

A Survey of Public Trust in Mass Media as Democratic Building Institution in Nigeria

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Abstract. Institutional trust in the mass media as a source of information about government is one of the key indicators of the quality of democracy. Conceptually, it recognizes and positions the mass media as a major structure that shapes democracy by its operating system and content, therefore requiring an acceptable measure of public confidence. To determine the quality of democracy in a given country, a systematic knowledge of the degree of trust members of the public have in the media institutions that provide them information about their government is essential. The paper reports the outcome of a survey conducted on the situation of public trust in mass media institutions in Nigeria. The study specifically answers a set of questions on the measure of public trust in mass media as a source of information about government activities in Nigeria; the variation in the levels of trust between public and private media and the major reasons for the direction of trust in media institutions in the country. A cross-tabulation analysis was carried out to determine how age demography may relate to trust in the mass media. Results show a significant level of public trust in mass media as information source about government activities in Nigeria. However, private media enjoys higher, though not statistically significant, level of public trust than public media institutions. The major reasons for the direction of trust range between ownership nature and perceived degrees of editorial independence in servicing the public with information about the government. The study also suggests a higher level of trust in the media among lower age members of the public in

inverse progression, thus raising a concluding assumption that traditional mass media institutions hold greater potentials for shaping the future of democratic developments in the country.

Keywords: Public trust, Mass media, Democracy, Nigeria

1. Research Background

Trust is a societal value that is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Rotter (1967) defines trust as ‘expectancy held by an individual that the word of another individual can be relied on’. Institutional trust reflects the security one feels about a situation because of guarantee, safety, structural assurance (the belief that things are normal) and situational normality (McNair, 1998). Research has demonstrated that the concept of trust is the key to our understanding of various human behaviors and that trust intervenes in almost every aspect of social life (Tsftati & Cappella, 2003).

According to Bertrand (1997), “democracy can insure the survival of human civilization. There can be no democracy without well informed citizens and there cannot be such citizens without quality media”. In line with this therefore, Ashley, Anderson, Scheufele, Dominique, Elizabeth & Corley (2012) argues that who the public trust for information is important in contemporary risk society where social change and technological developments occur at an accelerated pace. Members of the public use trust in experts to form attitude about

emerging issues and thus if the need for trust is inevitable then trust in media should also matter for people's interaction and civilization through exposure to news from the media.

One of the observed shifts in public opinion has been the decline in popular confidence in media institutions. It was argued that the media now loses its credibility; and being the watchdog of the society, this is threatening to the societal order and stability. Once upon a time, the media was looked upon as the most credible and reliable source of information. It doesn't just play the role of providing the public with accurate information but a source of verifying it. What is said by the media used to be trusted especially on the happening and running of the government.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, "global public confidence in media institutions has dropped more in the past years than in any other since the financial crisis in 2009 as people eschew experts in favor of their peers and also as a result of globalization and rapid changes in technology which were also believed to have fuelled the situation". In the Edelman index, for the first time, three-quarters of the 28 countries surveyed were categorized as "distrustful" of government, business, media and non-governmental organizations and the implications of this accelerating skepticism are "deep and wide-ranging".

Trust in media plunged from 51 per cent to 43 per cent, an all-time low for the index, with the sharpest falls in Ireland, Australia, Canada and Colombia. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the declining trust in media institutions is not strictly an American trend. Since the 1960s, "public trust in government and political institutions has been decreasing in all of the advanced industrial democracies. Although the pattern and the pace of the decrease are dissimilar across countries, the downward trend is ubiquitous (Nicolaous, 2017).

Public trust in media institutions is underscored by the centrality of public interest in journalism as duty and profession. Thus, according to McQuail (2003), public interest revolves around

"the idea that expectations from, and claims against the mass media on the grounds of the wider and longer term good of society can be legitimately expressed and may lead to constraints on the structure or activity of the mass media" (p. 301). Mistrust in media therefore applies to the particular context of audience relations with the news media. It is the feeling that the mainstream media are neither credible nor reliable; that the news media get in the way of society rather than helping society, and that journalists do not live by their professional standards (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Tsfat (2012) added that mistrust in the media also relates to the perception that the journalists are not fair and objective in their reports, and that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they would sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal gains.

