

Expectations of News Media in Uganda: Advancing a Theory of Relative Institutional Trust in Journalism

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Compared with work on trust in news, surprisingly little research examines audiences' expectations of journalism. Audiences' expectations, after all, elucidate public opinion of news, including the criteria by which news and journalists may be trusted. Journalism expectancy research is particularly paltry beyond Euro-American contexts, where normative and primarily Western understandings of journalism cannot be assumed. Drawing on 28 in-depth interviews, this study illuminates situated expectations of journalism and journalists in Uganda. I find that although respondents desire for media professionals to expose corruption, serve the public, and provide social support to communities, they expect in practice that journalists will accept bribes and produce government-leaning content. Despite this gap between desired and anticipated practices, respondents expressed positive perceptions toward journalists, often contrasting this confidence with frustration toward political representatives. Such favorability alongside unmet normative expectations, I argue, reflects individuals' relative institutional trust in journalism above any substantive evaluation of media performance.

Keywords: media trust, political trust, expectations, press freedom, relative institutional trust

In recent years, scholars have called for an audience turn in journalism studies (Swart, Groot Kormelink, Costera Meijer, & Broersma, 2022). In contrast to media-centric investigations embedded with industry imperatives and logics, an audience-centered approach foregrounds individuals' perceptions of journalism, extending forward to implications for news consumption and engagement. However, such an approach has been notably absent in media-trust scholarship, which has tended to focus on quantifying the crisis of declining trust and most often from the perspective of practitioners (Fisher, Flew, Park, Lee, & Dulleck, 2021). Moreover, the proliferation of work on media trust in the United States and Western Europe has not necessarily corresponded to equal attention to non-Western contexts, thus limiting collective understandings of these audiences as well as conceptual development of media trust more broadly.

To illustrate these limitations, several forecasts suggest that global trust in journalism is low and decreasing (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Ross Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024). However, although declines in

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media trust are well-documented in the Euro-American contexts, evidence of this remains mixed in many other places where trust has remained stable or even increased in recent years (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; McIntyre & Sobel Cohen, 2021). Surprisingly, perhaps, this includes countries like China, India, and Rwanda, all of which routinely receive poor press-freedom scores. Without a full understanding of the mechanisms that lead people to be more or less trusting of news, these results are difficult to square. Moreover, unintuitive findings without explanation open the door to various criticisms, particularly from actors who may be incentivized to delegitimize polling methodology, social science research, or the press writ large (Nielsen, 2023).

With these challenges in mind, and to elucidate driving mechanisms behind media trust in a non-Western context, this study explores expectations of journalism and journalists in Uganda. Drawing on 28 in-depth interviews and a cultures-of-news-consumption perspective (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), I argue that individuals' expectations of news media—and, by extension, media trust—can be examined alongside sociopolitical forces and shared experiences of news across diverse societies. The study's findings illuminate audience perspectives in Uganda, specifically, while providing a framework for future media-trust research that moves beyond normative ideals of what journalism should be to center individuals' situated perceptions and lived realities.

Media Trust and Audience Expectations of News

Media trust is often defined as an uncertain relationship between consumers and news media in which the audience places confidence in news media under the "expectation that interactions will lead to gains rather than losses" (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). Some have narrowed this definition further, describing media trust as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). Shared among these definitions is some level of uncertainty and *expectation* on behalf of audience members (Tsfati et al., 2022). Expectations refer to "stable patterns of anticipated behavior" (Wilhelm, Stehle, & Detel, 2021, p. 1011) and are shaped by a range of factors. These may include the communication context (e.g., time of day), relationships between individuals, and characteristics of the communicator, such as aspects of personality (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). When direct experience or individual-level information is scarce, expectations may also develop out of social norms, such as those associated with culture or gender (Burgoon, 1995).

In journalism studies, expectancy research has primarily examined how audiences normatively perceive "the value of journalists and journalism in society" (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022, p. 707). For example, research on Austrian and Dutch audiences find that participants expect journalists to adhere to established democratic journalistic values, such as relying on facts, acting objectively, and creating civic memory (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Costera Meijer, 2010). Journalism expectancy research also compares audiences' expectations with journalists' perceptions of audiences' expectations. A study of a German television newscast, for instance, found that journalists and audience members generally held shared expectations of journalists' roles as disseminators of facts (Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2014).

Despite this growing corpus of work on normative expectations, “we know surprisingly little about what the audience actually expects” (Riedl & Eberl, 2022, p. 1683). Even less work seeks to explain such expectations. From what does exist, individuals’ expectations of journalism may be shaped by sociodemographic indicators like age, education, political ideology, and whether one belongs to a minoritized identity group (Banjac, 2022; Riedl & Eberl, 2022). However, it is not clear how the broader sociopolitical environment, such as perceived press freedom or political culture, shapes expectations of journalism. This has implications for media trust, where misunderstanding individuals’ expectations of news has the potential to render any substantive measure of media trust meaningless insofar as researchers may understand *how much* people trust news media without knowing what these same individuals actually trust journalism and journalists to do. This study, therefore, advances journalism expectancy research by integrating it with work on cultures of news consumption in Uganda to explore how sociopolitical context shapes expectations of news.

