

Nigerian Audience Views on Mainstream Media and Moulding of Public Opinion in the 21st Century

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The mass media have been long known to shape and mould public opinion in every human society. However, with the influence of web 2.0 technologies that have affected mainstream journalism practice in the 21st century, this study investigated the extent to which mainstream media still mould public opinion in Nigeria. The paper was anchored on agenda-setting and media dependency theories as it investigated journalism's ability to mould the views of people on issues of public concern. The survey research design was used where the multi-stage sampling technique was adopted and an online Australian Calculator was used to draw the sample size of 371, the questionnaire was deployed as the instrument for data collection. The results among other things revealed that, though social media and blogs' usage have influenced mass media and public communication generally, mainstream journalism still moulds public opinion in Nigeria. This was revealed as respondents disclosed that in making decisions, they believe and use more information they obtained from mainstream media platforms than information they got from blogs and social media sites.

Keywords: blogs, information, mainstream media, public opinion, public agenda, social media

Introduction

There is a belief that mass media are the major public institutions that galvanise, refine, evaluate, and to a very large extent define the opinions expressed by the people in every human society. It is through the media that the leaders and the lead get to know what constitutes public opinion and the slant of it in every nation at any given point in time. This is often chiefly achieved through “the agenda-setting prowess of the media,” (Osisanwo, 2022, p.76). Being a profession that assembles, dissects and presents the divergent views of the people on any issue, journalism has been instrumental to shaping what is known as public opinion. Sometimes, in the process of performing their agenda-setting roles, journalists through the mass media stimulate the people to air their opinion on certain issues of public interest. They do not only provide the audience with the platforms for expression of views and counter views on any matter but they (the

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media) exert influence on what could stand as the opinion of the people. The mass media could twist and even thwart the aggregate opinions held in any society by influencing the direction or what people would give consideration. Perhaps, that is why Bernard Cohen cited in Ohaja (2005) noted that the mass media may not always succeed in telling people what to think, but they could be succinctly successful in telling people what to think about. So, in Cohen's view, the mainstream media contribute subtly in guiding the psyche of the members of the public towards many things they consider worthwhile to think about.

Public opinion could be expressed on variegated matters bordering on multi-dimensional areas of human endeavours. That is captured in the submission that, all matters pertaining to people, "their welfare in political, religious, technological, socio-economical and other ways form the fulcrum of the mass media's regular reporting," (Edogor, 2018). Thus, from its inception, journalism has its thrust on coverage of anything from all walks of life. It is not circumscribed to a particular area. The import is that as much as the ethics and legal demands permit, journalism is expected to squarely concentrate on human beings and what affects them regardless of their gender, race, tribe, religion, age, social, economic, or political status. The mass media could scrutinise and streamline the opinions of the people expressed in any or combination of those divergent areas. That is made possible as the media were the only or at least the cardinal social institution that played a significant role in moulding the views expressed by the people. In fact, "ever since the advent of the mass media, it has been assumed that journalists had a strong influence on the formation of public opinion," (Petersen, 2019).

Before the twenty-first century, whenever one mentioned the term 'mass media,' the picture of magazines, newspapers, radio and television would easily come to mind. Before now, public opinion was seen as the views of the members of the public expressed through the outlined means of social communication. Also, those who are behind the production of mass media content are always known as their identities are not hidden at all. At that time, journalism practice and those in the profession had an incontestable definition even in the views of non-journalists. However, with time especially within the twenty-first century, the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has altered a series of things about journalism and mass media generally. The innovations brought by the ICTs did not only influence the processes of assembling messages or opinions for interpersonal and mass communication, they also influenced the media used in both of them Edogor (2008). That is evident in the observation that "the traditional lines between media are disappearing. The internet has eroded the distinctions among media, thus merging them up into one," Oyero (2007, p. 169).