The question of public trust in media transcends credibility and reliability to include feelings of alienation toward the way the media function. In addition, like media cynicism, mistrust in media is subjective. The concept implies a trait like stability on the part of the audience and independent of the objective qualities of the source (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969). According to Siebert, Patterson and Schramm (1956), "The underlying purpose of the media is to help discover truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decision" (p. 65). It should not be a norm that journalism whose basic tenets are accuracy and fairness to aid the spread of lies and deception. Unfortunately, the growing commercial interests of media organizations, and the drive for dominance by institutions and states have contributed to the erosion of the tradition of truth telling and objectivity in the media. In this guise, the concept of democracy is misrepresented if there is a biased, one sided, slanted view of an issue or report in the news (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe 2010). Citing the Secretary General of International Federation of Journalists – Aidan White, Torres (2008) noted that when journalism is inaccurate; when it marginalizes important issues or denies access to different voices and when it is manipulated to serve narrow interests, it damages democracy.

2. A Contextual Problem of Trust in Nigeria's Media Institutions

Nigeria is regarded as operating the largest, freest and most pluralistic, and probably the most resilient media in Africa (Akinfeleye, 2005; Adeyemi, 1995). Some say her media is "the most developed and diverse in Sub-Saharan Africa" (NPC & UNICEF, 2001), enjoying "a lively tradition of independence and outspokenness" (Olutokun & Seteolu, 2001). The validity of these claims, considered from the angle of public interest is precarious, in that adherence to professional standards has been unstable and questionable. In the pre-independence era, Nigeria was seen to operate a highly professional media system – though with seeds of regional ethnocentrism. The media enjoyed a high degree of public trust during this period because of the nationalistic spirit which they pursued political independence. With seeds of regional ethnocentrism growing, the media became increasingly centrifugal in ideas and operations during the post-independence era. Public trust in the media institutions shifted along the new lines of regionalism and ethnocentrism, with the Yorubas tending to trust kins-owned media, and the Igbos tending to trust kins-owned media while the Hausa/Fulani tended to also trust kins-owned media.

In Nigeria's predominantly privately owned media landscape of today, regionally operated media system owned by ethnic individuals have given way to a system of political economy in which media operations are largely driven by profit, and to a lesser extent, ethnic and religious affinity. In a plural society, public interest can be serviced neither by a profit-driven media system nor by religious or ethnic journalism. This challenge is noticeable in the Nigeria, where according to Media Rights Monitor, the journalists, on the basis of friendship, ethnic and religious affinity, relationship or in deference to authority, have often aside their professional judgment in the performance of their functions. Apparently this practice defies the code of ethics, which stresses public interest as entailing a high degree of public trust, thus bringing to question the condition of public trust in the Nigerian media institutions.

Generally, there is an impressive amount of literature on public opinion, but few relate to trust in mass media as democratic building institution. While most of existing ones are conceptual in nature, the empirical ones are largely valid in advanced democracies where there is concern with election or change in government, especially United States. In underdeveloped democracies such as Nigeria, where economic pressure on the mass media is high, there are concerns on how the media is informing the public about government, and how that relates to public trust in the media institutions. The country is faced with a problem of public sector media that lacks the editorial independence to hold the government accountable to the public, and a failing private sector media that has continued to mislead the public on the issues of governance. For example, *Sahara Reporters*, Nigeria's largest privately owned online newspaper was recently in March 2017 embarrassed over its failed investigative report on Senator Dino Melaye's University Degree. The said newspaper had enjoyed high level of public trust because of its past records in exposing corrupt practices in the country, including the widely discontenting budget padding in the National Assembly. With the realization of the inaccuracies of Sahara Reporter on Senator Dino, the social media networks were deluged with comments, most of which questions professional standards and quality of journalism in Nigeria. Apparently, public trust in the media institutions was thrown to doubt with accusations of political partisanship, cynicism, manipulation etc. Against this backdrop, this study was inspired to undertake a general survey of the condition of public trust in the Nigerian media as information source on the government.

The study principally sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of public trust in mass media as information source about the government in Nigeria?
- How does the level of public trust compare between private and public media as information - sources about the government in Nigeria?

- What are the major reasons for the direction of trust in mass media as information source about government in Nigeria?

3. Extant Studies on Institutional Trust in Media

A few scholars have shown interest in producing empirical literature on public trust in media institutions in various democratic settings. Available literature however show that most research findings on institutional trust for mass media come with global and regional democracy index or reports produced by or for political institutions. For example, findings from a research presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2016, show that public trust in traditional media has fallen low as people increasingly favor their friends and contacts on the internet as sources of news and truth there by shifting their faith towards the internet rather than traditional media as purveyors of truth. In fact online search engines were deemed more reliable than traditional media for information, a reversal from five years ago (Nicolaous, 2017; Cook & Gronke, 2001).