A Cultures-of-News-Consumption Perspective

One lens through which to examine relationships between individual-level expectations and sociopolitical factors is with what Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) call “cultures of news consumption” or “group-level social, cultural, or political forces that pertain to the supply of available media choices, perceptions about their accuracy and utility, as well as norms about the value of news consumption as a civic duty” (p. 370). In other words, a cultures-of-news-consumption perspective examines how group-level forces manifest at the individual level and assumes that characteristics of the social environment shape individuals’ perceptions as much, if not more, than predisposed individual attributes or characteristics of news content. Examples of such forces include levels of press freedom, political freedom, political culture, news socialization, or other cultural norms.

Importantly, a cultures-of-news-consumption perspective does not ignore individual-level differences in perceptions of news. On the contrary, this theoretical orientation takes seriously the premise that individual-level variation exists and proposes such variation may be patterned based on shared factors, such as those associated with different political or civic cultures (Almond & Verba, 1963). Moreover, it assumes that perceptions of news inevitably vary by individual attributes (e.g., age or education) but that these are insufficient in explaining perceptions of journalists and journalism across diverse contexts. Operationally, group-level forces can be linked to individual attitudes in several ways, including through reported media folk theories and perceptions of journalistic roles. *Media folk theories* refer to “culturally available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of news consumption practices” (Pasitselska, 2022, p. 181). Folk theories allow individuals to narrate their experiences with and generate meaning from otherwise complex and seemingly abstract institutions like journalism. As part of these processes, audiences form their ideas about the media partially based on how they perceive those around them to understand the media, making social context key to individuals’ information orientation (Toff & Nielsen, 2018).

The influence of sociopolitical context may also be revealed in how individuals perceive *journalists’ roles*. A large body of literature examines journalists’ role conceptions, or how practitioners perceive and make meaning from their work (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Well-known typologies include roles like journalists as disseminators of information, adversaries to

power, or interpreters of events (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). A subset of research also compares perceptions of journalistic roles held by media professionals to those held by audiences, deriving from the idea that audiences can be characterized by “certain expectations and conceptions of what functions journalism and its practitioners should fulfill” (Loosen, Reimer, & Hölig, 2020, p. 1745). Together, an examination of media folk theories and perceptions of journalists’ roles provides clues as to audiences’ expectations—both actual and normative—of journalists and journalism, ultimately contextualizing media trust in a given context. Thus, the primary research question asked here is: What are the primary expectations of news media and news workers in Uganda?

Data and Method

Data for this study come from 28 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a stratified sample of Ugandan adults, conducted in and around Kampala between April and May 2023. As a case, Uganda shares sociopolitical attributes with neighboring African countries as well as areas of the Global South more broadly, including postconflict reconstruction, a diverse media market, and extralegal censorship of journalists (Marchant & Stremlau, 2020). With respect to Uganda’s specific media landscape, the country’s 1955 constitution guarantees freedom of the press while political threats and intermittent media shutdowns endure (Maractho, 2015). Despite these challenges, Ugandan journalists reportedly remain committed to normative functions of news (e.g., informing the public, investigating official claims; Mwesige, 2004). Compared with other East Africa countries, Uganda represents a middle ground with respect to state-press relations—arguably less politically restrictive than Rwanda but more restrictive than Kenya, for instance (McIntyre & Sobel Cohen, 2022). Similarly, although Uganda is certainly not spared from the global threat of misinformation online, Ugandan survey respondents reportedly feel they are exposed to less fake news than Kenyan participants but more than those surveyed in Rwanda (McIntyre, Sobel Cohen, Semujju, Ireri, & Munyarukumbuzi, 2024). Uganda, therefore, is an advantageous case to the extent that it is not an outlier on either side of these spectrums.

The use of interviews is supported theoretically by work on media folk theories and journalists’ roles, whereby perceptions of journalism and journalists may be revealed in how individuals describe their respective functions and values. Interviews provide a window into the cognitive processes of individuals and the ways they make sense of the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Most interviews ($N = 22$) were conducted in English, Uganda’s official language and the language of instruction at all education levels, except in rural areas where it is taught as a subject. Six interviews required translation from Luganda to English with the assistance of a local translator. The questions in the interview guide corresponded to the project’s theoretical interests—namely, perceptions of journalists’ roles and media folk theories—which were used together to assess the role of sociopolitical context in shaping individuals’ expectations of news. In all cases, questions avoided any assumption that respondents engage with news or news workers to the same degree or to any degree at all.

