Audiences' Political Orientation, Evaluation and Verification of News in Ghana

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Abstract

Today's information ecosystem exposes audiences to multi-faceted media choices characterized by debatably partisan-oriented media. Using an audience-centered approach in a cross-sectional survey of 419 respondents, we examined audiences' partisanship and evaluation of media content from politically affiliated news sources. We also considered the types of media the audiences rate as high in news-ness as reliable news sources and their intention to verify them. Moreover, we investigated whether audiences' ratings of story types are independent of their choices of the most reliable news source. First, the findings mostly showed no significant association between audiences' political affiliations and their ratings of partisan newspaper sources. Second, audiences held television (0.095) as the most reliable news source, followed by newspapers (0.119), and web/social media sites (0.236) were the least reliable. Audience segments variedly validate news from perceived trusted sources, with the highest tendency for validation toward television messages (0.119) and the least toward newspapers (0.236). Finally, the results showed that audiences' ratings of story types are not influenced by their choice of the most reliable source.

Keywords

1. Introduction

In today's information ecosystem, information is an essential resource open to the public in a wide expanse beyond the traditional media to digital outlets such as digital journalism or social media posts. The diverse media forms provide different types of content with multiple news choices. At the same time, news or-

ganizations and users from such varied sources as entertainment, commercial and political backgrounds publish contents that look similar in tone, appearance, and topic to news (Rickard et al., 2016). This media environment gives rise to a hybrid media system that obfuscates the definition of news as known in the news-democracy narrative.

The news-democracy narrative, as (Pingree et al., 2014). Calls it, has provided the basic definition of news about the notions of citizenship and democracy since the early 20th century (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The news media, both online and offline sources, share information with widely-dispersed audiences. Because of this value to democracy, many liberal theorists maintain that the news media occupy an irreplaceable place in every authentic open society and democratic discourse. The news-democracy notion also infers that news media should serve the democratic interests of society by providing accurate, diverse, and relevant information to the public. It implies that news media should be accountable, transparent, and participatory in producing and distributing news. Because this narrative underpins the need for information for participation as informed citizenry in a democratic society, it follows that news satisfies this civic and core value of democracy. Thus, the news is described as "the lifeblood of a democracy" (Kwode, 2022). Consequently, this framework shapes the public's basic understanding of news in a democratic society. Additionally, the news-democracy narrative sets norms about what constitutes news and people's motivations for news consumption (Glaser & Salovey, 1998).

Regarding what news should look like, the narrative uses the normative role of news in a democratic society to separate the news genre from other media types like entertainment (Amponsah & Okyere, 2023a). For this reason, news-democracy, as a normative theory and a social movement, frowns on the concentration of media ownership, the commercialization of news, and the algorithmic filtering of news content. At the same time, it advocates for a more inclusive and deliberative public sphere.

Despite the assumptions about news as a media genre with deep democratic meaning that defines the output of the journalism profession, the current media environment defies the traditional notions of what news is (news-ness). The new media environment signals the rise in media hybridity (Ireton & Posetti, 2018), which presents alternative journalism that blends news and entertainment and devalues objectivity and professionalism espoused in the traditional news-democracy narrative. As a result, this hybrid media paradigm postulates that the "traditional journalistic values of impartiality and objectivity, and fixed notions that confine journalism to 'news' and 'information,' have lost much of their credence and authority. These categories have come to coexist and interact with other notions and values which have emerged, like immediacy, appeal and affect" (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015). This way, the news media genre risks "entertainment becoming more news-like" and "news becoming more entertainment-like" (Stroud, 2007).

With this outlook, audiences would distinguish between news values and entertainment in their understanding of news; they expect news to be separated

from entertainment (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Moreover, studies (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) find that journalists and audiences hold notions of news such as objectivity (accuracy, fairness), neutrality, and credibility as consistent, as well as pervasive in their description of news values and professional roles about democracy. In this regard, the news media in Ghana and the subregion have the role of shaping public opinion and influencing political processes in the subregion. However, the media institution faces some challenges and limitations in fulfilling its democratic functions, including political interference, economic pressures, lack of professionalism, ethical violations, fake news and disinformation, and media polarization, which can undermine the credibility, independence, and diversity of the media, and thus weaken its contribution to democracy (Olabamiji, 2014).

The diversity in the news media space, tainted by the largely polarized political landscape, has become convoluted by a lack of credibility, objectivity, accuracy, ethical violations and fake news. For example, a recent report by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) analyzed the content of 26 newspapers and 16 radio stations in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal during the 2019-2020 election periods. The report found that many media outlets exhibited partisan bias, sensationalism, misinformation, and incitement to violence in their coverage of the electoral processes (Bucy, 2000). The report also highlighted factors contributing to media polarization, such as ownership patterns, regulatory frameworks, political interference, economic pressures, and audience preferences. Again, MFWA found that from June 2020 to May 2021, 54% of ethical violations in Ghana were attributed to pro-partisan media organizations affiliated with a known political party. While 65% of the violations were recorded on radio, 33% on news websites, and newspapers recorded 2%. Similarly, Hassan's (2022) report published by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) indicates that information disorder in West Africa threatens the social fabric of multi-ethnic societies across the region. The report argues that social media content is not confined online but spreads across conventional media and word of mouth, creating a "pavement radio" effect.

Because of existing biased reporting, fake news, misinformation, or disinformation, it is expected of an active audience to gauge the landscape, evaluate and verify the news. In Ghana, the audiences employ various strategies, including cross-referencing, fact-checking, and social media scrutiny. Cross-referencing is where people consult multiple news sources to compare information and check for consistency to help identify any discrepancies or conflicting reports while fact-checking organizations have also emerged in Ghana to assess the accuracy of news stories and claims made by politicians, public figures, and news outlets, and provide evidence-based evaluations. Also, social media scrutiny entails using social media platforms to share news and information and relates where users verify the credibility of information before accepting and sharing it. Users may seek corroborating evidence or consult trusted sources before accepting social

media claims. Regarding trusted sources, many Ghanaians rely on established and reputable news outlets or online sources related to the traditional media with a history of accurate reporting.

Not only do audiences consume news, but they also evaluate news, particularly "when they encounter media that mix elements of news with entertainment and blur the lines of what is real or fake…for audiences to decide what they consider news, what the concept means, and its effects" (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013). In this context of news-ness and hybridity, Edgerly and Vraga point out that sensationalism, satire or humor, outrage media, and soft news generally impair the news-democracy narrative. Thus, news-ness encapsulates what audiences understand as news and how much meaning shapes their response regarding learning and participation. However, preceding audiences' news consumption exists their agency involving their tastes, preferences, beliefs, interests or opinions, and consequently selectivity.

This study is also interested in audiences' selective exposure to news resulting from their political affiliation. In the contemporary high-choice information environment and the proliferation of partisan media, particularly following the arrival of online news outlets, opportunities for selective exposure have expanded significantly (Romer et al., 2003). This situation not only brings to the fore the debate about the impact of selective exposure on political attitudes and polarization but also occasions conversations on how news audience behavior is politically polarized in Ghana. Research on Ghanaian audiences' assessment of media messages relating to polarized media choices and their intention to verify the news seems nonexistent. Yet, the country has been experiencing significant polarization in recent years. By focusing on Ghana in this study, we seek to advance knowledge on the extent of audience assessments of news and the link of their choice of reliable news sources with political polarization and their behavioral intention to verify media messages.