Moehler & Singh (2011) independently studied why citizens in post authoritarian African democracies trust government-owned broadcast media more than the private broadcasters, given the public media's lack of independence and history of state propaganda, using Afro barometer data from sixteen countries. The study indicates that low political sophistication, illiberal attitudes, and support for incumbents are associated with greater relative trust in government media. The study also found that citizens prefer public broadcasters in polities with greater press freedom and lower corruption. These results suggest that private media need more democratic and critical citizens, rather than higher quality reporting and greater press freedom, to compete with the state media for influence and resource.

Based on the premise that online journalism offers readers with some features that may serve as an alternative to traditional journalism, Tsfat (2010) had similarly conducted a study to

explore possible associations between mistrust in mainstream news media and consumption of online news. Results from a telephone survey and an online survey demonstrate that the association between mistrust of mainstream news and exposure to online news in general is negative. Whereas mainstream exposure is related to trust in media, exposure to nonmainstream sites is related to media skepticism.

Earlier, Tsfat (2002) had reported from a survey that audience trust in the institutions of the news media is fading. The study hypothesized that mistrust in the media serves as a moderator for media effects and as a factor influencing media exposure selections. Both propositions were tested on five separate large sample data sets, including the US National Election Study of 1996, General Social Survey, and three additional studies conducted at the Annenberg School for Communication during the 1996 and 2000 election years. The first proposition was tested in relation to news media agenda setting, spiral of silence, cultivation and priming effects. Findings show that media skepticism indeed moderated agenda setting and spiral of silence processes. Hypotheses about the moderating role of media skepticism in cultivation and priming were not supported. Tests of the second proposition regarding the influence of media skepticism on news exposure selections showed skepticism to be negatively related to exposure to mainstream news channels, but positively related to exposure to non-mainstream channels like Political Talk Radio and Internet news sources. In addition, media skepticism interacted with need for cognition in their effects on mainstream media exposure so that the effects of skepticism were stronger when need for cognition was low. As evidenced in the works cited here, empirical literature on public trust in media institutions are few and mostly relate to advanced democracies. Even when Africa is studied in this regard, the researchers have mostly come from external interests and affiliations. This leaves extant literature largely in deficit of empirical evidence on the opinion of the public regarding the quality of the service rendered to them by their media institutions.

4. Research Premise

The significance of public trust in mass media institutions as a measure of the quality of democracy can be situated in the Social Responsibility paradigm, which argues that society and the public have a right to expect high standards of performance from the mass media in the pursuit and sustenance of democracy, and that intervention can be justified to secure this for the public good. The media, according to this paradigm is duty-bound to be responsive and accountable to the society it serves. That the press has a responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society's needs and interests. Other related theses of the social responsibility theory are outlined by McQuail (2000):

- Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society;
- These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance;
- In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of law and established institutions;
- The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offense to minority groups;
- The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society by giving access to various points of view and rights of reply;
- Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employers and the market.

This is to say that theory is still useful for understanding professionalism and the interactions between the public and the media a set standard of accuracy, truth, and information. In Nigeria, like elsewhere in the world, a socially responsible media knows that public trust is essential not only for citizens to make rational decisions but also to spur economic and social development, which is why it is enshrined in the journalistic code of ethics that public interest entails a high degree of public trust. A social responsible media is expected by the

public to provide full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent information on government activities in contexts that give them meaning so that they are trusted as democratic building institution.

5. Method

This study is essentially a descriptive survey, in which a non-representative sample of 134 participants was conveniently drawn from the Ahmadu Bello University community in Zaria, northern Nigeria. Participants included students and workers within and outside the University campus, who are active news consumers. Questionnaire administration was not selective of religion, gender, ethnic origin of participants because of the need to make blind acquisition of data.

The questionnaire was both structured and unstructured type. The structured questions sought to determine the direction of trust for media while the unstructured questions sought to know the reasons for the direction of the trust. Thus, where given options are considered inexhaustive, participants are open to stating choices that are eventually included in the data analysis. Participants were asked several questions relating to their news consumption habit and trust in various sources for information on government activities, but only the aspects that are relevant for answering the research objectives were extracted for analysis. The research data from structured questions were analyzed using simple quantification and percentages, while data from unstructured questions were subjected to typological qualitative analysis. Where necessary, quantitative data were compared using cross-tabulation and reported with chi-square.