The purposive sampling strategy targeted respondents across a range of criteria, ensuring enough variation along key demographic and theoretical dimensions to draw conclusions beyond the individuals studied (Lamont & White, 2008). These attributes include variation in reported news use, media trust, and political ideology, as well as basic demographic characteristics said to shape perceptions

of news, such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status. Following IRB approval from the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division, I contacted Ugandans working in health care, journalism, community development, and education, given personal professional connections to these fields. These contacts connected me to four individuals who became primary interlocutors for recruitment. Sampling through interlocutors allows researchers to access multiple networks rather than relying on a single individual's contacts, thus broadening the diversity of participants (Fujii, 2017). Each interlocutor directed me to willing respondents across three environments to broaden social stratification: university students, middle-class professionals, and individuals working in informal sectors. Interviews lasted 34 minutes on average. After about two dozen interviews, participants' responses to questions became appreciably predictable based on sampling criteria, signaling thematic saturation had been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Table 1 presents descriptive information about participants, including gender, age, relative location of upbringing, education, and occupation as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Respondents were ages 18 to 65 ($M = 32$) and the sample includes more men ($N = 19$) than women ($N = 9$). Location of upbringing is categorized as "urban" or "more rural," with urban referring to those who self-identified as growing up in a city and "more rural" corresponding to those who self-identified as growing up outside a major city. Education refers to the highest level attained, and occupation is categorized as one's current position. This distribution generally corresponds to demographic trends in Uganda, with the exception of gender, where the ratio of men to women is roughly even. According to 2021 World Bank data, however, women spend nearly two times more time on household work compared with men, making it relatively more difficult to speak with them. Beyond gender, there is considerable variation across education and occupation, as well as age, where, in Uganda, the average life expectancy is 63 years (World Bank, Global Development Data, 2021).

Table 1. Interview Respondent Information by Gender, Age, Location, Education, and Occupation.

Interview	Gender	Age	Location	Education	Occupation
4/30/23	Male	18	Urban	Secondary	University student
4/30/23	Male	19	Urban	Secondary	University student
4/30/23	Female	19	Urban	Secondary	University student
4/26/23	Male	21	More rural	Primary	Driver
4/14/23	Male	23	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Communications
4/18/23	Female	23	Urban	Secondary	Shop owner
4/20/23	Female	23	Urban	Bachelor's degree	University student
4/20/23	Male	23	Urban	Secondary	Community development
4/30/23	Male	23	More rural	Secondary	University student
4/25/23	Male	24	More rural	Secondary	University student
4/18/23	Male	27	Urban	Trade school	Shop owner
4/21/23	Male	27	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Shop owner
4/26/23	Male	29	More rural	Primary	Askari (guard)
4/27/23	Male	29	Urban	Primary	Shop owner
4/27/23	Male	29	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Tour guide
4/18/23	Male	30	Urban	Secondary	Driver
4/27/23	Male	30	Urban	Secondary	Shop owner
4/25/23	Female	31	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Community development
4/29/23	Female	31	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Shop owner
4/18/23	Male	35	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Public relations
4/27/23	Male	35	Urban	None	Unemployed
4/20/23	Male	37	More rural	Secondary	Community development
4/18/23	Female	45	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Public relations
5/5/23	Male	45	More rural	Bachelor's degree	Shop owner
5/5/23	Male	48	More rural	Primary	Shop owner
5/5/23	Female	54	Urban	Primary	Shop owner
5/5/23	Female	64	More rural	Primary	Shop owner
5/5/23	Female	65	More rural	Primary	Shop owner

Interview data were thematically analyzed, as semistructured interviews lend themselves to interpretive analysis and allow researchers to pursue situated perceptions (Hopf, 2004). Coding was conducted at the semantic level and then organized for broader thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Several themes were predetermined from the outset based on my theoretical orientation, such as individuals' expectations of news as well as codes to assess determinants of the expectations, including sociopolitical factors. In coding for media folk theories, I looked for respondents' (1) descriptions of the function of news, (2) perceptions of satisfactory journalism, and (3) personal or secondhand experiences with news organizations. About perceptions of journalists' roles, I coded for ways journalists were described, including assumed professional tasks and references to job performance. In coding for sociopolitical determinants of expectations, I looked for influences shaping perceptions of news beyond personal

evaluations, such as references to other sectors or public opinion. I also coded for explicit evaluations of news media, such as expressions of trust.

From the information gleaned through these codes, I noted that respondents' normative expectations of journalists and journalism were substantively different than what they expected in practice. I then rereviewed the data with two labels in mind—normative expectations and actual expectations—and categorized these perceptions accordingly. This resulted in the creation of six subcodes, split evenly between normative and actual expectations. Beyond my initial coding protocol, I also labeled words, phrases, or sections based on data that were repeated several times, were especially surprising, or were characterized as important by respondents (Owen, 1984). After indexing these data, and concurrently considering divergences between actual and normative expectations, I created two additional codes—one for information related to respondents' defense of journalistic practices as well as a code for references to political dissatisfaction. These topics appeared in almost every conversation and ultimately helped explain respondents generally positive perceptions of journalism and journalists despite unmet normative expectations.