The next section of this study examines relevant literature on the theory of selective exposure, the conceptual framework of news-ness and its influencing factors, and the impact of political orientation on audience sensemaking of news. After the methodological procedure and the presentation and discussion of results, we would conclude and make some recommendations. In this regard, the following research questions underpin the study.

Research Questions

The study seeks to explore the dynamic relationship between audience biases and news perception, specifically investigating how the political leanings of an audience influence their evaluations of news from politically affiliated sources. Additionally, it aims to understand the correlation between the audience's desire to fact-check news and their selection of trustworthy news outlets. Lastly, the research will examine the extent to which audience preferences for different types of stories vary based on their chosen most reliable news source.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Selective Exposure

The study would be based on the theory of selective exposure, which refers to the tendency of individuals to seek out, prefer and consume information that confirms their existing beliefs and attitudes while avoiding or dismissing information that challenges them. It results from news selectivity, which explains how and why people choose certain new sources and content to consume over others. Communication scholars have studied selective news exposure for more than half a century. Research indicates a relationship between people's political beliefs and news exposure across different media types, from newspapers to television to the Internet (e.g., Esser & D'Angelo, 2003).

The current global trend of multi-faceted media sources and choices of media has also introduced more partisan media into the media repertoires, particularly following the arrival of online news outlets. Thus, this high-choice information environment has expanded interest in selective exposure and revived debates about its consequences on the democratic process, such as political attitudes and polarization (Brewer et al., 2003). Some research claimed that more selective exposure could reinforce individuals' political predispositions and reduce the media effects on people's cognitions and political attitudes (Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000).

Recent studies have shown that exposure to congruent information, especially on the Internet and social media, can strongly impact individuals (Willen, 2007). While the Internet and social media offer an overwhelming amount of information, research suggests that greater selective exposure to congruent political news is correlated with polarization (Rickard et al., 2016), and it can reduce political discussions with non-like-minded others (Willen, 2007). Consequently, selective exposure can make citizens who use congruent political information assume that public opinion is in their favor, which can impair political tolerance and foment uncompromising stances and limit the political agenda to more divisive issues and dominant parties (Arpan et al., 2006).

Research focusing on selective exposure has mainly considered the characteristics of the individuals (e.g., (Echterhoff et al., 2005)) or the information source (e.g., Arpan et al., 2006). Some studies also examined the contextual factors of selective exposure and media consumption patterns across various political information environments (Arpan et al., 2006). However, what motivates individuals' exposure to like-minded or congruent information remains undetermined (Zeldes et al., 2008).

Regarding media consumption and political information, we are interested in selective exposure and political polarization. In contrast to the usual practice followed in selective exposure research, which tends to focus either on a single type of medium or on a specific digital platform (typically, Facebook or Twitter), we follow (Toft et al., 2010) in taking a media repertoires approach, which advocates for analyzing news exposure as a combination of different outlets.

2.2. Selective News Exposure and Political Orientation

Political orientation is a term that describes the way a person or a group thinks about social, economic and political issues. It can be influenced by many factors, such as education, culture, religion, family, media, personal experience and values. Some common political orientations are liberalism, conservatism, and socialism. Each of these orientations has a different view on how society should be organized and governed, what rights and responsibilities people have, and what role the government should play in solving problems. It can create partisanship or political polarization, which is the divergence of political attitudes and affective evaluations of political groups.

News audience polarization due to selective exposure suggests that people may select news media based on their beliefs, interests and opinions. Selective exposure and political polarization affect how people consume and process political information. Likewise, media polarization suggests media outlets adopt partisan or ideological stances and cater to like-minded audiences. These concepts are closely related and have important implications for political communication and democracy.

Partisanship affects selective exposure in news consumption. Hence political orientations may determine partisans' high rating of media messages to coincide with their political viewpoints (Willen, 2007). Such an outcome of political polarization often arises due to the disappearance of the political center and shared political ground (Zeldes et al., 2008). Moreover, selective political exposure is more likely when entertainment value is low and partisan interest is high (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Similarly, conservatives and liberals perceive hybrid media differently. Liberals would rate hybrid media such as satire and celebrity activism high in new-ness, but conservatives would rate the same low (Zeldes et al., 2008).

When people consume only pro-attitudinal media and avoid counter-attitudinal media, they may become more extreme, confident in their opinions, and more hostile and distrustful of their opponents (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). According to Tóth et al., exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can strongly correlate with political and ideological preferences. Such exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can bolster attitudes and contribute to polarization.

The media landscape in Ghana is vibrant and diverse, with hundreds of newspapers, radio stations and television channels. However, one of the challenges facing Ghana's democracy is the increasing polarization of the media along political lines, with many media outlets serving as mouthpieces for political parties or their owners. This polarization has negative implications for Ghana's democracy and national development, as it undermines the principles of objectivity, accuracy and fairness in their news reporting and distinguishing between facts and opinions and fuels misinformation and social division.

Many media outlets in Ghana are owned or affiliated with politicians or political parties and tend to promote their interests and agendas (Tutu et al., 2023).

According to a systematic review by (Smith, 2009), pro-attitudinal media can exacerbate ideological and affective polarization, increasing hostility and distrust between political groups. In Ghana, this phenomenon was evident in the coverage of the 2020 presidential election, which the (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021) described as biased and sensationalized.

Media outlets catering to polarized audiences may amplify partisan messages and filter out dissenting voices, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Concerns over echo chambers, filter bubbles and algorithmically driven information environments generated many more recent studies of selective exposure, focusing on the use of social media. However, the studies find little evidence for the pervasive impact of echo chambers or filter bubbles on polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). However, most of these studies find little evidence of pervasive echo chambers or filter bubbles, suggesting that the potential impact on polarization is small.

While selective exposure has been documented in offline and online environments, the evidence of its extent and impact on political polarization is far from unanimous. For example, online news audience polarization is slightly higher than offline (Matthews et al., 2023). Moreover, (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021) found evidence of homophilic interactions and polarization on Twitter but opposite patterns on WhatsApp and Facebook. Besides, an experimental study of Twitter users in the US examining the ideological impact of exposure to cross-cutting views identified the impact of political orientation. For some (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), the impact of partisan selective exposure on most audiences does not show automatic and more polarized political attitudes.

Furthermore, (Temin & Smith, 2002) found that the choices mostly center around a few popular news outlets, and all news sites also appeal to ideologically diverse audiences. However, social media use is associated with incidental exposure to news, whereby people who mostly use social media for other reasons also see news from sources they would not otherwise use, which expands their news repertoires more than people who do not use social media (Temin & Smith, 2002).

The literature, therefore, shows that the extent of selective exposure to political polarization is not uniform. While selective exposure can increase ideological or affective polarization in some studies, others have found no or weak effects. The variation in findings may depend on several factors, including contextual factors and individual differences, and the possible mediators and moderators of the relationship. Some of the possible mediators and moderators of the relationship between selective exposure, media polarization, and political polarization are the type and quality of media content, the level of exposure and attention to media messages, the cognitive and emotional responses to media messages, the social interactions and discussions with others, the prior attitudes and motivations of media users, and the characteristics of the political system and culture (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

2.3. News-Ness Concept and Factors

News has a special connection with a democratic society because of its role as a vehicle of information dissemination and, consequently, to an informed citizenry and participation (Larbi, 1999). Research has shown audiences' approval of the democratic value of news and their expectations of such professional standards as factualness, neutrality, and objectivity from news contrasting their expectations of other media genres and the blurred hybrid media context (Amponsah & Okyere, 2023b). Hence, news-ness conveys the extent to which the audience considers a media message as news.