With the availability of ICT devices and applications like blog sites and social media sites in the twenty-first century, everyone could participate in the processes of assembling and delivering messages, information, ideas, et cetera meant for public consumption. This informs the submission that, "we live in an age where media are seemingly ubiquitous and impactful, with mobile media, Internet connectivity, drones and video surveillance often bringing nonstop news and information to a public with an oftentimes thirsty appetite for news" (Pavlik, 2023, p. 223). Thus, individuals and non-human sources who were not hitherto used in

the production of the contents of communication intended for public consumption can now gather messages and deliver them to a mass audience using the alternative media provided by the ICTs. The European Society of Professional Journalists (2004, p. 1) cited in Aja (2011) observes that the news and information from the mainstream media are being increasingly circumvented by mass media audiences who use alternative media platforms as sources of getting messages. The popularity of alternative media platforms has made them expedient and the extent the mainstream media could still determine or shape public opinion in the twenty-first century has to be examined. That forms part of the matters this paper has attempted to provide empirical solutions to.

Statement of the Problem

In every democracy, the opinions of the people are considered essential to each branch of the government. This is essentially because the people ideally engineer the emergence as well as hold the power to dethrone or make any government lose legitimacy in democracy. Thus, the legitimacy of every democratic government is dependent on the people's acceptance of the government and their policies. Public opinion could largely show when the people support the government or not. That is the reason every reasonable government strives to ascertain the position of public opinion about their administration and or their policies. Also, governments make concerted efforts to ensure that their policies are endorsed by a greater number of people in different strata of society. Through the instrumentality of public opinion among other ways, people's support to government policies and programmes could be measured and seen for relevant actions or reasons.

The mainstream mass media x-ray the government and showcase governmental agenda, plans policies and programmes to the people and elicit their (people's) responses towards any policy initiated by the government. These roles count for the premium value which many societies place on the mass media as the watchdog that watches over and relays the actions and the activities of the government to the masses. Perhaps, such a watchdog role of the mass media could be seen in Chapter II, section 22, of the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended*, which states that "the mass media shall at all times be free to...uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people." This provision by extension includes bringing the yearnings of the masses to the government which has to cater for the collective interest of the people.

The foregoing shows that the Nigerian constitution places a sacred responsibility on the mass media as an institution known hitherto to be the radio, television, magazine or newspaper. However, in the twenty-first century where there is a reportedly subtle usurpation of the works of the mainstream mass media by the users of alternative media sources (blogs and social media sits), the rate at which the mass media monitor the opinion of the masses about everything including the governance and report to the government needs to be re-examined. There are no empirical studies known to the researchers that have examined the ability of the mass media towards galvanization of public opinion vis-à-vis the

existence of other extant sources of getting information in Nigeria of the 21st century. Thus, this study investigated the extent at which the people view the mainstream media as the sources of moulding public opinion at the present age where bloggers and social media users or influencers have provided alternative platforms for galvanization of public opinion.

Objectives of the study: The following objectives guided this study: (1) To ascertain the extent at which members of the public accept the mainstream media as an institution that moulds public opinion in the twenty-first century; (2) To find out if there are alternative means which the members of the public understand as other sources that mould public opinion in the twenty-first century; (3) To determine whether members of the public believe that the Nigerian Government respected public opinion in the last eight years.

Research questions: This study was guided by the following research questions below: (1) To what extent do members of the public in Nigeria accept the mainstream media as an institution that moulds public opinion in the twenty-first century? (2) What are the alternative means which the members of the public understand as other sources that mould public opinion in the twenty-first century? (3) Do members of the public believe that the Nigerian Government respected public opinion in the last eight years?

Literature Review

The researchers examined some useful pieces of previous literature that are relevant to this study in order to throw light on the key subject matter of the work. The literature was reviewed under some subheadings for easy comprehension. Also, two theories were considered and applied to the study.

Overview of Public Opinion

According to facts from recorded history, public opinion could be traced back to the 18th century when it was believed to have originated. From that point, the crude perspective of what eventually became known as public opinion was formed. As expected, the nature of that time differs from what it is in the present century. This could be gleaned from the submission of Davison (2021) who recounts that:

Although the term public opinion was not used until the 18th century, phenomena that closely resemble public opinion seem to have occurred in many historical epochs. The ancient histories of Babylonia and Assyria, for example, contain references to popular attitudes, including the legend of a caliph who would disguise himself and mingle with the people to hear what they said about his governance. The prophets of ancient Israel sometimes justified the policies of the government to the people and sometimes appealed to the people to oppose the government. In both cases, they were concerned with swaying the opinion of the crowd. And in the classical democracy of Athens, it was commonly observed that everything depended

on the people, and the people were dependent on the word. Wealth, fame, and respect-all could be given or taken away by persuading the populace.

