

THE RESURGENCE OF TRUST IN TRADITIONAL MEDIA: RETHINKING NEWS CREDIBILITY AND AUDIENCE BEHAVIOUR IN THE AGE OF AI

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ABSTRACT

This position paper reveals changing patterns of news credibility and audience engagement fuelled by the increase of artificial intelligence (AI) in the media ecosystem. The study highlights the declining popularity of traditional media; the television, radio and even newspaper, in favour of user-centric digital alternatives, as well as the growing wave of trust or confidence in traditional media channels. The findings reveal that the resurgence in trust is attributed to the increase of misinformation produced by AI and people's uncertainty regarding the content posted on social, alternative media and other digital media outlets. The paper argues that amid re-emerging trust, traditional media must adapt in order to secure its place as the most reliable information and news source in a media landscape increasingly fragmented by digital platforms and AI-generated misinformation. In conclusion, the paper submits that the re-emergence of trust in traditional media is not mere nostalgia, nor is it sustenance automatic, therefore, stakeholders in traditional media must maximise this momentum and reposition the sector as the core source for fact-checking and verifying news from unregulated sources and social platforms by balancing innovative technology with a collective commitment to integrity, transparent practices, and public engagement.

Keywords: Traditional media, Artificial Intelligence, News credibility, Audience trust, Media consumption

Introduction

For decades, traditional media which refers to mass media institutions that existed prior to the internet, namely; television, radio, and newspapers were considered the primary custodians of public information across the globe, as they shaped public perception, exercised oversight of power, and fostered national deliberation through systematic editorial frameworks and professional journalism standards (Anyanwu *et al.*, 2024; Buchmeier, 2024). However, the rapid development of digital technologies, especially from the early 2000s, triggered a transformation in the media industry. The audience, especially the youth, started shifting to digital and social media platforms because of their immediacy, interactivity, and claimed authenticity (Newman, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019). The emergence of what scholars now refer to as ‘new media’ shifted the public’s reliance on traditional media institutions for news and current information. In this context, traditional media were increasingly regarded as sluggish, excessively filtered, and out of touch with the contemporary, participatory communications landscape (Gillis, 2024).

The advent of social media sites like Twitter, now called X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok has turned everyday individuals into content creators and distributors around the globe. The concept of the “citizen journalist” has surfaced, and challenged the traditional media monopoly on news dissemination. These platforms actively enable the participation of marginalised and underrepresented people’s voices, and they disrupt the traditional top-down model of information flow. The same shift resulted in the fragmentation of audience attention (Upadhaya, 2024; Miller, 2019). As media sources multiplied, the trust placed on each of them became increasingly baseless. Instead of relying on known trusted institutions, media content was trusted based on personal biases, peer influence, or its popularity on social networks. In these hasty and chaotic traditional media environments, media outlets were trying hard to stay relevant and ended up being perceived as biased, gatekeeping, or disconnected from the grassroots (Gillis, 2024).

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is once again reshaping the landscape of the media industry. Sonni *et al.* (2024) have noted that the rapid advancement of AI systems poses as an asset for optimising the production of news, its analysis, and the personalisation of media. However, it also poses a serious challenge; the rapid creation and dissemination of synthetic copies of real content. With the ability to produce convincing content at scale, the generation of deepfake videos, AI news articles, and voice clones blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. The difference between this current moment and the last instance of “fake news” concerns disguise sophistication. Tools powered by AI generate content that is much more difficult to expose and evade even the most trained eyes and advanced algorithms (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Westerlund, 2019).

This increasing ambiguity has caused a renewed discussion on news credibility of information sources. News credibility refers to the objectivity, accuracy, completeness, fairness and trustworthiness of a news source (Amponsah & Okyere, 2024). Traditional media and new media have their own advantages and disadvantages. While new media improved communication speed and access to information, its facilitation of false information, data manipulation, and echo chamber algorithms have made it the focus of criticism (Surjatmodjo *et al.*, 2024). With the rise of the internet, many have viewed traditional media as more

trustworthy given its commitments to journalism practices, editorial oversight, and institutional responsibility as the audience transforms from passive consumers to active critical seekers of fact-checked information (Anyanwu *et al.*, 2024). Humans as social creatures are adaptable, and their trust can be lost and regained, hence this does not mean a complete shift to, or decline of, social media and digital platforms. It indicates the re-balancing of public trust. Companies like Google have increasingly observed individuals spanning all demographics seeking information through legacy media organizations, be it on traditional broadcast or their digital platforms, rather than social media (Nelson, 2020; Anyanwu *et al.*, 2024).

