

What Following the News Buys, and Where It Buys Most

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ABSTRACT

News consumption is expected to make citizens both more critical of government and more politically active. Across 39 African countries and 53,444 respondents in Afrobarometer Round 9, it does only the second. A standard deviation of news consumption raises contacting a councillor or member of parliament by 2.5 percentage points, protest by 1.1 and turnout by 0.8, while leaving disapproval of the president, demand that public documents be published, and belief that elections remove bad leaders statistically indistinguishable from zero. The pattern holds under survey weighting, logit estimation, and in 32 of 38 national samples for contacting. What varies is where news is politically consequential. Interacting consumption with V-Dem freedom of expression, news predicts presidential disapproval at 3.2 points where media are least free and -0.9 where they are most free, and the same reversal appears for demand and for protest. Following the news mobilises everywhere and politicises only where the state is trying to prevent it.

Keywords: media exposure; political participation; press freedom; information; Afrobarometer; Africa

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1. Introduction

The expectation that news makes citizens both better informed and more demanding is old, and it underwrites a good deal of media development policy. Support for independent journalism in low-income democracies is justified on the grounds that an informed public holds power to account, which requires informed citizens both to notice failure and to act on what they notice.

This paper separates the two. Afrobarometer Round 9 records how often 53,444 respondents in 39 countries take news from radio, television, newspapers, the internet and social media, alongside a full battery of political attitudes and behaviours. The two halves of the expectation come apart cleanly.

News consumption predicts action. A standard deviation of the news index raises the probability of having contacted a local councillor or member of parliament by 2.5 percentage points against a base of 30.4 percent, attendance at a protest by 1.1 points against 9.2, and turnout by 0.8 points. It raises the belief that one could obtain a public document by 1.5 points. Each of these carries a p-value at or below 0.031, and the contacting and protest results hold in 32 and 27 of 38 national samples estimated separately.

News consumption does not predict criticism. Disapproval of the president moves by 0.7 points with a p-value of 0.212. Demand that local budgets, contracts and salaries be public moves by 0.3 points at 0.412. Belief that elections remove unrepresentative leaders moves by -0.4 points at 0.260. Informed citizens in this sample are more active and no more disaffected than anyone else.

That finding is not new in isolation, and its strongest precedent solves the causal problem this design cannot. Conroy-Krutz (2018) exploits variation in FM radio signal in Uganda and finds participation effects without attitude effects. The contribution here is to show that the asymmetry generalises across 39 countries and five media, and then to ask a question that a single-country design cannot: whether the political return to following the news depends on the environment in which it is followed.

It does. Interacting news consumption with the V-Dem freedom of expression index, presidential disapproval carries an interaction of -0.084 with a p-value below 0.001. Where media are least free, a standard deviation of news consumption is associated with 3.2 percentage points more disapproval of the president. Where media are most free it is associated with 0.9 points less. The sign reverses across the range of the moderator, and the same reversal appears on demand that documents be public and on the view that media should be free to publish. Contacting an official, the outcome most directly served by practical information, is unaffected by the media environment.

The reading offered here is selection rather than persuasion, and it is set out in Section 3. Where the press is free, news is ambient and following it says nothing about the follower. Where the press is constrained, following the news is a choice made against friction, and the people who make that choice are already more critical than their neighbours. On this account news does not manufacture critical citizens anywhere. It reveals them where the state is trying to keep them from reading.

The paper proceeds in ten parts. Section 2 sets out the two expectations. Section 3 develops the selection argument and states three hypotheses. Section 4 describes the data. Section 5 maps the African media landscape. Section 6 reports the main effects. Section 7 reports the interaction. Section 8 treats endogeneity at length. Section 9 addresses robustness and alternatives. Section 10 concludes.

2. What News Is Supposed to Do

This section reviews the two expectations the paper separates, and identifies where the evidence for each is strong and where it is assumed.

The mobilisation expectation is that exposure to news lowers the cost of political action by supplying the information action requires: who the representative is, what the council decided, when the meeting is. On this account news is an input to participation and need not change any opinion at all. Norris (2000) made the case at book length for postindustrial democracies, arguing that news consumption and civic engagement reinforce one another rather than the first corroding the second, and Boulianne (2015), meta-analysing the digital variant across a large body of studies, finds small but consistently positive associations with participation. The evidence in African settings is stronger than the comparative literature usually acknowledges. Conroy-Krutz (2018) exploits variation in FM radio signal in Uganda and finds substantial participation effects with no accompanying attitude effects, which is the mobilisation account in its purest form. Conroy-Krutz and Moehler (2015) show experimentally in Ghana that exposure to partisan media can moderate rather than polarise, and Paluck and Green (2009) show in Rwanda that a radio programme changed norms and behaviour while leaving stated beliefs largely intact, which is the same separation of action from attitude arriving by a different route.