One underlying fact from Davison's bird's eye-view of the origin of public opinion is that, it entails influencing the opinion of the crowd or people to offer support or to oppose an idea. In essence, public opinion is not expected to always be the consensus of any particular social group over an issue. It is expected to portray both the views of those who agree on an issue and the views of others who hold a sharp contrary view on the same issue from the same group. So, public opinion encapsulates the divergent views of diverse members of a certain group. In line with this view, MacDougall (1966) cited in Ukonu (2007, p. 101) states that "public opinion can be said to be the state of opinion in a public on certain issues or matters when there are differences as well as agreements. Public opinion is just the opinions of the members of a group plus their differences." It refers to the collective opinions of those who constitute the majority on a particular matter and those who hold the minority view on the same matter of public concern.

The bottom-line in the foregoing is that the issue where the opinion is expressed should be what members of the public have an interest in or the issue that affects a greater percentage of the populace or their means of livelihood. Perhaps, the submission beneath better summarises the nitty-gritty of what public opinion entails as expressed by Ukonu (2007, p. 101) who argues that:

Therefore, the centripetal force within a public is an interest for all, upon which they may be divided or agreed in debate about them. If the matter does not concern the public, it is private. A member of NLC might have had a radically different opinion from that presented by the NLC as a body about privatization of the petroleum industry. This is the more reason such groups are not publics, and when the newspaper says public opinion, it should not be the aggregation of the voices of ASUU, NLC, political parties or health organisation...

In her explanation of public opinion, Hasan (2013) included the age distinction as a factor in the meaning of the term. Thus, she notes that "public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs held by the adult population," Hasan (2013, p. 124). By inference, this definition does not include the opinion of the teens as what would make up public opinion. In Nigeria particularly, where the constitution of the country recognises adults from the age of eighteen years and above, it implies that the opinions of students who would not be up to the age categorised as adults should not be taken into consideration in public opinion as Hasan (2013) posits. The exclusion of the views of children or those who are not adults in the estimation of what constitutes public opinion in the idea of Hasan (2013) is not an acceptable standard across the world.

Thus, we do not share the age distinction which Hasan (2013) cited earlier in the explanation of public opinion. The reason is that it is unfair to relegate the reasonable opinion expressed by children as what could count in the views of the public. It amounts to utter denial of children's right of expression which the contemporary world does not espouse because children have some essential needs that are paramount to their development. For instance, secondary school children

could express their opinion on matters pertaining to their welfare in education or health related matters and that has to be taken seriously and not be side-lined or discarded on the premise that they are not adults. Article 12 of the Child Rights Convention (CRC) cited in Edogor and Okunna (2020, p. 93) provides that, “children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.”

In an explanation of public opinion, Key (1961) cited in Davison (2021) states that public opinion is “opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed.” The famous MacBride Communication Commission corroborates the definition of Key (1961) when it emphasises that public opinion entails the opinion of all those who are not in the position of decision-making in society. “Public opinion is considered to be that of people outside the decision-making process, external to the power centres, and differs from that of people who because of their specific position, knowledge and skills, are responsible for decisions. Therefore the individuals concerned have to contribute their voices to the issue in question,” (MacBride, 1981, p. 196).

The emphasis here is on public opinion being seen as the opinion of people outside the corridors of power. This is simply because the root word ‘public’ implies ‘the people.’ Strictly speaking, the term ‘public’ is referred to as ‘the electorate’ or ‘the masses,’ in political science. In the mass media field, it could be seen as ‘the audience.’ All these refer to those at the receiving end of the actions of others who dish out policies, take actions that would have effect, or enact laws that could impact on others. So, it would be a kind of aberration to use public opinion about those who occupy seats of power. Most often, the decisions and actions of the people who are in various positions to make policies that would affect the people or members of the public are what could stimulate reactions or responses that could be technically taken as ‘public opinion.’

Davison (2021) sees public opinion as “an aggregate of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a community. Some scholars treat the aggregate as a synthesis of the views of all or a certain segment of society; others regard it as a collection of many differing or opposing views.” This explanation summarises the divergent views of some scholars who have tried to give the definition of public opinion as cited earlier herein. Many sociologists, political scientists and communication scholars have their distinct perceptions of what public opinion is. However, public opinion should reflect the views expressed by the people on a matter(s) that affect(s) them collectively or on what affects a greater portion of the society. It is seen in a scenario where the crowd or group of people make expression of their opposition or position of support to a decision, action, policy, law, bill, etc.

