summary, participants relied more on alternative media for their information needs satisfaction than the traditional news media.

The fourth research objective was designed to ascertain the reason for distrust of traditional news media. Participants generally said that the basic reason was interference in terms of political and commercial interests of the media owners. They said that the contents no longer reflected exactly what was happening in the

society as some of the traditional news media avoided mentioning issues that may affect the political or commercial interests of their owners. One participant identified as Uju from the Ministry of Health said, "I just click on any interesting news that pops up on my Facebook platform. I don't bother to switch on my television or buy a newspaper because I know most of them won't want to say anything against the government or make statements that will prevent advertisers from patronizing them. But majority of the participants confessed that though they go to social media to seek out news stories, they sometimes considered going to traditional news media to further confirm stories they already saw on social media. As one of the participants by name Chima, noted, "I usually go to Facebook and WhatsApp for stories but when it has to do with politics and crime I also check traditional news media just to be sure what I saw on social media is very true. That doesn't mean I have to trust the traditional news media always. I just like checking them out occasionally when viral issues break out in the country".

The summary of this finding is that political and commercial interests of the media owners are the dominant reasons why participants distrust the traditional news media. This does not mean they don't visit these media occasionally but they rely more on alternative media for information needs gratification.

Discussion of Findings

The first research objective investigated the frequency of exposure to traditional news media by respondents in Awka. The findings showed that all the respondents agreed that they were generally more exposed to social media than traditional news media. This finding agrees with studies that reveal a declining exposure to mainstream news media due to increasing dependence on social media in today's world (Ksiazek, et al., 2023; Brenan, 2022). There is a credibility crisis playing out across the globe when it comes to exposure to traditional news media and according to the Digital News Report 2022 published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which surveys more than half of the world's population, it was found that trust in news had fallen in almost half of the countries it surveyed (Newman, 2022). Indeed, the report observed that around 30% of people who actively avoid the news do so because they believe the news to be untrustworthy or biased (Ksiazek, et al., 2023). The result of this research also corroborates the findings of earlier media scholars, that the social media offer greater number of people opportunity to get exposed to contents at a short while (Obiakor & Ikegbunam, 2021; Obiakor, Adikuru & Agbakaja, 2022; Ikegbunam & Obiakor, 2023; Obiakor, Ikegbunam & Ezeaso, 2023; Obiakor, C. U. & Adikuru, C. C. 2024; Obiakor, C. U., Ikegbunam, P. C., & Ezeumenwa, F., 2024). The essence is that exposure to alternative media is easier, simpler and less costly compared to exposure to the mainstream media.

Again, this finding agrees with the observation by Bergström, & Belfrage (2018) who asserted that a visit to a social media platform with the intention of seeking private/social connection may result in exposure to different sorts of news in one's feed. Similarly, after a study of young people's news consumption, Madden, Lenhart, and Fontaine (2017) formulated this consumption shift in an astute way saying that in an age of smart phones and social media, people do not follow the news as much as it follows them.

The second research objective was designed to ascertain if respondents distrust the traditional news media. Majority of the

respondents reported different levels of distrust for the traditional news media. The summary is that participants said they had declining trust for the radio, television and newspapers which makes them rely more on social media for their information needs gratification. This is supported by studies which report that public trust in the media has dropped in recent years (Sterrett, Malato, Benz, Kantor, Tompson, Rosenstiel & Loker, 2019).

Studies also show that many 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 (Mustapha, et al., 2022). While previous research revealed that trust for alternative news media is correlated with lower levels of trust in the mainstream (Moehler & Singh, 2011; Mustapha, et al., 2022), yet the presence of private media in Africa does not equate to alternative sources to government media. The result also supports the perception theory which says that the audience actively decide on which media to be exposed to and which contents to select and retain (Festinger, 1957; Folarin, 1998; Baran, 2013). It is possible that distrust for traditional news media is affecting audience selection of these media as major sources of information.

The third research objective set out to examine respondents' main source for information gratification between traditional news media and alternative media. Participants generally reported that they depend more on social media and blogs for information needs satisfaction than the traditional news media. This is probably due to the growing distrust for these mainstream media. The finding agrees with other studies which report that one of the major reasons to distrust the news media, and to increasingly use alternative outlets, could be an impression that the information reported in the mainstream media is false or even intentionally misleading (Mustapha, Shilina, Agyei & Ocansey, 2022). The findings further agree with other studies which reported that emergence of social media as an alternative for source of political information increased is as a result of lack of firm trust in the two mainstream media - government and private (Mustapha, et al., 2022). The findings of this objective also support the perception theory which says that that audience actively decide on which media to be exposed to and which contents to select and retain (Festinger, 1957; Folarin, 1998; Baran, 2013). The fact that participants rely on social media for information could be as a result of distrust for traditional news media.

The fourth research objective was designed to ascertain the reason for distrust of traditional news media. The basic reason given by participants was interference in terms of political and commercial interests of the media owners. A study explains that bridges in ethics and rules in journalism practice are among the reasons for continued mistrust since media trust is perceived to be correlated to the credibility and trustworthiness of mass media (Mustapha et al., 2022). Furthermore, 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). Some scholars argue that the decline in media trust is the key target of the populist politician agenda nowadays to continue attacking just to divert the trust of people to themselves (Mustapha et al., 2022; Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris & Eisenegger, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed and supported a growing trend of studies revealing a declining trust for traditional news media across the world. Audience members in Anambra State have a dwindling trust on the mainstream media and rely more on alternative media such as blogs and social media platforms for information needs gratification. Their distrust for mainstream media stems from perceived interference due to political and commercial interests of media owners.

Recommendations in this study are premised on the multiple avenues for future studies opened up by this study. Whereas this study focused on prevalence of traditional news media distrust, it is recommended that future studies should further investigate how exposure to social media specifically influences perceptions of misinformation and disinformation which often lead to distrust of traditional news media.

Furthermore, the traditional news media should strengthen their news and current affairs content with more credible information devoid of interference by their owners and political office holders, to make more audience members to trust their contents. It is further recommended that from a selective exposure perspective, studies should be done to establish whether there are specific categories of news that can lead to exposure to and trust of traditional news media contents. Finally, it is further recommended that investigating the possible reciprocal relationships of traditional news media distrust with active information seeking using longitudinal data would add to the conceptual understanding of the declining trust of traditional news media by the audience across the world. Also, the present study should be extended to other parts of Nigeria to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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