In the emerging AI age, this paper posits that there is a resurgence of trust in traditional media. The argument centres on the fact that with growing AI concerns, audiences are re-evaluating traditional journalism's value as a news purveyor, and now as a guardian of truth. In the context of trust, emerging literature and recent surveys, as well as observable media trends, are explored in this work on how audience behaviour is responding to the purported credibility crisis of new media in the AI age. By rethinking credibility in news and analysing the legacy media's perceived rebirth, this discussion hopes to expose an important transformation in the audience-media relationship. As the line between reality and artifice blurs, the answer to "What can we trust of what we see online?" explains why the credibility that traditional media was once accused of losing is now being quietly reclaimed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Media Credibility Theory. The Media Credibility Theory stems from the work of Hovland and Weiss (1951) and was later refined by Gaziano and McGrath (1986). It focuses on the perception and trustworthiness of sources and their expertise regarding the media. The theory postulates that trust and credibility affect how people and audiences choose, understand, and rely on content. A media source's high credibility creates media reliance, while skepticism diminishes media reliance. The theory's key postulations are: credibility is multi-dimensional including trust, accuracy, fairness, and expertise; prior personal experience, media channel and social context shape an individual's credibility perception; and credibility, once lost, is hard to regain.

In this study, the theory helps to explain why trust in traditional media resurges. With the rise of AI-generated misinformation on social and alternative media platforms, audiences are recalibrating their trust and reverting to traditional media, which are seen as veritable and responsible media. The change in behaviour can be explained by the Media Credibility Theory: audiences who regard using traditional media as more credible tend to seek, rely on, and act on information from these sources and distance from other outlets that are deemed unreliable (Atish, 2024). Despite its strengths, the media credibility theory is not without limitations. Critics point out the credibility dimension is subjective and varies with a context. People from different socio-cultural backgrounds or political divides may perceive the same media outlet completely differently (Bryanov *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, shifts in technology such as algorithmic news curation and personalised news feeds directly evaluation mediation, make its application much more complicated (Atish, 2024).

The socio-cultural backgrounds also contribute to the variance in trust such as between Nigeria (68%) and the US (31%), the variance in trust levels in the two countries is as a result of the contrasting nature of their foundational social contracts, in which Nigeria's social trust is primarily based cultural loyalty, while the US's social trust reflects an individualistic culture

where trust is not presumed but must be earned. It is safe to say that Nigeria is mirroring this individualistic approach to trust as time goes on.

The Media Credibility Theory provides an insight into the increasing trust in traditional media and the role credibility has on the shaping audience engagement. High credibility can lead to dependence and trust, because with increased credibility, reliance on the media rises, skepticism in the other hand can decrease it significantly.

The Historical Decline of Trust in Traditional Media

For a considerable part of the twentieth century, traditional media, including television, radio, and newspapers, dominated the dissemination of news and information to the public. These media were considered credible as they shaped news according to formal editorial systems and practiced professional journalism (Amponsah & Okyere, 2024; Sujoko *et al.*, 2023). This form of media maintained a singular social authority until the early 2000s, when the integration of the internet and social media began to shift the landscape of news consumption (Hendrickx & Opgenhaffen, 2024). Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube granted access to events and opinions in real time, and far beyond what traditional outlets provided. People began to value immediacy, the informality, and the participatory nature of new media (He *et al.*, 2024). The traditional model of “journalist-to-public” communication suffered from the emergence of the “citizen journalist.” This new form of media enabled anyone with a smartphone to document, share, and comment on events in real time. This shift resulted in the perception of traditional media as increasingly slow, distant, and at times biased (Upadhaya, 2024).

The emergence of the active audience happened in conjunction with this shift, where users actively engage with, question, and even create media content, as opposed to passively accepting it (Miller, 2019). The digital space empowered users to have more control over what to consume, offering the ability to curate customised news feeds, with influencers, online commentators, or alternative media that they trusted more than mainstream media (Gu *et al.*, 2022). The decline in trust was exacerbated by an increasing segment of the public believing that mainstream media was connected to either political or business activities (Henshaw, 2024). In certain situations, traditional media was viewed as either irrelevant or as colluding to promote limited perspectives (Gillis, 2024). The trust was further eroded by politicians and public figures labelling trustworthy journalism as “fake news,” which in turn, escalated suspicion and division (Egelhofer *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, social media platforms struggled to manage the flow of misinformation, users had to sift through an overwhelming volume of content, some of which was accurate while other pieces were, at best, misleading. This fostered a more fragmented media ecosystem with mistrust becoming more subjective and linked to either personal belief or ideology (Desai *et al.*, 2022; Hook & Verdeja, 2022). In a nutshell, the decline of trust in traditional media was not purely technological nor did it decline instantaneously. It illustrated a culture in transition, one in which authority and credibility, as well as media gatekeeping, faced unprecedented scrutiny. This culture, one that embraced more open and participatory forms of media, laid the groundwork for the challenges of the AI era, in which questions of trust and truth are even more difficult to untangle.