The concept of news-ness has three features. Firstly, it is audience-focused because it considers audiences' agency in making sense of media genres and assessing media messages and outcomes. Secondly, it assumes that people may have difficulty defining news but can identify it when they perceive specific media content (Fisher et al., 2019). Thirdly, news-ness assumes differences in audiences' evaluation of such "news." Thus, researchers may consider whether audiences' ratings of a media message for news-ness impact higher learning and participation or whether media content or type may establish variations in audience evaluations. Moreover, researchers' (O'Neill et al., 2015) recent concern over fake news suggests such news can impact how audiences' would categorize certain media content as fake news, which would have low ratings and outcomes.

Factors that influence news-ness bring home the 1948 seminal work of Harold Lasswell. His model of communication presented five components: 1) *who*, 2) *s*aid *what*, 3) in which *channel*, 4) to *whom* and 5) with what *effect*. (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003) conceptualized those five basic factors as affecting news-ness as "*what* is communicated, *how* it is communicated, *by whom* it is communicated, and *where*…[and] audience *who receives* the message." While the first four elements are found in both the traditional concept of news and news narratives of hybrid media, the fifth factor (the audience) interlocks the message factors to explain news-ness.

The audience's notions of news correspond with what is communicated or the information type. The information type coincides with news values in shaping journalists' view of events regarding newsworthiness under the news-democracy narrative (O'Neill et al., 2015). Studies have found that news values such as "immediacy" influence audiences' assessments of news-ness; while hard news receives the highest rating of audience perceptions of the news, exclusive and forward-referencing have the lowest rating in news-ness (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023).

Emphasis on tone and framing characterizes a media message's communication (the how). Regarding the tone, the traditional journalistic practice highlights an unbiased and professional delivery style, which employs quotations from news sources to serve as a credibility tool and create context and an angle (Baym 2010). On the other hand, a hybrid media message would combine hu-

mor, sensationalism, or outrage with current information, which audiences would consider less news (Tutu et al., 2023).

Regarding "who communicates the information," today's media environment abounds with various sources whose messages can impact news-ness. Although source familiarity and reputation help audiences speed-read messages, audiences frequently consume media messages from familiar, ambiguous, and unfamiliar source situations, especially on social media sites (Dori et al., 2023). Whereas partisan sources suggest politically biased patronage and rating, legacy sources exhibit a mixed influence on news-ness (Tutu et al., 2023).

"Where the information is communicated" deals with the form and context of the media message. In the current media environment, where audiences interact with information, the audiences access news in multiple spaces, locations, and formats, which may shape their evaluations of news-ness; in encountering that message, the audiences may perceive and respond variedly in their rating of different media forms (Hallin and Mellado 2018). Moreover, social media cues may have persuasive power on audiences' perceptions of news-ness and influence their story selection or engagement and impact on them, especially in low-source familiarity situations (O'Neill et al., 2015).

Audiences constitute the fifth factor, which comes with individual differences in encountering a media message. Individual differences also manifest in motivations. Accordingly, some theories of news consumption decisions reveal that many motivations shape audiences' media choices, including entertainment, ideologically driven choices, socially driven consumption, and information need (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The motivations drive audiences' processing, perception and assessment (Tutu et al., 2023). Consequently, variations in audiences' evaluation of the news-ness of message content occur, especially in a hybrid media context (Tutu et al., 2023).

Among the characteristics of individual differences are age, prior media experiences, and political orientation. Regarding age, young people born into the hybrid media environment have a more flexible approach to media choices and standards and sensemaking of news that may differ from their older counterparts (O'Neill et al., 2015). Moreover, regular users of particular media have a different sense of newsworthiness of media forms, and particular media forms they are accustomed to would match their expectations of news-ness (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). As a result, regular users of hybrid content are likely to rate satire or outrage higher in news-ness than nonusers of hybrid forms. Also, News consumption may entail credibility and political preferences in the active selection and lapse into a habitual consumption pattern once the initial selection is congruent and satisfying (Gardner et al., 2022).

Audiences' credibility assessment in news consumption implies evaluating the source as an important factor. Through the evaluation, audiences find data consistent or inconsistent with their political beliefs, consider inconsistent information sources less credible, and perceive consistent information more positively

(O'Neill et al., 2015). Thus, active media users can choose ideological content that emphasizes their ideological predispositions or perspectives, but they may go beyond partisanship to include individual and situational differences (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

The studies suggest that audiences' understanding of news-ness points to their expectations of the media they consume, which can drive differential effects (O'Neill et al., 2015). In addition, audiences' high rating of news might be due to partisan processing, where the audience has a lower intention to verify the message information coming from related partisan sources (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Yet, the association between selective exposure and polarization seems context-dependent in a high-choice information environment.

2.4. Research Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant difference in the inclination to verify news among the various categories of sources deemed most reliable.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): The inclination to verify news varies significantly among different categories of the most reliable sources.

3. Method

3.1. Study Setting

The democratic environment in Ghana has been praised as a model for the African continent, especially in the middle belt of Ghana comprising the Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, and Bono East regions with their administrative capitals Goaso, Kumasi, Sunyani and Techiman, respectively, where socioeconomic and ethnic diversity and political pluralism coexist peacefully. This belt has 35% of the 33 million population of Ghana. The middle belt reflects the socioeconomic and political outlook of Ghana. It is politically active and influential in Ghana's elections. The region has been a hotspot for electoral competition between the two major political parties in Ghana: the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). The NPP and NDC have news media outlets that are identified with them. For example, Net2 TV, the Daily Statesman newspaper and Wontumi FM are considered pro-NPP, while TV XYZ, the Daily Democrat newspaper and Power FM are pro-NDC.

In Ghana, political parties play a crucial role in the country's democratic system. Like in many other African countries, the political orientation of Ghanaian news audiences can vary widely. Historically, two political parties have dominated Ghana's political landscape: the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). These parties serve as vehicles for political mobilization, representation, and competition during elections. They have alternated in power since Ghana's return to multi-party democracy in 1992. A competitive and polarized environment often characterizes the political landscape in Ghana, where supporters of each party hold strong political beliefs. Audiences in Ghana often align themselves with one of these major parties or other

smaller parties based on their ideologies, historical affiliations, and socioeconomic factors. However, it is important to note that not all Ghanaians are affiliated with a specific party because independent voters evaluate candidates and policies individually (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003).

This study's target population was adults (18 years and older) in Ghana. The accessible population was all adults in the Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, and Bono East Regions. These regions were selected because they were relevant to the study for the reasons already given in this section and because they host people from different parts of the country. The participants were selected from the capital cities of these regions, namely Goaso, Kumasi, Sunyani, and Techiman, respectively, because of their social, economic and administrative significance, even for the rural inhabitants. While Goaso, Sunyani and Techiman are municipalities, Kumasi is a metropolis second to Accra (the capital of Ghana).