Findings

As described, respondents distinguished between what they thought journalists and news organizations *should* do and what they expected in practice. These distinctions were developed iteratively in the research process when it became clear that what individuals expected from news and news workers in Uganda were not, in their view, favorable behaviors in many cases, even while respondents could conceive of more desirable practices. "Aspiration" is thus used here to designate respondents' normative expectations of news media. Derived from the Latin word *aspirare*, meaning "to strive for" or literally "to breathe into," aspiration captures participants' impulse to set goals or ambitions for news organizations and practitioners. Compared with alternatives like "hopes" or "desires," "aspiration" better reflects the gap between what respondents wanted from media houses and what they believed they were likely to receive.

Aspirations for Journalism, Journalists

Respondents' aspirations for news and news workers generally coalesced around three themes: journalists and media houses as (1) information providers, (2) bridges to government operations, and (3) supplemental purveyors of social services. Notably, these aspirations ranged from abstract notions (e.g., journalists as watchdogs) to applied ideas (e.g., journalists should teach people to grow crops). This continuum was not stratified by demographic indicators like age, education, or income; however, the degree to which respondents applied aspirations to their personal lives did vary by social background. For example, those in lower socioeconomic brackets tended to discuss aspirations in personal terms, such as how hands-on training would improve their livelihood, whereas those in more comfortable financial circumstances mentioned similar aspirations but with respect to how they would benefit other community members.

Information Providers

Nearly all interview respondents saw the provision of information as a primary normative function of news media. Specifically, journalists should "let people know what's really happening in the world"

(Damba,¹ April 18, 2023) and have a “duty to reach information to Ugandans” (Fatuma, April 20, 2023). Furthermore, respondents saw news media as the only mechanism for learning about several topics—the economy, political corruption, international diplomacy—that may otherwise be reserved for elites. As Kabilito noted, journalists “bring light to stuff that has happened behind the curtains” (April 30, 2023). Patience referred to this as “hidden information [the people] don’t know” (April 30, 2023), with both respondents indicating there are important aspects of public life that the average person would not otherwise learn about. Ivan summarized this perspective succinctly: “If the journalists are not there, the people will be blind” (May 5, 2023).

Respondents also described information as a human right and a key ingredient to development. “Journalists are like human rights activists. They empower [people] with information so that they can make their own decisions,” Patience said (April 30, 2023). Henry similarly emphasized individual decision making, saying, “for any society to develop, information must not be selfishly guarded, whether good or bad. It has to be disseminated so that people make their own judgments” (May 5, 2023). These statements together illustrate a shared desire for news information in service of self-determination.

Bridges to Government

A second salient aspiration for news media concerned political accountability and access. Compared with calls for mere information transparency, this second aspiration refers to the kind of active investigative work often associated with watchdog reporting. Some respondents used this term explicitly, saying “here in Uganda, we describe [journalists] as watchdogs” (Musa, April 30, 2023) or the “fourth organ” of the government (Julius, April 30, 2023). Respondents also described the general inaccessibility of government operations to average Ugandans and the role of journalists in bridging this divide. “Trust me, there are people who are like 30 years old who have never been to parliament,” Fatuma said (April 20, 2023). Isaac echoed this sentiment, saying, “I can’t personally walk into a [government] office and be like ‘Hey, can I have this document?’ No, these news organizations . . . They get that document” (April 21, 2023).

For some, the news media’s role should not only include translating government operations to citizens but also reflecting citizens’ concerns to representatives. One interviewee compared this to how he perceived the press in the United States to operate: “In the United States, you feel like people should be able to critique the education policy,” he said. “And whose duty is that? It’s a journalist’s” (Emmanuel, April 20, 2023). Respondents thus conceived of news media as an opportunity to “bridge the gap” (Isaac, April 21, 2023) between the public and Uganda’s political power, which includes both making government operations more accessible to citizens and bringing citizen concerns to the steps of parliament.

News Organizations as Purveyors of Social Services

A third aspiration was that news organizations should provide supplementary social services, either through news coverage or directly to individuals. For example, some suggested that media houses can support the Ugandan economy and “promote business” through running advertisements for services and

¹ Respondent names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout.

products (Patience, April 30, 2023). These sentiments extended to the content of news stories, where reporting can “put something in your head and you learn something about business” (Brenda, May 5, 2023). Beyond advertisements, participants believed that media houses could support economic activity more directly by, for example, “help[ing] you get skills” (Felix, April 18, 2023). Musa similarly recalled a training program where a Ugandan news organization helped individuals improve their farming techniques: “[The media house] takes these people outside to learn how to grow crops even . . . They have done a great impact to give back to the community” (April 30, 2023). Participants also indicated that media houses can alleviate employment concerns by hiring community members, saying news organizations “should give jobs to people” like custodial or landscaping work (Mukisa, April 25, 2023). Eva believed a local media house in her community had hired many people in this way, saying, “They’re helping the unemployed youth . . . They are solving the problem of unemployment in this country” (April 18, 2023).

In addition to addressing unemployment, interviewees aspired for media houses to support primary education or, as Kabilito put it, to “help the youngsters to come up” (April 30, 2023). Isaac called this a news organization’s “added value” in which media houses provide supplemental school materials to children alongside content for adults (April 21, 2023). At the broadest level, respondents generally believed that media houses should “give back to their community” (Musa, April 30, 2023). Mukisa described this as a necessary “social mission” of news organizations, saying that “there is no way that an organization can be located in a community where there is no clean water.” For him, “[media houses] should render those small services that they can to the communities where they are located” (April 25, 2023).