Mass Media and Public Opinion

The media as an institution found in human societies contribute to formation of public opinion. They could equally determine the magnitude of permeation of public opinion in the society and the likely resultant response to it (public opinion). This makes the media an indispensable institution in shaping and defining public

discourse. Be that as it may, some scholars have argued that each medium of mass communication captures the public opinion in accordance with what the organisation believes as a corporate entity. Perhaps, Beniger and Herbst (1990) narrate the view better in the observation that, “within a separate and growing sphere of thought and behaviour, public opinion *is* what the monitoring system measures, and reality *is* what the mass media system reports-not by scientific or technical achievement but by institutional intent.” The import is that when properly measured, each media outfit’s intent towards swaying public opinion differs from others’ intent depending on what each of them pursues as a guiding principle.

The sovereign position of the mass media as the efficacious instrument that commandeers the majority view has not been hidden. Although the notion that the effects of mass media on humans are likened to the impact of a bullet on the body has been repealed with the findings of some studies, the power of the mass media to exert influence on any society has not been invalidated. “During the era of limited effects, several important ideas were developed that began to cast some doubt on the assumption that media influence on people and cultures was minimal. These ideas are still respected and examined even today,” (Baran, 2010, p. 368). This submission is akin to the observation of Ojobor (2002, p. 18) who notes that, “because of the known power of the media to affect the way people think and things, they were credited with incredible persuasive ability to change attitude and behaviour. It was feared that people did exactly what they saw in the media.”

The capacity of the mass media to influence society with a piece of dependable information which people could use to make both group and individual decisions has been made known before now. For instance, Murshed (2014) cited in Ullah and Khan (2020) observed that “media have become the supreme source of information which is held to be true at any cost. Thus it gives license to the people who use mass media personally to shape the opinion of the people and thereby adversely affect the society.” Neuman (1979) cited in Okoro and Agbo (2003) observe that the mass media make people adopt common values on issues. In corroboration of the above submissions, Morah and Okunna (2020, p. 712) note that, “the media are not just channels but are also diverse environments that enable communications to occur; they may influence the meaning and sense of the information transferred.”

The role of the mass media in shaping the views of people in politics particularly was admitted by Edogor (2018, p. 75) who notes that, “at least scholars have consensus that the media determine the extent of the discourse on politics.” Hasan (2013, p. 528) affirms that “it is the media through which people form an opinion...” Also, Neiger (2007, p. 311) succinctly avers that, “...communication scholars are in agreement that the elusive concept of ‘public opinion,’ those ‘pictures inside people’s heads’, is influenced by the way events are presented in the symbolic reality of the media.” The views of the cited scholars provide at least the perspective of the mass media’s impact on what is referred to as ‘public opinion’ regardless of the differences in the definition of the term.

Mass Media Landscape of the 21st Century

Generally, the 21st century era is known as a period where there are multidimensional and unparalleled changes in the ways things are done prior to the century. However, the 21st century mass media landscape seem to have experienced the changes more than any other sphere of human endeavour. The ICT devices and software have transformed the channels of mass communication as well as the consumers. The 21st century mass media vista is characterised by the use of web 2.0 applications or technologies that allow media users to generate and share contents to individuals and groups including mainstream media outfits. In observation of the changes in the century, Ciboh (2005, p. 146) succinctly notes that presently, “anybody with a computer can now become a reporter, editor and publisher.” While corroborating the submission, Akpan and Nnaane (2011, p. 34) state that, “some of the latest mobile phones allow users to take still pictures or video clips. For instance, when breaking news occurs, people in the area can take video and still pictures, before the media arrive on the scene...”

In a nutshell, the technologies of the 21st century have provided rooms for the mass media to reach their audiences through multiple means and allow the audiences as well, to participate in the work of sharing information and messages to others. This uphold the idea of a communication philosopher, Habermas (2008, p. 70) who observes that, “free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Everyone can therefore speak, write, and print freely...” These developments have made public opinion process more complex than what used to be obtained over the years before this current period.