3.2. Research Design

This research employed a quantitative approach to explore the dynamics of how different types of stories and their origins affect the perceptions of Ghanaian audiences in recognizing what constitutes news. The primary objective was to investigate the relationship between the audience's judgments of newsworthiness and their subsequent intentions to verify the content of media messages. To conduct this investigation, the study applied a cross-sectional survey design, a strategic choice due to its effectiveness in capturing the diverse reactions of various demographic groups to news.

The cross-sectional survey was instrumental for several reasons. First, it allowed the researchers to gather data from a broad spectrum of participants at a single point in time, thereby providing a snapshot of how different groups perceive and interact with news. This method was particularly beneficial in examining how individuals with varying political affiliations and other demographic characteristics respond to media and news in their current state.

The choice of a cross-sectional survey was further justified by its ability to facilitate a detailed analysis of respondents' characteristics. By understanding factors such as political alignment, the researchers could delve deeper into the analysis of how these personal attributes influence the way individuals assess news and decide to engage with media messages. For instance, it might reveal if people with certain political beliefs are more skeptical of news from particular sources or if they are more or less likely to verify news stories. Additionally, this method's utility was evident in its broad application across different population segments, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of public perception and behavior concerning news consumption and verification. This comprehensive approach is vital in a country like Ghana, where diverse populations might have significantly varied ways of interacting with and interpreting the media.

The work of O'Neill et al. (O'Neill et al., 2015) underscores the importance of understanding these dynamics and how they contribute to broader patterns of

media consumption and public discourse. By applying these principles to the study, the researchers aimed to contribute valuable insights into the field of media studies, particularly in the context of Ghana's evolving media landscape. The findings of this research are expected to offer significant implications for journalists, media practitioners, and policymakers who seek to understand and influence how the public engages with news and information in an era of increasing misinformation and media skepticism.

3.3. Sampling

Because the population size could not be determined (unknown), we depended on Kibuacha's (2021) formula to decide the appropriate sample for the study. The formula to decide the appropriate sample for the study is given as follows:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times sd \times (1 - sd)}{e^2}$$

where:

Statistical Element	Description/Value
Confidence Level	95%
Margin of Error	0.05
Z-Score	1.96
Standard Deviation (assumed)	0.5
Sample Size Calculated (n)	385
Sampling Technique	Convenience Sampling
Gender Distribution	210 (50.1%) Males, 209 (49.9%) Females
Age Distribution	287 (68.6%) aged 18 - 34, 132 (31.4%) aged 35 - 55+
Total Respondents	419

Therefore, the sample size was:

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{0.05^2}$$
$$= \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025}$$
$$= \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$
$$= 384.16$$

Based on the obtained value, a sample size of 385 or high was assumed to be appropriate for the study. So, we conveniently selected a minimum of 100 respondents from each region.

The sample was selectively done to ensure relevant data were gathered to answer the study's questions; hence convenience sampling technique was used for this study. Although convenience sampling is a nonprobability sampling tech-

nique, it is an effective way of getting an idea of people's views and attitudes without much bias. It is often used in audience surveys on media polarization and news rating due to its low cost and ease of access in selecting a representative sample.

For example, (Dori et al., 2023) conducted a systematic review of 94 articles that assessed the role of (social) media in political polarization. They found that most studies used convenience samples, such as Twitter users, online panelists, or students. They argued that convenience samples could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of media polarization. Another example is (Tutu et al., 2023), who examined the scientific merits of homogeneous convenience samples in developmental research, claiming that results from homogeneous convenience samples won't differ from those obtained from a random sample or some inaccessible part of the population. Thus, based on the appropriate sample size, convenience sampling allowed the researchers to collect data from a large and diverse group of people regularly exposed to multiple news media outlets in the respective regions.

In addition, four assistants were recruited in each region to administer the questionnaire to reduce researcher bias. Again, to ensure gender balance, the recruits were asked to select fifty males and fifty females in each of the four cities. Of the 419 respondents, there were 210 (50.1%) males and 209 (49.9%) females. The majority of the respondents, 287 (68.6%), were 18 - 34, and 132 (31.4%) were in the age bracket of 35 - 55+.

3.4. Data Collection

In this research, we employed a meticulously designed questionnaire as the primary tool for gathering data. This questionnaire was systematically divided into four distinct sections, each serving a unique purpose in understanding the intricate relationship between individuals and the media landscape.

Section A was the initial part of the questionnaire, which focused on identifying what types of stories the respondents classified as newsworthy. This section was critical in establishing a baseline for what constitutes news in the eyes of the audience, offering a diverse range of statements on different types of news stories. Respondents were asked to express their opinions using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," providing nuanced insights into their perceptions.

Section B delved deeper, asking respondents to evaluate the quality and reliability of news content based on its source. This section aimed to uncover the perceived credibility of various news outlets and how the source of news might influence the audience's trust and acceptance. By rating different sources, we sought to understand the impact of source credibility on the perception of news.

Section C was designed to explore the effects of political affiliation on the evaluation of news. This part of the questionnaire presented items that helped determine whether respondents' political leanings influenced their judgment of

news content, especially when the source was known to have a particular political inclination. The objective was to ascertain the degree to which political bias might moderate an individual's assessment of news credibility and accuracy.

Finally, Section D aimed to investigate the relationship between the respondents' ratings of news and their behavioral intentions, specifically their propensity to verify the information presented to them. This section was crucial in understanding whether and how the perceived reliability of news influences the actions that individuals might take to confirm or refute the information they encounter.

Overall, the questionnaire was a comprehensive instrument designed to shed light on various facets of how individuals interact with and perceive news and media. By utilizing a five-point Likert scale across all sections, the study aimed to capture a wide spectrum of attitudes and behaviors, paving the way for a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics at play in media consumption and trust.

3.5. Data Analysis

The process of handling the extracted data involved several meticulous steps to ensure accuracy and reliability. Initially, the data underwent editing to rectify any errors or inconsistencies present. This was followed by coding, which involved categorizing the data into meaningful segments for easier analysis. An essential part of this initial phase was cleaning the data, a critical step where the data was scrutinized for completeness and consistency. Ensuring that the dataset was devoid of any discrepancies or missing information was crucial before proceeding to the next stage.

Once the data was prepared, it was processed using STATA 17.0, a powerful statistical software known for its robust data management and statistical analysis capabilities. This software was employed to perform both inferential and descriptive statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. In this context, the results were primarily presented in frequencies and percentages, which offer a straightforward way to understand the distribution and proportion of data in various categories.

Additionally, tables and charts were utilized as visual aids to present the data more effectively. These tools are instrumental in making complex data more accessible and understandable to the audience. They allow for easier comparison and highlight key trends and patterns that might not be immediately apparent in raw data.

For continuous variables, which are numerical data that can take any value within a range, the mean and standard deviation were computed. The mean provides the average value, offering a central tendency of the data, while the standard deviation indicates the amount of variation or dispersion from the average.

Furthermore, the study delved into more specific analyses, such as the rating of different story types. This likely involved evaluating various narratives or

content types to determine their popularity or effectiveness. To assess the most reliable source of information, a Chi-square test was employed. The Chi-square test is a statistical method used to determine if there's a significant difference between the expected frequencies and the observed frequencies in one or more categories. It's particularly useful in research like this where understanding the relationship between categorical variables is crucial.