Despite the opportunities outlined above, respondents indicated that access to such programs and services was not equal. Most examples provided were articulated as aspirations or isolated experiences as opposed to reliable empirical realities. For instance, Gabriel insisted that services ostensibly available through media houses are inaccessible to poor areas of the city where he lives: “[Media houses] don’t engage in volunteering work here. I’ve never seen any. Those are the things they’re supposed to do” (April 27, 2023). Gabriel thus believed social services to be a normatively desirable expectation of news media, even while he felt as though such services were unavailable to him.

These subthemes—news media as information providers, bridges to government operations, and purveyors of social services—reflect respondents’ aspirations for journalists and news organizations in Uganda. In other words, participants articulated normative expectations of news while acknowledging that practitioners may not always meet these goals. In fact, individuals’ expectations of what media practitioners actually do in practice deviate substantially from the aspirations above.

Actual Expectations of Journalism, Journalists

Respondents disclosed their actual expectations of journalists and media practitioners in various ways. Some detailed firsthand experiences; others revealed their expectations while recounting a recent news story that they remember reading or listening to. These expectations are likewise categorized into three primary themes, including the expectation that journalists and news media (1) provide information, (2) accept bribes and delay coverage, and (3) produce progovernment content.

Information

Although actual expectations of news were overall more pessimistic, respondents acknowledged that journalists still provide useful information. What sets this information apart from the type of information that respondents aspired to receive? For many, the difference is in scope and topic. Although earlier aspirations referenced bringing “hidden information to light” and exposing “behind the curtain,” the information that most respondents expected in practice from news media was relatively more mundane. For example, one respondent described how a news report can save her from making an unnecessary trip to town: “Let’s say I’m home and there’s something happening, and I come here [to the market] when it’s closed. But if I have a source of news, I’ll know there’s no need of coming to the market” (Martha, May 5, 2023). Although this information indeed improves respondents’ lives in material ways, it does not necessarily rise to the level of watchdog journalism. Mukisa described a similar push-notification perspective, saying, “So long as you want to be updated, so long as want to know what’s trending, so long as you want to know what’s going on in the country, you have to be in touch with news” (April 25, 2023).

The distinction between types of information becomes more important when considered alongside topics covered. For example, although individuals expected to receive reliable information about traffic or natural disasters, there was some consensus that political reporting had been “spoiled by politics” (Julius, April 30, 2023). In other words, political coverage was perceived as anemic compared with other topics, reflecting one-sided views and presumptively shaped by political censorship. Francis shared this sentiment, saying that although much of the information shared by media houses is correct, with political news, “there is something hidden over” (April 18, 2023). Thus, although respondents expected to receive some types of information from news media, their expectations were tempered, particularly with respect to the degree of investigative reporting and political news.

Bribes and Delayed Coverage

A second expectation of journalists was that they would accept bribes and delay coverage of certain events. The practice of accepting money for news coverage is not unheard of in journalism, particularly in East Africa (e.g., Nkie Mongo, 2021). However, nearly all respondents expected journalists to engage in this type of behavior regularly. More specifically, respondents explained that some journalists “twist stories” to get paid, altering content for financial benefits (Rose, April 25, 2023). In other instances, money moves stories up in a publication or broadcast. Julius, who formerly worked in local politics, described it like this: “To be in the lead stories, you must pay those reporters . . . But if you leave it normally and it moves in a normal situation, they can bring it last” (April 30, 2023). Most believed the practice was “overshadowing original journalism” and negatively shaping the industry (Henry, May 5, 2023).

In addition to accepting bribes, respondents assumed journalists would delay coverage of some stories for personal or political gain. As Rose described, “When everything has happened, [journalists] will be like, ‘Oh my god, we’re here.’ You’re coming to capture the news, but you are late, so now you are going to miss out on very important information” (April 25, 2023). Gabriel explained that these delays are exponentially worse in poor areas of the city, adding that “[journalists] take long to come around” (April 27, 2023). Simon, who also resides in an underserved part of Kampala, confirmed, saying,

"Journalists never come to the ghetto" (April 27, 2023). Although respondents were not satisfied with these behaviors, most were quick to identify what they perceived as the root causes: "Money, people want money. It's not that everyone has that genuine heart that they won't take a bribe from anyone," one person said (Mukisa, April 25, 2023). For others, delayed coverage can be traced back to the production of progovernment news content. One individual summarized the news media in Uganda to that end: "[News] delays. They have to first check if it's not against the government. So, you can't get news as it happens" (Gabriel, April 27, 2023).