So, the 21st century era is a period of democratization of the sources of information assemblage and delivery. Thus, through the instrumentality of social media and blog sites, the mainstream media audiences could equally participate in the art and science of gathering and dissemination of messages, information, ideas and opinions to members of the public. The 21st century media milieu is characteristically where there are prevalent new forms of media devices that encourage self-publishing or reporting, which has made mass communication less sophisticated, very attractive with immediate feed-back as well as more audience-friendly. Even in the present era where the new media are in vogue, the mass media and the new media combine to help the people more avalanche platforms for expression of their views. So, the existence of the multiple means of communication expectedly is helpful for expressing of public opinion. This submission was better captured in the observation that, “public opinion is not fragmented. People who read news online identify the same issues as most important for improving society. This research provides empirical evidence that proves this, contradicting those who argue that the proliferation of online media leads to the fragmentation of society,” (Majo-Vazquez, 2017). In the 21st century, the audiences’ use of social media particularly to participate in public opinion and information dissemination as well as the efficaciousness of the channels in reaching the audience are useful in moulding public opinion.

The new media bring their advantages in news dissemination to public opinion formation. It was Onomo (2012, p. 38) who notes that social media have

become “widespread tools for communication and exchange of ideas, helping individuals and organizations with just causes to reach a phenomenally vast audience that could hitherto not be reached by traditional media.” Osahenye (2011, p. 52) captures the gamut of the influence of the social media by referring to it (the power) as the “unstoppable power of the social media.” This implies that social media or the new media extends the tentacles of the mass media in assembling the views or opinions of the members of society. “Social media have become a mainstream activity and have become a major mode of communication,” (Idakwo, 2011), so, they are sources of public opinion today. Given the extent of social media’s influence on other contemporary channels of communication, the 21st century mass media landscape could be referred to as the ‘era or generation of digital media.’

Theoretical Framework

This paper was anchored on agenda-setting and media dependency theories. The proposition that mass media programmes determine the matters people could give attention to in society has been in vogue for a considerable length of time. That is the fundamental argument of the proponents of agenda-setting theory propounded by McCombs and Shaw in the year 1972. According to Folarin (2002, p. 75), “agenda-setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society.” Another mass media scholar Bittner (1989, p. 376) cited in Ojobor (2002, p. 18) observes that agenda-setting theory is “based on the thinking that people receive information directly from the media without intermediaries and that reaction to such information was a personal or individual thing, not based on how other people might influence them.” The notion that the media command a very reasonable percentage of any issue the people give consideration or devote their time to deliberate implies that, members of the public would still see the media as the influencers of public opinion. This is why agenda-setting theory was considered very to be applied to this study.

Also, there is a belief that mass media have become a reliable and powerful body in which people rely on the contents of their messages. This idea was captured in the media dependency theory propounded by Defleur and Ball-Rokeach in 1975. They “offered a view of potentially powerful mass media, tying that power to audience members’ dependence on media content,” (Baran, 2010, p. 369). The essential point here is that the scholars projected the mass media as powerful channels whose contents are dependable enough for the members of the public to take cognisance of the contents while making their various individual or collective decisions.

Invariably, as concerns this study, it means that the members of the public who are exposed to the contents of the mainstream media would still value their offerings in what they (the mainstream media) project as public opinion. That is, if the mass media have consistently maintained publication or presentation of dependable information to the audience in various issues reported as public

opinion. This points to the idea of upholding the ethics of giving respect to public interest by mass media professionals.

Methodology

The survey research method was adopted for this paper as the primary data used for it were gathered from the opinions of members of the public. The population used for the study is ten thousand, one hundred and ninety-eight (10,198), which is the total number of both academic and non-academic staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State as revealed by the Information from the Administrative Unit of the institution.

A sample size of 371 (three hundred and seventy-one) was obtained using an online Australian Calculator from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For the stated population, the calculator gives the confidence level as 95%, at a confidence interval of 0.055001, with a standard error of 0.02552 and a relative standard error of 5.10. The population of the study was stratified into academic and non-academic staff. The academic staff under their union (Academic Staff Union of Universities) do not have a strict division(s) among their members unlike the non-academic staff union that divided their union along- Senior Staff Union of Nigeria Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU).