The data was rigorously prepared and analyzed using a combination of editing, coding, cleaning, and statistical techniques. The use of STATA 17.0 facilitated comprehensive inferential and descriptive analyses, with the findings effectively presented through tables, charts, and specific statistical measures. This meticulous approach ensured that the conclusions drawn were based on solid, reliable data and robust statistical methodologies.

4. Results

This section provides a detailed analysis and explanation of the results obtained from the investigation of the three research questions and the two hypotheses posed in the study. Overall, a total of 419 individuals participated in the survey, providing a substantial amount of data for analysis. This part of the document will delve into the specific responses and trends observed among the participants, offering insights into the patterns and implications of the findings. Each research question and hypothesis will be addressed in turn, highlighting the key outcomes and how they contribute to the broader understanding of the subject matter under investigation. The significance of the response rate and the demographic characteristics of the respondents will also be discussed to provide context for the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data.

4.1. RQ1: Political Affiliation and Rating of News from Politically Affiliated Sources

Because the dependent variable (ratings of the sources) and the independent variable (political affiliations) were nominal, the Chi-square test was used to test the independence between the participants' political affiliations and their views/ratings of politically affiliated news sources. A 4 × 5 contingency table was developed for the two variables. The contingency table showing the frequencies for the unique combinations of the two variables (ratings of the source and political affiliation) for each news source is presented in Table 1. In this contingency Table, the columns represent the participants' ratings of each news source, and the rows represent the participants' political affiliations. Cell values are frequencies for each combination of political affiliation and rating of news sources.

Of the 419 participants, Table 1 reveals that 138 were affiliated with NPP, 75 indicated they were affiliated with an independent candidate, 122 were affiliated with NDC, and 84 indicated that they were affiliated with other political parties. This result suggests that Ghana's two popular political parties are the NPP and

Table 1. Contingency table for political affiliation and rating of news from politically affiliated sources.

Political Affiliation	Is accurate and trustworthy	Offers a range of opinions	Helps me make up my mind	Helps me understand what's going on	Has a depth of analysis and content not available elsewhere	Total
NET 2 TV						
NPP	59	21	11	32	15	138
IND	22	18	8	9	18	75
NDC	47	26	21	11	17	122
Others	31	20	12	8	13	84
Total	159	85	52	60	63	419
TV XYZ						
NPP	39	35	29	18	17	138
IND	21	15	17	8	14	75
NDC	43	18	20	26	15	122
Others	25	19	18	10	12	84
Total	128	87	84	62	58	419
Daily Statesman						
NPP	46	30	30	23	9	138
IND	16	17	18	13	11	75
NDC	28	23	31	23	17	122
Others	26	14	21	10	13	84
Total	116	84	100	69	50	419
Daily Democrat						
NPP	26	35	38	20	19	138
IND	20	12	15	15	13	75
NDC	42	20	29	22	9	122
Others	20	23	16	15	10	84
Total	108	90	98	72	51	419
Wontumi FM						
NPP	39	27	27	28	17	138
IND	16	18	11	14	16	75
NDC	27	32	27	19	17	122
Others	21	15	20	14	14	84
Total	103	92	85	75	64	419
Power FM						
NPP	38	28	24	28	20	138
IND	18	14	11	9	23	75
NDC	38	18	22	32	12	122
Others	22	21	13	13	15	84
Total	116	81	70	82	70	419

the NDC. Again, it can be seen from the Table that 159 participants indicated NET 2 TV news is accurate and trustworthy, 85 said Net 2 TV offers them a range of opinions, 52 participants also revealed that NET 2 TV helps them make up their minds, 60 of the participants believed NET 2 TV news help them understand what's going on. Lastly, 63 participants believed that the depth and analysis of news content on NET 2 TV could not be found anywhere else.

Again, Table 1 shows that 59 participants affiliated with NPP (that is 43% of the NPP affiliates) indicated that NET 2 TV news is accurate and trustworthy, while 47 participants affiliated with NDC (39% of NDC affiliates) thought that news from Net 2 TV was accurate and trustworthy. However, 43 (36%) NDC affiliates believed that news from TV XYZ was accurate and trustworthy, with 39 (29%) NPP affiliates having the same opinion. This finding means that the percentage of NDC affiliates who considered Net 2 TV, an NPP-affiliated news source, to be accurate and trustworthy was higher than that of NPP affiliates who considered TV XYZ (NDC-affiliated news source) news to be accurate and trustworthy.

A careful look at column one of the ratings (accurate and trustworthy), as in Table 1, reveals that many participants rated news sources affiliated with their political parties as accurate and trustworthy. For instance, 46 (33.3%) NPP affiliates indicated news from Daily Statesman (NPP affiliated source) is accurate, and only 28 (23%) of NDC affiliated participants had the same opinion. Again, 42 (34.4%) of the NDC affiliates thought that news from Daily Democrat (NDC affiliated source) was accurate and trustworthy. In comparison, only 26 (18.8%) of NPP affiliates had the same opinion about news from Daily Democrat. So, we ran a Chi-square test to determine whether participants' ratings of politically affiliated news sources depended on their political affiliations. The result is presented in Table 2. No cell had an expected count of less than 5, so this assumption for a Chi-square test was met.

From Table 2, we observe that the Chi-square test of independence between political affiliation and Net2 TV is [X^2 (12) = 27.375, p = 0.007]. Because the p-value is less than the alpha value of 0.05, we infer an association between participants' political affiliation and their rating of Net 2 TV. Even though the Cramer's V associated with this test is significant, the value is less than 0.2, which

Table 2. Chi-square tests of independence between political affiliation and rating of news from politically affiliated sources.

	Pearson Chi-square Value	df	p-value	Cramer's V Value	P-value
Political Affiliation * NET 2 TV	27.375	12	0.007	0.148	0.007
Political Affiliation * TV XYZ	13.036	12	0.366	0.102	0.366
Political Affiliation * Daily Statesman	12.113	12	0.437	0.098	0.437
Political Affiliation * Daily Democrat	18.423	12	0.103	0.121	0.103
Political Affiliation * Wontumi FM	9.214	12	0.685	0.086	0.685
Political Affiliation * Power FM	22.580	12	0.042	0.132	0.032

indicates the relationship between participants' political affiliation and their rating of Net TV is weak [Es = 0.148, p = 0.007]. That is, the two are weakly related. With a Chi-Square result of [X^2 (12) = 13.036, p > 0.366], it is concluded that the rating of TV XYZ by participants was not dependent on their political affiliations. The test of independence between political affiliation and participants' rating of Daily Statesman gave a result of [X^2 (12) = 12.1131, p = 0.437]. Again, since the p-value of 0.437 is greater than the significance value of 0.05, it is concluded that participants' political affiliation did not influence their news rating of Daily Statesman.

The rating of news from the Daily Democrat by participants was also not influenced by their political affiliation. Table 2 shows the result of [X^2 (12) = 18.423, p = 0.103], meaning no significant association exists between the respondents' political affiliation and their rating of the Daily Democrat newspaper. The Chi-Square test result for independence between political affiliation and rating of news from Wontumi FM provided [X^2 (12) = 9.214, p = 0.685]. Again, the obtained p-value of 0.685 is greater than the significant level of 0.05; hence, respondents' news rating from Wontumi FM was not significantly informed by their political affiliations. However, the rating of news from Power FM by participants was found to be significantly influenced by their political affiliations [X^2 (12) = 22.580, p = 0.032] because the p-value obtained from the Chi-Square analysis is lesser than the 5% significant level. Again, the effect size Cramer's V) is less than 0.2. Hence, the variables of participants' political affiliation and their rating of Power FM are weakly associated.