Progovernment Content

Accordingly, a final prominent expectation of journalists and news media in Uganda was that reporters produce progovernment content or coverage shaped by "influences from government" (Mukisa, April 25, 2023). For some, a sense of political pressure leads journalists to blind objectivity or neutral reporting to a fault. Respondents suggested that journalists inadvertently produce progovernment content when allowing government officials to justify controversial decisions, such as arresting opposition protestors. Simon gave this example: "When people from the ghetto protest, some of them are taken, and the news allows officials to say that they don't know where they are" (April 27, 2023). Experiences like this led some respondents to reject the idea of objectivity altogether, saying that "the media should not tell balanced or objective stories . . . Just tell what's happening" (David, April 27, 2023).

In other instances, participants felt that the news media were more intentionally producing government propaganda. "We end up getting news which has the feelings of the reporter," Julius explained. "He reports the side which he wants and leaves the other content, which is a disservice to us" (April 30, 2023). Some went farther, still suggesting that media exist "to serve the government" (Bacia, April 29, 2023), calling these practitioners "regime journalists" whose main objective is to "popularize government news" (Julius, April 30, 2023). Of course, respondents acknowledged that not all journalists participate in this kind of brazen progovernment coverage, but there was a shared understanding that this behavior existed and could be expected regularly from a subset of Ugandan media professionals.

Taken together, these accounts thus illustrate the broad expectation that journalists and media houses will often advance progovernment interests through their coverage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents did not describe this as a favorable expectation. Still, participants were quick to defend journalists for this behavior in many cases, citing the risks and pressures associated with their jobs. Moreover, nearly all respondents were appreciative of news media and expressed generally positive perceptions—including relative trustworthiness—of journalists at some point during their respective interviews. This puzzle warranted additional explanation given its contrary position to existing research. Violations of normative expectations, for instance, have been shown to turn users away from journalists and media outlets (Lee, 2015). Likewise, even though media-trust research has long documented that audiences engage with news that they do not trust (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2005), this work does not fully account for the inverse (i.e., why individuals might trust an industry or news organization despite reportedly negative expectations of it). Thus, a third finding emerging from these interview data begins to reconcile and contextualize respondents' seemingly divergent attitudes.

Relative Institutional Trust in Journalism

The aspiration-expectation gap, coupled with generally favorable perceptions of journalists, can be in part explained by a sense of *relative institutional trust* in journalism. In the context of this study, relative institutional trust refers to the idea that individuals' motivations to trust journalists or news media may be shaped as much, if not more, by their perceptions of other public institutions than by any substantive evaluation of media performance. For respondents, distrust was primarily aimed at elected officials and government agencies, which, in contrast, cast news media and journalists in a marginally more positive light. These perceptions were evident when respondents (1) defended unsatisfactory journalistic performance, (2) sought supplementary social services from news organizations, and (3) described memorable journalistic content that overwhelmingly reflected investigative reporting of government malfeasance.

Citing Censorship

Without specific prompts related to journalists' working conditions, every single participant discussed government censorship of journalism. As Francis put it, "Journalists are very good people, but they're being tortured" (April 18, 2023). Several others referenced the physical "risks" of news work (Henry, May 5, 2023; Sanyu, April 2023) and acknowledged that "journalists suffer a lot" (Fatuma, April 20, 2023), including being reportedly beaten by the police (Eva, April 18, 2023; Patience, April 30, 2023; Peter, April 26, 2023). Beyond bodily harm, news professionals struggle to attain necessary broadcast licenses. Julius explained this, saying, "If you support the opposition, even if you have how many billions of dollars, [the state] must verify you to work . . . So that bans journalists from doing professional work" (April 30, 2023). Others discussed the cancellation of existing licenses, saying that "[journalists] fear when [news] is against the government. . . . If they air it, the next time their license will be cancelled" (Gabriel, April 27, 2023).

Participants also noted that journalists are denied information and access by public officials. "In Uganda, I feel like journalists have been brutalized, that they have been denied access to information," one person shared (Emmanuel, April 20, 2023). Information is also censored when journalists are denied entry to physical areas, such as political rallies or crime scenes. "We know that the constitution gives [journalists] rights," said another participant. "There are times that their rights are violated . . . They [police] even stop them from accessing places" (Patience, April 30, 2023). Respondents thus identified censorship in many forms, including both physical harm and bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Moreover, respondents cited censorship when defending journalistic performance. Specifically, individuals shared perspectives like, "journalists are paid to do such things because they fear . . . You must take care of your life. Why would you say a different thing? Then you would be dead" (Francis, April 18, 2023). Ivan likewise justified incomplete reporting, saying that "the journalists have a big problem because [the government] keeps them, they fight with them . . . Journalists find it's difficult to give the real picture" (May 5, 2023). Many respondents maintained that most journalists are "just focused on doing their jobs" (Eva, April 18, 2023) and "doing their best" (Rose, April 25, 2023). Interviewees were willing to excuse, or at least overlook, unsatisfactory journalistic practices given their awareness of the press-freedom environment in Uganda. "Let's give credit where it's due" (Rose, April 25, 2023) was a common refrain.

In sum, there was general agreement among participants that “being a journalist in Uganda is not easy” (Fatuma, April 20, 2023) and that the Ugandan government and political elites are, in part, to blame. From here, respondents generally held more favorable attitudes toward media professionals relative to the political elites and government agencies that perceivably censor them. Such perceptions provide insight into how and why individuals might extend trust to Ugandan media organizations and professionals, despite expecting suboptimal content or interactions with them in practice.