Nnamdi Azikiwe University has three Campuses where the Academic and Non-academic staff of the institution work. However, the researchers purposively chose the Awka Campus of the university as the greater number of the staff work there. The researchers used simple random sampling (balloting) to choose between the SSANU and NASU to be studied, and after the balloting, SSANU was selected. Similarly, the ASUU members were stratified into the 10 faculties of the university where lecturers are found. The researchers employed the services of 2 research assistants who were guided to distribute the instruments (the questionnaire) equally among the ASUU and SSANU members selected for the study.

Data Presentation

The researchers drafted and validated 370 copies of questionnaire that were administered for the study where the chosen sample size was distributed at equal proportion between the members of the Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) both of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Chapter. Out of the 370 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 10 copies were not returned. Thus, 360 copies were used for data collation and the data collated were presented on tables using frequency and simple percentages. The information captured about the respondents are presented in Tables 1-5.

Table 1. Respondents' Age and Gender Distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
30 – 40	98	27%	Female	160	44%
41 – 50	92	26%	Male	200	56%
51 – 60	93	26%	Others specify	Nil	Nil
Less than 70	77	21%	Total	360	100
Total	360	100	-----	-----	-----

Source: The researchers' survey, 2023.

The data in Table 1 show that the respondents are within the working-class statutory age brackets of academic and non-academic staff in Nigeria as indicated by the information in Column 1 of the table above, and the frequency as well as the percentages of their responses were presented on columns 2 and 3. Also, the information presented in other columns of the table shows that the male gender dominated the staff of the university sampled. The researchers would not be able to infer the reason for the preponderance of the male population in the university's workforce.

Table 2. Respondents' Marital Status and Educational Qualification

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentages (%)	Educational Status	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Married	202	56%	HND	61	17%
Single	128	36%	B.A/B.Sc.	85	24%
Divorced	02	0%	MA/M.Eng./M.Sc.	124	34%
Widowed	28	8%	PhD	90	25%
Total	360	100	Total	360	100

Source: The researchers' survey, 2023.

The data in table two above show that greater respondents are married and they were followed by those who are still single while there is an insignificant number of the respondents who accepted that they are divorcees. The insignificant number of the respondents indicating that they are divorcees points to the premium significance which Nigerians, nay, Africans attach to marriage as an institution. Though, the point has no direct bearing on the objectives of the study, it is necessary to highlight that the data revealed that even while in the condition of anonymity as in a research scenario like this, not many Africans could accept to be known as divorcees. Also, the insignificant number of the respondents with HND qualification could be attributed to the dichotomy which Nigerians place on HND certificates and university first degree certificates.

Research question one: To what extent do members of the public accept the mainstream media as an institution that moulds public opinion presently?

Table 3. Public's Opinion on the Mainstream Media and Moulding of Public Opinion Presently

Question and Responses: To what extent do you think that mainstream media: radio, television, magazine and newspaper, still mould public opinion presently	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No extent at all	22	6%
To a large extent	330	92%
No idea	8	2%
Total	360	100

Source: The researchers' survey, 2023.

The respondents accepted that the mainstream mass media remain the institution that moulds public opinion as defined in the instrument used for the data collation in the study. This was revealed when a greater number of them (92%) in table three above accepted that they are aware that the mainstream media help to bring the divergent views of members of the public together to form a whole called 'public opinion.' Thus, to a very large extent, the members of the public are aware of the role of the mainstream media in the formation of public opinion.

Research question two: What are the alternative means that the members of the public understand as other sources that mould public opinion in the twenty-first century?

Table 4. People's Views on the Alternative Sources that Mould Public Opinion Presently

What are other alternative sources that mould public opinion?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Market leaders/unions, Religious leaders: pastors and Imams	22	6%
Leaders of Professional Bodies/Unions and Community leaders	38	10%
New media: Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, blog sites, etc	287	80%
Teachers/lecturers	13	4%
Total	360	100

Source: The researchers' survey, 2023.

A greater number of the respondents (80%) accepted that new media: Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, blog sites, etc are the alternative sources that contribute towards moulding public opinion in the twenty-first century.

Research question three: Do members of the public believe that the Nigerian Government respected public opinion in the last eight years? This research question was used to elicit the views of the respondents on whether the immediate past government of Nigeria led by former President Muhammadu Buhari respected public opinion?