It can be concluded from the Chi-Square test result at a 95% confidence level that the participants rated four of the six politically affiliated news sources (TV XYZ, Daily Statesman, Daily Democrat, and Wontumi FM) were not significantly influenced by their political affiliations. However, the rating of Net 2 TV (NPP-affiliated source) and Power FM (NDC-affiliated source) were significantly influenced by participants' political affiliation.

4.2. RQ2: Audiences' Validation of News for the Categories of Reliable Sources

Respondents were asked to select from four sources of news the one they considered the most reliable source. The four sources were: Television, newspapers/print, radio, and social media. Most respondents, 147 (35.1%), believed that television is the most reliable news source. Television was followed by newspapers 137 (32.7%). Radio, 88 (21%), came after newspapers. Web/social media news was considered reliable by only 47 (11.2%).

Following up with the respondents' choice of the most reliable news source was an item asking them to rate their validation of news from their perceived reliable sources. Respondents were asked to indicate their conduct of what they do with news they read/listen to, about their choice of a reliable source on a scale of 1 - 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagreed, 2 = Disagreed, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Agreed and 5 = Strongly Agreed. Negatively worded items were coded in reverse order.

Eight items elicited respondents' views on how they validate news from reliable sources. The average of a respondent's responses to these eight items was obtained to represent his/her validation of news. Hence, the grand mean for these items is used to interpret the respondents' attitudes toward validating news. A mean of less than three indicates respondents do not validate news from their choices of reliable news sources, and a mean greater than three indicates they validate news from the sources. The result in Table 3 reveals that, generally, the participants tended to validate news. With a mean of 3.4074, which is greater than 3, it can be said that the respondents validate the stories they receive from their trusted sources.

We wanted to determine if respondents' tendency to validate news differs or is the same for the four sources. A normality test was run to see if the dependent variable "validation of news" was normally distributed across the four categories of news sources. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality in Table 4 shows that the tendency to validate news was not normally distributed in the four categories. Hence, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the tendency to validate news from these four sources.

The following hypotheses were tested using the Kruskal-Wallis test at a 5% significance level.

H_0: The tendency to validate news is the same across the categories of a most reliable source

H_1: The tendency to validate news differs across the categories of most reliable sources

Table 3. Mean scores for respondents' validation of news.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Seek out more information	4.1398	1.08335
Follow up to see if the information was fact or opinion	3.9541	1.06237
Check to see if it was complete	3.9375	2.72090
Seek other sources to validate the information	3.5676	1.13454
Follow up to see if the information was fact or opinion	3.5700	2.74831
Identifying and excluding fake accounts or bots	2.8892	1.17170
Extremely unlikely to verify	2.4516	1.12613
Less likely to verify	2.5375	1.15409
Validating news (Grand Mean)	**3.4074**	**0.83342**

Table 4. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality.

Most Reliable source	Statistic	df	P-Value
Television	0.095	147	0.002
Newspapers (printed)	0.119	137	0.001
Radio	0.143	88	0.001
Web/social media on a mobile phone	0.236	47	0.001

To use the Kruskal-Wallis test, we had to test if the distributions for news sources had similar shapes. Hence, Levene's test of equality of variance was used. The result in Table 5 shows that the homogeneity of variance test based on the means and the medians were not statistically significant at an alpha level of 5%. It was concluded that the groups had similar distributions; hence the Kruskal-Wallis test can be used.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed at a 5% alpha level to test whether the possibility of validating news was the same for the four categories of reliable sources. The result is presented in Table 6.

The Kruskal-Wallis test at a 5% significance level shows a significant difference [H (3) = 8.364, p = 0.039]; hence, we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that the tendency of validating news is not the same across categories of most reliable sources. At least one group differs in its tendency to validate news. Since the overall test showed a significant difference across the respondents in the four categories, pairwise comparisons were performed with a Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. The result is presented in Table 7, and its accompanying figure is in Figure 1.

The results from Table 7 and Figure 1 show a difference between newspapers

Table 5. Test of homogeneity of variance.

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
	Based on Mean	0.452	3	415	0.716
	Based on Median	0.390	3	415	0.760
Validating news	Based on the Median and with adjusted df	0.390	3	317.980	0.760
	Based on trimmed mean	0.468	3	415	0.705

Table 6. Independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test.

Total N	419
Test Statistic	8.364[a]
Degree of Freedom	3
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	0.039

Table 7. Pairwise comparisons of the tendency to validate news from reliable sources.

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig.[a]
Newspapers (Printed)-Radio	−8.659	16.510	−0.524	0.600	1.000
Newspapers (Printed)-Web/Social Media	−34.268	20.430	−1.677	0.093	0.561
Newspapers (Printed)-Television	37.871	14.352	2.639	0.008	0.050
Radio-Web/Social Media	−25.609	21.835	−1.173	0.241	1.000
Radio-Television	29.212	16.289	1.793	0.073	0.438
Web/Social Media-Television	3.603	20.252	0.178	0.859	1.000
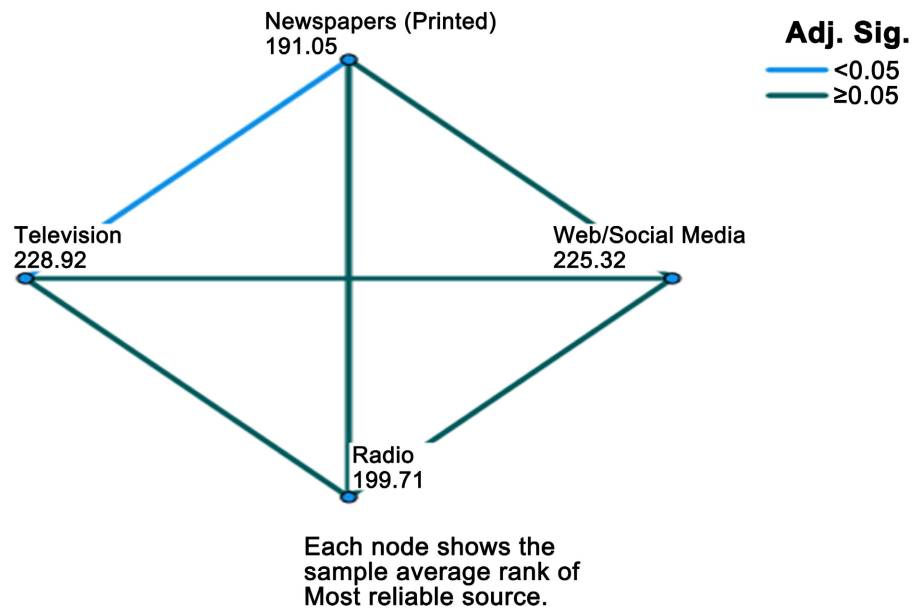
Figure 1. Pairwise comparison of validating news from the most reliable source.

and television. That is the tendency of validating news for participants who considered newspapers their reliable source is not the same as those who considered television their reliable source. The mean rank for television is 228.92, higher than the mean rank of newspapers (191.05). This finding indicates that those who regarded television as their reliable source are more likely to validate news from this source than those who considered newspapers their reliable source.