Supplementary Social Services

A second theme to support the idea of relative institutional trust derives from respondents’ aspiration for media houses to supplement social services conventionally provided by government agencies, such as public education or employment assistance. This perception draws into sharp relief the extent to which respondents distrust their elected officials to deliver these resources satisfactorily. Importantly, individuals may not necessarily expect news media to provide these social services consistently or comprehensively, but their aspiration for news organizations to do so illustrates a relative confidence in news media compared with political actors.

Respondents detailed various services that they aspired for news organizations to provide—advertising, skills training, direct employment, general employment assistance, primary education materials, scholarships, and city infrastructure. Beyond these discrete services, however, individuals implicitly and explicitly tied these services to larger issues of national development. For example, interviewees described how journalists and news media helped them “to grow in business and even in community” (Francis, April 18, 2023). Likewise, Brenda pointed to the proliferation of media houses in Uganda as an important nation-building strategy, saying, “I think having all these media houses is good for Uganda, and their perspective is to build the nation” (May 5, 2023). Others characterized journalism’s role in development vis-à-vis coverage of social issues. “Some regions don’t develop unless someone does a story on it,” Bacia said (April 29, 2023). She went on to describe an investigative news story in which children were trafficked into cities to beg for money, creating a “cycle” of poverty that the government had been ignoring. Thus, whether by coverage of specific topics or general access to information, respondents shared a broad sentiment that news media and journalists are contributing, or at least could contribute, to the country’s development in lieu of meaningful policymaking.

These perceptions are notable given traditional notions of development, in which policy efforts and government-provided social services are typically foregrounded. For many interviewees, however, elected officials and government agencies had routinely failed to deliver these services across various sectors. Instead, politicians were described as actively “engaging in corruption” (Gabriel, April 27, 2023) and advancing politically motivated policies. For example, one respondent described a situation in which she believed money for infrastructure was withheld based on regional voting patterns. She explained, “We realize the reason why most of the roads are not done now in Kampala is because when they were voting in the central region, they didn’t vote for the president . . . So, this could be punishment for all of us” (Bacia, April 29, 2023). Some respondents were less optimistic about whether media houses and journalists could realistically effect social change. In such cases, individuals believed that many media professionals had been taken by politics and thus were either unable to or uninterested in disrupting the political status quo. Still,

these respondents saw such nation building as a normatively desirable goal for news media, therefore holding to a potential that they had otherwise all but written off for most elected officials and government agencies.

Content Considerations

A final piece of empirical evidence illustrating relative institutional trust in journalism emerged in response to a discrete question asked of each participant: "Could you tell me about the last news story you remember reading or listening to?" Of the 23 respondents who answered this question, all but two referenced stories related to government corruption in Uganda, and 14 of these accounts were from the same news event. The story concerned the arrest of a Ugandan minister accused of diverting iron roofing sheets intended to benefit an underserved area in northeast Uganda (Atuhaire, 2023). Respondents characterized the news event much like it was being reported, saying that the iron roofing had been "stolen" (Bacia, April 29, 2023) and "embezzled" by government officials (Steven, April 14, 2023). Moreover, participants highlighted the rate at which the story was spreading across Uganda, referring to it as "the iron sheets saga" (Henry, May 5, 2023; Rose, April 25, 2023).

Discussion of this story was often followed by praise for journalists and media houses. Bacia, for example, said that such coverage helps "with dropping the levels of corruption" (April 29, 2023). In other cases, respondents were skeptical about whether the arrests would have real impact on Ugandan politics, illustrating their disenchantment with the political system. One respondent referred to those arrested as "sacrificial lambs" (April 18, 2023) who would be held accountable for a system's worth of corruption. This cynicism was shared by David, who took issue with popular concern over roofing sheets: "Why are we arresting those who stole iron sheets and not those who stole money for airplanes or vaccinations for kids?" (April 27, 2023). Said another way, respondents not only cited the iron sheets scandal as memorable but also as a story exemplifying larger issues of political corruption.

Although the iron sheets story came up in nearly every interview, nine respondents discussed other instances of political malfeasance in Uganda first. Several referenced a story in which a minister was shot and killed by their bodyguard reportedly in response to unpaid salary, sparking concerns over wages and financial corruption in Uganda's security sector (Naturinda, 2023). Other memorable stories included the government-sponsored torture of motorcycle taxi drivers as well as the kidnapping of supporters of opposition leader Bobi Wine. Of the 23 memorable stories provided by respondents, just one story topic was obviously unrelated to political corruption (a recent thunderstorm).