Table 5. People's Views on Whether Nigerian Government Respected Public Opinion in the Last Eight Years

Do you accept that the Nigerian Government respected public opinion in the last eight years?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	331	92%
Yes	23	6%
No idea	6	2%
Total	360	100

Source: The researchers' survey, 2023.

The respondents accepted that the previous Nigerian Government as led by former President Muhammadu Buhari did not respect public opinion in the eight years of the administration. This could be seen in the responses presented on table five above. The views of the respondents representing 92 percent of the sample showed that the administration had no regard for public opinion in the country.

Discussion of Findings

In the course of this paper, the extent to which members of the public accept that the mainstream media still hold sway in moulding public opinion was assessed. The respondents revealed that the mainstream media are still the institution that moulds public opinion in Nigeria. This finding corroborates the finding of Majo-Vazquez (2017) which found that “the conventional media that have online edition have a better reputation than the new digital media. That is, they are recognized more readily as authoritative information sources.” Perhaps, this may be attributed to the fact that despite the wide usage and popularity of the new media as revealed in the study of (Edogor et al., 2014); they are largely believed to be a means of spreading fake news and misinformation (Ezeonyejiaku et al., 2022). So, this finding points to the fact that even with the popularity of the new media, they are not rated much as the sources of moulding public opinion compared to the traditional media. In a nutshell, the import of the finding is that regardless of the influence of the new media on journalism practice, the mainstream media still maintain their relevance in galvanising the views of members of the public in Nigeria.

In addition, this paper also found that the new media have become the alternative sources that mould public opinion in the twenty-first century after the mainstream media. This could be obviously attributed to the whirlwind of changes which the new media have ushered into the hitherto order of things in the media sphere. This revelation is not farfetched as it is obvious in the twenty-first century that as the new media have offered members of the public multiple options of receiving and sharing information and messages. The submission corroborates the view of Majo-Vazquez (2017) who observes that the online media sites have had a considerable impact on the internal dynamics of news and information production and dissemination. It should be noted that before the twenty-first century, the mainstream media were virtually the only sources of receiving and imparting information and opinions.

Besides, with the availability and the use of other means of receiving opinions and information in the twenty-first century, this paper also, sought to find out whether other sources of receiving opinions and information have replaced the mainstream mass media in moulding public opinion. The result was that the traditional media have not been displaced in their position as the main source of shaping public opinion in Nigeria. This finding is in line with the views of Edogor et al. (2014, p. 55) who opines that “no new form of mass medium had ever displaced the existing one prior to it.” Also, as regards the position of the new media in distribution of news and information in this present time, Majo-Vazquez

(2017) notes that the new media have brought a lot of changes yet they “have not eroded the central position of the traditional media in the distribution of information.” Even though there are more media and the news diets are more varied, there is still a broad consensus as to the issues on which public debate should focus. And these issues are determined by the traditional media’s agenda.” This observation still adds to the fact that the conventional media with their online presence command the aggregate views of members of the public in Nigeria.

One of the results of the study shows that members of the public revealed that the Nigerian government under former President Muhammadu Buhari did not respect public opinion in his eight years. Perhaps, this revelation corroborated the stance of the *Punch* newspaper’s editorial of December 11, 2019, where the paper decided to prefix Buhari’s name with his military rank in the 1980s. Also, the same publication chose to refer to the Buhari’s administration as regime. All these were decisions of the media outfit owing to their conviction that Buhari’s government lacks respect for public opinion and disregard for rule of law generally (The *Punch* Editorial, 2019). This position of a national daily in Nigeria about the then sitting president of the country is one of the means to measure the ambiance of the government vis-à-vis regard for public opinion. Considering the fact that this study has revealed that the conventional media mould public opinion, it could be said that the view of the *Punch* newspaper reflects the views of reasonable portion of the Nigerian people on President Buhari.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the views of the Nigerian mass media audience concerning the mainstream media and moulding of public opinion in the 21st century. This was done to ascertain the position of the traditional media as the hitherto major force in galvanising public opinion. The findings have defined the key sources and the alternative sources of moulding public opinion in the 21st century Nigeria. The researchers also probed to find out the audiences’ perception of the immediate past Nigerian Government as regards upholding public opinion expressed in the country. The data presented indicated that the Nigerian government led by former President Muhammadu Buhari had no regard to public opinion most often in the affairs of the country. All these were the efforts made to achieve the objectives of this study.

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