It can be concluded from the results that though all respondents had the attitude of validating news, even if the news is from their perceived reliable source, those whose reliable source of news is television had the highest tendency to validate news. Those whose reliable source is newspapers are the least likely to validate news from this source.

4.3. RQ3: Audiences' Rating of "Story Type" and Their Choice of the Most Reliable Source

Participants' choice of most reliable sources was compared with the news stories they considered news. Participants were grouped according to their choice of the most reliable source, and a contingency between the categories of reliable sources and ratings of five-story types was created. The 4 × 4 contingency table presented in Table 8 reveals that 129 out of 147 participants whose reliable source of news is television recognized breaking news as news. Then, 113 out of 137 participants whose reliable source of news is newspapers (printed) considered breaking news as news, 76 of the 88 respondents whose choice of a reliable source of news is radio thought that breaking news is news, and 43 out of 47 social media affiliates said breaking news is news. A very small number of the participants, 3, 5, and 1, respectively, for television, newspapers and radio, believed breaking news is not news, and 4, 2, and 3, respectively, were unsure how to

Table 8. Contingency table for most reliable sources and rating of story types.

News Type		Television	Newspapers (printed)	Radio	Web/Social Media	Total
			Most Reliable Sources			
Breaking	Definitely News	129	113	76	43	361
	Entertainment	11	17	8	4	40
	Not Sure	4	2	3	0	9
	Definitely Not News	3	5	1	0	9
Total		147	137	88	47	419
Fact Checks Definitely News		125	101	63	42	331
Entertainment		9	20	14	4	47
Not Sure		11	12	10	1	34
Definitely not News		2	4	1	0	7
Total		147	137	88	47	419
Opinion and Exclusive Definitely News		112	96	70	37	315
Entertainment		20	18	8	7	53
Not Sure		10	15	7	3	35
Definitely not News		5	8	3	0	16
Total		147	137	88	47	419
Forward-referencing Definitely News		77	75	51	33	236
Entertainment		34	23	15	9	81
Not Sure		30	31	20	5	86
Definitely not News		6	8	2	0	16
Total		147	137	88	47	419
News should take a Definitely News		83	81	53	27	244
humorous, satirical Entertainment		40	32	15	11	98
angle in which the host Not Sure		19	17	13	7	56
infuses humor in his Definitely not News questioning		5	7	7	2	21
Total		147	137	88	47	419

classify breaking news. No participant in the social media group indicated that breaking news is not news. However, participants from each category of most reliable source considered breaking news as entertainment, namely, 11, 17, 8 and 4 participants for television, newspapers, radio, and social media.

On participants' views on "fact-checking," Table 8 reveals that 125 whose choice of a most reliable source is television had the opinion that fact-checking is a form of news. Also, 101 newspaper affiliates indicated the same. Sixty-three of the 88 participants whose reliable news source is radio also said fact-checking is news. In comparison, 42 of the 47 participants who recognized social media as their reliable source shared the same opinion. Again, a small number (2, 4, and 1) from television, newspaper and radio categories, respectively, believed that fact-checking is not news. In this case, 9, 20, 14, and 4, respectively, from television, newspaper, radio, and social media, considered "fact-checking" as entertainment.

Most of the participants, 112 (76.2%) whose reliable news source is television, indicated "opinion and exclusive" stories are news. Of those in the newspaper category, 96 recognized such stories as news. Also, 70 and 37 participants in the radio and social media categories said opinion and exclusive stories are news. And 5, 8, 3, and 0, respectively, for television, newspaper, radio, and social media, did not identify this type of story as news.

Table 8 shows that 6, 8, 2, and 0 of participants who selected television, newspaper, radio, and social media, respectively, as their reliable sources of news believed stories that are "forward-referencing" are not news. However, large numbers from these groups indicated that forward-referencing stories are news. The counts are 77, 75, 51, and 33 for television, newspaper, radio, and social media, respectively. Many participants from each category thought forward-referencing story types are entertainment 34, 23, 15, and 9 from each category, respectively. Yet a significant number from each category could not classify this type of story. They indicated they were "not sure" what form such stories are. They were 30, 31, 20, and 5 for television, newspapers, radio, and social media, respectively.

The Table also reveals that many participants in the four categories believed that news should take a humorous, satirical angle in which the host infuses humor in his questioning. Those who had this perception were more than those who did not. Of those who believed that news should take a humorous, satirical angle in which the host infuses humor in his questioning, 83, 81, 53, and 27 were associated with the television, newspaper, radio, and social media categories, respectively. Nevertheless, a substantial number from each category of the most reliable source believed that such stories are entertainment, 40, 32, 15, and 11 for television, newspaper, radio, and social media, respectively. A considerable number of participants from each category were not sure how to classify such news, 19, 17, 13, and 7 for the categories in the order as stated before. Yet, a few respondents (5, 7, 7, and 2 for the respective categories) indicated that such stories are neither news nor entertainment.

It was observed from the Table that the counts for the categories of responses to the different story types were not the same across and within the categories of reliable news sources. So, we used the chi-square test to determine whether the ratings of types of stories depend on the choice of the most reliable source at a 5% significant level. We wanted to determine if the participants' choice of their most reliable sources moderated their ratings of story types.

As presented in Table 9, the chi-square test results revealed that participants' rating of story types is independent of their choice of most reliable sources. The chi-square test of independence between the most reliable source and breaking is [$X^2_{(9)} = 7.380, p = 0.598$], because the reported p-value of 0.598 exceeds the alpha level of 0.05, we concluded that participants' rating of breaking news was independent of their choice of a most reliable news source.

Table 9. Chi-square tests of independence between rating of story types and most reliable source.

	Pearson Chi-Square	Df	*P*-Value
Most reliable source* Breaking	7.380	9	0.598
Most reliable source * Fact Checking	14.906	9	0.094
Most reliable * Opinion and Exclusive	7.126	9	0.624
Most Reliable * Forward referencing	10.491	9	0.312
Most Reliable * News should take a humorous, satirical entertainment angle in which the host infuses humor in his questioning	5.260	9	0.811

The test between "most reliable source" and rating of "fact-checking" was also not statistically significant $\left[X^2_{(9)} = 14.906, p = 0.094 \right]$. At a 5% significance level, the chi-square test between "most reliable source" and "opinion and exclusive" was not significant $\left[X^2_{(9)} = 7.126, p = 0.624 \right]$. Again, no significant association was found between "most reliable source" and rating of "forward-referencing" $\left[X^2_{(9)} = 10.491, p = 0.312 \right]$. Participants' choice of the most reliable source was not found to moderate their ratings of "news should take a humorous, satirical entertainment angle in which host infuses humor in his questioning" $\left[X^2_{(9)} = 5.260, p = 0.811 \right]$. Thus, at the 5% significance level, it was observed that the audiences' ratings of the five-story types were not influenced by their choice of the most reliable source.

5. Discussion

This study employed an audience-centered approach to answering the research questions. The findings showed no significant association between audiences' political affiliations and their ratings of partisan newspaper sources and one radio source, Also, the tendency to validate news is not the same across the categories of news sources. In addition, audiences' ratings of story type are independent of their choices of the most reliable news source. The implications of the findings are discussed.