It is noteworthy that, at the time of the interviews, other major news events included the war in Ukraine, the war in neighboring Sudan, the deadly flooding in southern Uganda, and Uganda's passing of one of the harshest anti-LGBTQ laws in the world. However, when given the opportunity to elevate memorable journalistic content, most participants selected stories in which their own political officials were held accountable. Of course, the stories detailed above should not be understood as representative journalistic content, at least insofar as the perceptions of respondents are concerned. Rather, the stories provided are better understood as instances in which individuals saw a positive opportunity or potential for what journalists and journalism in Uganda *could* be.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify salient evaluative frameworks used to judge media trustworthiness by exploring individuals' expectations of journalists and journalism in Uganda. Findings revealed a perceived gap between aspirations for Uganda's news media and what participants expected in practice. Moreover, respondents' overall attitudes toward journalists and news organizations were relative to their perceptions of other public institutions, namely government agencies and elected officials. Although actual expectations did not meet individuals' aspirations in most cases, respondents maintained high regard for media professionals and articulated relatively higher confidence in news media than their political representatives.

These findings have several implications. First, the study's design begins from audiences' actual expectations and extends forward to implications for normative theory and trust, thus moving beyond ideals about what journalism can or should be to instead center individuals' lived realities. Findings also provide one explanation about how these expectations relate to media trust—advancing the notion of relative institutional trust—and echo calls for journalism expectancy research that is “strongly aware of recipients' political reality” (Riedl & Eberl, 2022, p. 1696). This is noteworthy given that journalism expectancy research has primarily focused on documenting and classifying expectations without necessarily explaining what shapes these expectations to begin with.

About media trust, insights from this work suggest that popular conceptual definitions of trust in news may be incomplete—at least under some circumstances. Although prevailing approaches define media trust as the expectation that interactions with news or journalists will lead to more gains than losses (Strömbäck et al., 2020), this definition may not sufficiently account for the influence of sociopolitical context in these evaluations. Future definitions may be expanded to reflect an assessment of gains and losses that is *relative* to other sociopolitical institutions for a fuller understanding of audience perceptions of news.

To this point, the notion of relative institutional trust deserves significantly more study. One interpretation of these findings is that evaluations of news media may be as much a reaction to the broader sociopolitical environment as they are any substantive measure of media performance. This matters given that most journalism trust-building efforts target media interventions (Banerjee et al., 2023), when a much broader discussion of institutional trust may be needed. Moreover, the findings run contrary to existing work assessing media trust and political trust, the lion's share of which demonstrates positive correlations between the two (e.g., Ariely, 2015; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Although this observation is not a call to swing the pendulum in the other direction entirely, it should prompt investigations into associations between these concepts across diverse societies.

Notably, some degree of tension is likely to exist between aspirations for and actual expectations of journalism in all contexts. In fact, such disconnects may be healthy when journalists see value in political information that audiences find boring (Tewksbury, 2003). However, participants' perceived gap between aspirations and actual expectations was not simply a difference in degree (e.g., “I would like a lot of watchdog reporting, but I expect a little”). Rather, respondents' expectations were substantively different than what they could imagine as normatively desirable. I have argued that these perceptions are in part a response to a sociopolitical context in which widespread distrust of political elites casts media professionals in a relatively

more favorable light, despite shortcomings. For this reason, these findings should not be generalized to other contexts; rather, they provide a set of mechanisms that could be explored in other environments and over time. Likewise, the interview sample consisted of mainly urban residents in Uganda's capitol city. It is possible, if not likely, that individuals residing in rural areas may have unique relationships to journalism (e.g., one community radio station versus many urban outlets) as well as their political leaders (e.g., closer affiliations with district local politicians). Future research should therefore explore the relationship between perceptions of news and political trust in rural Uganda, perhaps statistically comparing different levels of political influence or using interviews to better understand perspectives outside urban areas.

Additionally, this study began from prevailing definitions of media trust, though it does not seek to quantify audience expectations or systematically compare them to reported trust levels. Instead, findings illuminate what individuals expect—or aspire—to receive from journalists and news organizations, with a theoretical assumption that such expectations are conceptually related to trust. Additional empirical evidence is needed to ascertain to what extent the above expectations correlate with reported media trust. Relatedly, these analyses admittedly left the object of individuals' expectations underspecified at times (i.e., individual journalists versus news organizations). Though the interview guide asked about these groups separately, heeding calls to disaggregate perceptions of news (Strömbäck et al., 2020), respondents generally discussed media professionals and organizations interchangeably despite my cues to differentiate.

Finally, this study extends work on both cultures of news consumption and journalism expectancy research by integrating their perspectives. Expectancy research is generally concerned with the examinations of individuals; expectations, after all, are defined as one's personal perception of "stable patterns of anticipated behavior" (Wilhelm et al., 2021, p. 1011). However, research on cultures of news consumption provides a theoretical basis by which to assume that one's expectations of news media, assessed here using individuals' reported media folk theories and perceptions of journalists' roles, are shaped by group-level forces. The integration of expectancy theory likewise introduces a body of scholarship that centers individuals as units of analyses. When combined, expectancy theory may illuminate a host of mechanisms by which cultures of news consumption are absorbed and manifested at the individual level. Together, these perspectives offer a framework for future media-trust research that is both theoretically integrated and responsive to situated sociopolitical environments.

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