The Rise of AI and the New Misinformation Landscape

The increasing sophistication of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies serves as a potent tool for generating content, presenting a peculiar problem of the creation and dissemination of fake information (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). These AI technologies are advancing to the extent that they are able to create and produce deepfake videos, synthetic news articles, cloned voices, and photorealistic images, which are now part of modern misinformation AI. Unlike the previous waves of misinformation that would rely on obsolete images and texts, modern AI-generated misinformation is at another level (Zahn, 2024; Lancaster 2023). Perhaps the most alarming of all is the emergence of hyper-realistic AI-generated content, as it directly undermines the trust placed on digital information (Westerlund, 2019). Public figures can now be made to say or do things they did not say or do via deepfakes. Articles and speeches from public figures can be AI-generated to sound just as the real ones, and with advancements in voice-cloning tools, fake audio clips can be produced (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Users are increasingly finding it difficult to distinguish reality from fiction as the boundary between the two is now fuzzier than it used to be.

The risks that come with misinformation have evolved with technology due to its sophistication. Social media has faced backlash for enabling the dissemination of misinformation, but the increased use of AI makes this even more difficult to control (Desai *et al.*, 2022; Hook & Verdeja, 2022). Algorithms boost engagement instead of prioritising precision, which results in inaccurate stories being disseminated more quickly and widely than authenticated coverage (Yu *et al.*, 2024). The AI and human-generated content flood exceeds the capacity available to fact checkers and journalists to address misinformation instantly. In addition, most AI-produced media lacks identifiable authorship, making it more difficult to attribute and disprove misinformation (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023).

The environments such as these increase audience anxiety over the information's credibility. The climate of AI-enabled misinformation, as well as the scope and speed of information's dissemination, leads to skepticism even when interacting with authentic content (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). For this reason, individuals are gravitating to the more traditional forms of media, including digital formats. These outlets may not be flawless, but they offer editorial control, adhere to ethical norms, and take institutional responsibility (Fotopoulos, 2023). This change is not solely a reversion to the bygone days, but, instead, a response to the unreliability brought about by deregulated digital platforms. With the rapid advancement of technology capable of generating almost perfect fictional narratives, the need of the hour is for traditional journalism, serving as a human-verified and accountable resource, to reclaim its mantle as a truth.

The Return to Traditional Media: Why Trust is Shifting Back

Globally, the level of trust in the media hovers at around 40%, with the United States registering an especially low 31% (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d.; Brenan, 2024). Strikingly, Edelman Trust Barometer (2024) noted media trust to be the lowest scoring institution globally, while countries like Kenya reported an astounding media trust level of 66%, which is exceptionally above the global average. In the case of Nigeria, a tailored version of the Edelman survey unveiled remarkable figures, showing 78% trust in the media, which reflects one of the highest scores in the world (Edelman, 2024). More recent figures suggest Nigeria's overall institutional trust level climbed to 65%, and media trust standing at an

astonishing 68%, far exceeding the global average of 40% among 48 surveyed countries (Edelman, 2024).

The Pan-African data from GeoPoll (2024) illustrates that in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, about one-third (31%) of respondents considered traditional media to be more reliable than social media, which was on par at 30% reliability. Further, 38% of respondents cited television as their primary news source, almost equal to social media's 39% share. Trustworthiness, as an attribute, was over speed and convenience considered the most important by 51% of respondents (GeoPoll 2024). In Nigeria, legacy media brands continue to dominate the trust rankings from audience surveys. Multiple surveys and audience sentiment reports suggest that Channels TV, Vanguard, Punch, Arise TV, TVC, and NTA remain some of the most trusted news organizations (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024).