5.1. Political Affiliation and Rating of News from Politically Affiliated Sources

Results showed no significant association existed between audiences' political affiliations and their ratings of partisan newspaper sources. There was no association between political affiliation and the rating of one partisan radio source (Wontumi FM – NPP) and a partisan television source (TV XYZ – NDC). However, a significant association was established between Power FM (NDC) and Net2 TV (NPP) ratings and respondents' political affiliations. However, the results tend to support previous findings Arceneaux et al. 2013; that suggest the impact of partisan selective news exposure on most audiences and polarization is not automatic, and that exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can influence audience choices and polarized political attitudes (O'Neill et al., 2015).

Unsurprisingly, no significant association existed between audiences' political

affiliations and their ratings of partisan newspaper sources, yet contrastingly having an association and disassociation between their political affiliations and ratings of partisan radio and television sources. It implies that we cannot take an outright stance as in some previous studies on political orientations determining partisans' high ratings of media messages. Aside from selective exposure, media credibility and socio-political settings may shape audiences differently. Hence, our findings do not support radio and TV partisan ratings with political affiliation or viewpoints in previous studies. Rather, the results tend to support previous findings (Kwode, 2022) that suggest the impact of partisan selective news exposure on most audiences and polarization is not automatic, and that exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can influence audience choices and polarized political attitudes.

On a speculative level, we agree with observation that people turn to news to obtain accurate information about the world; and given utility maximization and the impossibility of attending to all news, all the time, people have an incentive to ignore many stimuli. Considering the audience interest in the value of credibility or trust, audience evaluation of media content from politically affiliated news sources is shaped by "the expectation that the interaction with the trustee would lead to gains rather than losses". So, it would not make much sense to follow media that one does not trust. Theoretically, a correlation between audience evaluation of media content from politically affiliated news sources can be expected. However, it is also a fact that in many cases, people's media use is ritualized rather than instrumental and habitual rather than active. People use media, even news media and news genres, for purposes other than getting informed. These purposes include entertainment and social identity needs.

5.2. Audiences' Validation of News for the Categories of Reliable Sources

The results indicated that audiences regarded television as the most reliable news source, followed by newspapers. The next was radio; web and social media sites were the least reliable news sources. Also, the results showed overall that the audiences validate news from even perceived trusted sources. (Tutu et al., 2023) The tendency to validate news is not the same across the categories of news sources. Those who regarded television as their reliable news source had the highest tendency to validate news, while those relying on newspapers as news sources were the least likely to validate messages from these sources.

The fact that the audiences validate perceived trusted sources hints at the relevance of discussions about fake news. Although this study was not about fake news, the audiences' response indicates their concept of news and how they believe it could be challenged by fake news. (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023) Their rating of web/social media sites' low reliable news sources may suggest the greater risk of accessing fake news at those sites. However, it looks intriguing how the audiences who rated television as their top reliable news source would simultaneously have the highest tendency to verify television news, while those who rely

on newspapers as news sources (second) were the least likely to validate messages from these sources. This observation is inconsistent with that higher ratings of news-ness result in lower intent to verify.

Although people rate television and newspapers higher on the credibility scale than others because they are produced by well-trained personnel and have standardized ways of filtering news stories for accuracy and objectivity, the audiences might have integrated other news factors, such as being more analytical and providing depth and context to account for the least verification of newspaper news. (Matthews et al., 2023) In Ghana, as in any other country, audiences validate news based on various factors when determining the reliability of news sources. While the specific categories may vary, Ghanaians often consider several key aspects when assessing the credibility of news outlets. It is important to note that these factors are not exhaustive, and individual audience members may have their criteria for evaluating news reliability. (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) Additionally, media literacy initiatives, fact-checking organizations, and the role of regulatory bodies in ensuring accurate and reliable reporting also play a crucial role in shaping the audiences' validation of news in Ghana.

5.3. Audiences' Rating of "Story Type" and Their Choice of the Most Reliable Source

Audiences' ratings of story types are independent of their choices of the most reliable news source. As a result, the choice of the most reliable news source was not found to moderate their ratings. Alternatively, their choice of the most reliable source did not influence ratings. Their choices of news outlets and ratings of story types are independent of one another. The findings seem to contradict the news-ness concept, yet the audiences do so in rating traditional media more highly as news than online media. This observation may raise the concern that the new media environment presents audience expectations that are "unfixed, decentered, and open to reimagining" (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013). The findings also emphasize the contention that defining "what is news" may not be consistent for all audiences, content, or platforms.

The audiences' ratings of web/social media as the lowest among their reliable news sources and validating news from even perceived trusted sources may have two implications. First, our findings support previous studies that indicate audiences can assess the credibility of online and traditional news and decide the most appropriate source for information (Dori et al., 2023). This view bolsters the concept of an active audience and shows audiences are more discreet than thought about their news exposure (O'Neill et al., 2015). Moreover, in the present study, the pattern of audience rating shows the prominent place audiences hold for traditional media sources for information. It suggests their measure of news-ness from the perspective of the traditional news-democracy narrative and its news values. This view must encourage news organizations to elevate the discipline of verification and interpretation in the journalistic process and not relax verification routines.

When choosing the most reliable source, audiences consider various factors to determine the credibility and trustworthiness of a particular source. These factors include the reputation and track record of the source, the quality and accuracy of their past reporting, the level of transparency and accountability they demonstrate, and any potential biases (Martin et al., 2023). Audiences often rely on established news organizations, reputable journalists, and experts in the field as reliable sources (Clementson et al., 2023). Additionally, the rise of fact-checking organizations and independent investigative journalism has significantly guided audiences toward trustworthy sources. With the increasing prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, audiences are becoming more discerning in selecting reliable sources, seeking out those that adhere to ethical standards and provide verifiable information.

The study found no significant association between audiences' political affiliations and their ratings of partisan newspaper sources and one radio source. This indicates that individuals' political leanings do not predictably influence how they rate news from sources affiliated with different political parties. Additionally, the study found that the tendency to validate news is not consistent across categories of news sources. This suggests variability in how different news sources are trusted and verified by audiences.

Furthermore, audiences' ratings of story types were found to be independent of their choices of the most reliable news source. This means that regardless of which source an individual considers most reliable, their judgment of what type of content is news does not change. The study concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings, particularly highlighting that political affiliation and the choice of a reliable news source do not significantly dictate how news is rated and validated by the audience in Ghana.

6. Conclusions

This study provides insights into how Ghanaian audiences assess the media they consume and their perceptions of news-ness. It also shows the extent political affiliation evokes either more or less favorable responses to news sources and how considerations of reliable news sources drive intent to validate news. The study, however, has limitations. We raise a caution of generalizability of results outside Ghana because differences in the media landscape involving news factors such as socio-political contexts and fewer regulations need consideration. Moreover, we recommend further research using more rigorous sampling techniques to improve generalizability.

Furthermore, this study did not discuss the demographic and political characteristics of the sample, how they compare with known characteristics of the population of reference, and how any differences between the two might affect the validity of the results. A future study may also consider fake news because it is foundational to journalism and deserves scholars' attention, particularly finding whether audience assessment of fake news generally impacts disaffection for

news. Another area may be further looking into audiences' ratings for television, newspapers and online/social media sites and their motivations, reasons and values for verifying the news.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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