6. Findings

RQ1: Level of Public Trust in Mass Media

To answer the first research question, participants were asked to indicate if generally they trust mass media as information source about government activities in Nigeria. Table 1 reports the outcome.

Table1. Participant Trust of Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Trust Media	102	76.1
Don't Trust media	32	23.9
Total	134	100

As the data on Table 1 shows, those who trust mass media (76.1% of the participants) compares significantly higher with those who do not trust them (23.9% of the participants) as information source on government activities in Nigeria $X^2(1, n=134) = 36.567, p < .001$. Invariably, there is a significant measure of public trust in mass as information source on government activities in Nigeria.

RQ2: Comparing Levels of Public Trust between Public and Private Media

To answer the second research question, the participants who indicated that they trust the mass media were further asked to indicate which of public or private media institutions they trust more as information source about government in Nigeria. Table 2 below shows the result.

Table 2: Difference in Participants' Levels of Trust between Public and Private Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Private Media	62	60.8
Public Media	40	39.2
Total	102	100

As table 2 reveals, the level of public trust is higher for private than public media institutions as information sources about government activities in Nigeria. Statistically however, there is no significant difference in the levels of public trust for private and public mass media institutions as information sources about government activities in Nigeria $X^2(1, n=102) = 4.745, p=.029$. To account for the participants who indicated that they do not trust mass media, they were asked to indicate the source other than mass media they trust the most for information about government in Nigeria. Table 3 shows the outcome.

Table 3: Participants' Trusted Sources other than Mass Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Inter Personal Sources	6	18.7
Social Media	15	46.9
General Internet Sources	11	34.4
Others	-	-
Total	32	100

Apparently, social media is found here to be a potentially trusted source of information on government activities in Nigeria. This is closely followed by general internet sources. Participants did not specify any other source of trusted information about government activities in Nigeria. However, a cross tabulation was done to see how level of trust in mass media and variations in trust between private media and public media, and other trusted sources relate with participants' age categories. The result is shown on tables 4 and 5 below.

Table 4: Participant Trust in Media by age

Participants age	Trust Media	Don't Trust media	Total
18-27	56	16	72
28-37	25	11	35
38 - 47	14	3	17
48 and above	7	2	9
Total	102	32	134

The result on table 4 suggests that trust in the mass media as information source about government in Nigeria is higher among lower aged public, thus leading to an assumption that the higher the age, the lesser the level of trust in mass media as information source about government among the Nigerian public. This might be a subject for further investigations, particularly because the table also reveals a decreasing level of trust in mass media with increasing age.

RQ3: Major Reasons for the Direction of Trust

Participants were asked to indicate in an open-ended format the reasons for the direction of their trust in mass media generally, and the preference for public or private media sources for information about government.

The data were analysed typologically with mutually exclusive categories of reason. The findings revealed that the major reasons for the direction of trust range between ownership nature and perceived degrees of editorial independence in servicing the public with information about the government.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Indeed several questions regarding public trust in mass media as democratic building institution require investigation. In this study, we considered the most basic ones, commonly found in democracy barometer questionnaire, but rarely coming from independent researches. Thus, based on the objectives of knowing the measure of public trust in the mass media a source of information about the government in Nigeria, we asked two related questions: what is the level of public trust in mass media; and how do the levels of trust compare between private and public media institutions? The data obtained from 134 survey participants were subjected to descriptive analysis and it was found that there is a significant level of public trust in the mass media as a source of information about the government in Nigeria. Comparing the levels of trust, we found that private media institutions enjoy higher trust than public media institutions. Although the survey participants were not required to state the reasons for the direction of their trust, observation could show that such reasons may range between ownership nature and perceived degrees of editorial independence in servicing the public with information about the government.

A striking interest about our findings in this study is the deviation from many previous findings, which reported low levels of public trust in mass media institutions in different democratic environments. In Nigeria, as our study shows, there is still a high level of trust in the mass media despite occasional failures in investigative reporting. By way of conclusion, what this implies is that the mass media remains a potential institution capable of shaping future democratic developments in the country. Although there also seem to be a tendency towards social media for reliable information about government, it and interpersonal sources or general internet sources are yet to prevail over the traditional mass media sources as indicated in our study. Extended analysis however reveals that people of lower age cadre tend to trust the mass media for information about the government than people of higher age cadre.

The reasons for this might well be subject for further investigations.

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