This phenomenon is not limited to Nigeria or Africa. In the United States, legacy media outlets such as the BBC, Reuters, The Associated Press, PBS, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, CBS, TIME Magazine, and The New York Times have all embraced renewed appreciation as a result of audiences looking for dependable information during the AI-generated misinformation crisis (YouGov, 2024). The 2024 Reuters Institute Digital News Report indicated that legacy broadcasters still command greater trust than digital-first and social media broadcasters, especially during significant news events. Their trustworthiness stems from years of reputation and editorial biases that set them apart from the online world rife with unverified content (Reuters Institute Digital News News Report, 2024). This set of data illustrates that, both in Africa and globally, the audience is increasingly turning to traditional media for reliable and verified news. This is not a result of seeking a bygone era, but a marked demand for responsibility, strong editorial content, and heavily verified information, especially with the rising tide of AI misinformation that erodes trust in unregulated digital systems.

Limitations of the Resurgence in Trust

The return to traditional media has its benefits, but the shift comes with its challenges as well. Some audiences remain skeptical of politically biased, corporate-controlled, or previously misleading government-owned or politically affiliated stations due to questions about independence and objectivity (Henshaw, 2024). Older audiences have more trust in traditional media, but younger audiences still rely more on social media for news, as highlighted by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (no date). The speed, convenience, and algorithm-driven relevance of platforms like X, TikTok, and Instagram continue to shape how audiences consume information (Monir, 2021).

Not all uses of AI in news are detrimental, and it is crucial to recognise this point. AI-powered transcription, content curation, and even fact-checking functions are claimed to be used by many traditional media houses blurring the lines between "old" and "new" media (Sonni *et al.*, 2024; Prato, 2024). Trust in traditional media has been growing, and is in fact, coexisting with a changing and fragmented news ecosystem. The central challenge is no longer loyalty to a media platform, but how credibility is established, maintained, and recognised across all media environments.

Position Statement: The Need to Rethink News Credibility in the Age of AI

This paper argues that the renewed trust in traditional media does not reflect a nostalgic return to old paradigms, but rather an essential recalibration in an information

environment marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and digital subterfuge. For a period, traditional media outlets seemed to suffer a rapid loss in trust from the audience and, at the same time, relevance, but the relentless rise of AI-generated misinformation has, in a way, exposed the vulnerabilities of the content systems without regulations. Consequently, people are not merely returning to traditional and legacy media; they are, in fact, looking for journalistic standards that are built on trust, verification, transparency, accountability and ethical frameworks of responsibility.

That said, trust placed in traditional media should not be mistaken for a media-holistic endorsement of the media system. In fact, it represents the urgent need to innovate the parameters that determine who defines the news and the frameworks of credibility. From this perspective, the back-to-trusted media phenomenon should act as a catalyst for rethinking and reengineering media reforms that provide the need for transparency of reported content, technological competence by the media practitioners, and sharp audience public literacy.

Globally, traditional media, in whatever form they may exist, have a unique opportunity to further drive this change. However, they must first cultivate and defend reputation, and this goes beyond merely securing platform loyalty. Viewers and readers do not simply receive information passively as before; they now actively engage, and in this case, they are alert to how narratives can be shaped by AI. That invites a new relationship between the public and the media; a relationship in which trust can be cultivated and maintained through transparent, truthful and demonstrably ethical actions over time. The future of defining the role of AI in journalism will not be in the hands of algorithms alone; but also in the hands of media institutions, journalism practitioners, and the audiences, how they rethink credibility and how legacy media stakeholders embrace this opportunity to restore traditional media as a dependable source of information, trust, and engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evolution of trust in the digital ecosystem of news has been compounded by the evolution of AI-generated content. As the distinguishing line between authentic content and synthetic content continues to be blurred, people are, in a slow and gradual manner, reverting to traditional media. This trust that is now being re-established is not only visible in television, radio, and print but also in the increasing popularity of digital platforms of legacy news organizations that, unlike in the past, now compete on level ground with the immediacy of social media.

The re-emergence of trust in traditional media is not a mere nostalgia, and as the paper has shown, is a conscious search for credibility and a media structure in a noisy world dominated by algorithms. This change is not, however, guaranteed or automatic. Media institutions are not free to take it for granted that such momentum is bound to last. Instead, the emerging tendencies should be interpreted as a challenge that calls for proactive measures, such as heightened public participation, better and more interactive and user-friendly digital platforms, and a visible trust anchor amidst a chaotic media environment.

Given how the public now encounters fragmented and AI-generated content, traditional media needs to reposition itself as the core source for fact checking and verifying news from unregulated sources and social platforms through timely reporting on digital platforms, follow-up on stories, monitoring the internet for fake news and debunking them timely on their website. To regain public trust sustainably, traditional media must also innovate

boldly in terms of their reach on digital platforms and communicate to the public clearly why it remains a vital, responsible and credible source in the AI-driven age.

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