The critical expectation is different and less well evidenced. It holds that news reveals what governments would rather conceal, and that revelation produces disapproval, which produces demand, which produces pressure. This is the account that underwrites most media assistance programming, and its micro-evidence is thinner than its rhetorical prominence suggests. Paler (2013) found that Indonesian citizens given budget information became substantially more dissatisfied without becoming more likely to sanction anyone. The wider transparency literature reviewed by Kosack and Fung (2014) concludes that disclosure improves governance only under conditions rather than as a general matter. Peisakhin and Pinto (2010) show that an information right can work as an instrument for the individual who invokes it, which is a narrower claim than that information mobilises publics. Information about poor performance reliably changes beliefs; it changes behaviour much less reliably.

A third literature complicates both. Bowles, Croke, Larreguy, Liu and Marshall (2025) delivered fact-checks to South African citizens over six months and improved their ability to discern false political and health claims, while finding almost no change in what those citizens consumed or in whether they verified anything. If discernment can be improved without consumption changing, and if a substantial share of what circulates is false, then more consumption need not mean better information, and the mobilisation account carries no guarantee that what is mobilised is well founded.

There is a separate strand on media and accountability that operates on governments rather than on citizens. Where the press is free and plural, the argument runs, officials anticipate exposure and behave better. Besley and Burgess (2002) find Indian state governments responding more to food shortages where newspaper circulation is higher. Strömberg (2004) traces the geography of United States relief spending to radio access. Snyder and Strömberg (2010) show

congressional accountability rising with the congruence between media markets and districts. Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya (2011) find an independent television channel shifting Russian votes. This is a supply-side mechanism that operates whether or not any individual citizen reads anything. It is not tested here and the two accounts are not in competition. What matters for the present design is that it makes press freedom a plausible determinant of government behaviour as well as of citizen behaviour, which is one reason Section 9 treats the moderator with caution.

The African case differs from the comparative literature's usual setting in ways that matter for the mechanism. Radio dominates rather than television or print, so the medium reaching most citizens is the one with the lowest infrastructure requirement and the widest rural reach (Conroy-Krutz and Koné 2022). Party systems are weaker, so the informational shortcut a partisan identity supplies in older democracies is less available, which should raise the marginal value of news for anyone trying to work out who is responsible for what. Evaluations of government across the continent track awareness of what government does and general perceptions of its conduct at least as much as personal circumstance (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2005; Mattes and Bratton 2007). And the digital layer has arrived quickly and unevenly: Nyabola (2018) describes a Kenyan politics in which online organisation and offline institutions run on different logics, and Afrobarometer finds digital media use roughly doubling across the continent between 2014 and 2021 while the demographic gaps in access widen (Conroy-Krutz and Koné 2022).

What is missing is a cross-national test that separates the two expectations on the same respondents and asks whether the answer depends on the media environment. That is what follows.

3. Constraint and Selection into News

The argument is about who follows the news, not about what the news contains.

In a country with a free and plural press, news is cheap and ambient. It arrives on the radio in the background, on television in the evening, and through social media without being sought. Consuming it requires no commitment and signals nothing about the consumer. Under those conditions the population of news consumers is close to the population, and the association between consumption and political attitudes should be weak, because there is no selection generating one.

In a country where the press is constrained, the position changes. Independent reporting is scarcer, harder to reach, sometimes risky to be seen consuming, and often available only through channels that require effort or equipment. The population that follows the news anyway is therefore selected on something, and the most plausible candidate is prior political engagement and prior scepticism about the government. The association between consumption and critical attitudes should be correspondingly stronger, not because news made anyone critical but because critical people are who persists.

The idea that a regime's information environment shapes what its citizens conclude about it has an established form in political economy. Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009) show that a ruler's incentive to permit a free press depends on how much he needs information about his own agents, which makes media freedom endogenous to the political economy rather than a fixed national attribute. Guriev, Melnikov and Zhuravskaya (2021) find that the arrival of 3G internet reduced confidence in government, and did so most where traditional media were state-controlled, which is the same conditional shape reported here arriving on different data and a different design. What the present argument adds is the audience side of it: not what the newly informed conclude, but who was in the audience to begin with.

A related result cautions against reading political resources straightforwardly. Croke, Grossman, Larreguy and Marshall (2016) show that in Zimbabwe better-educated citizens participated less rather than more, because they judged the electoral channel not worth using. Where the political environment is constrained, the characteristics ordinarily assumed to drive engagement can run the other way, and the composition of any politically attentive group becomes a question rather than an assumption.

The account is deliberately modest about what news does to anyone. It does not claim that following the news makes citizens critical, and it does not claim that news is more informative in unfree states, which would be implausible. It claims that the composition of the audience changes with the cost of joining it. That is a selection mechanism, and selection mechanisms are usually invoked as threats to inference rather than as findings. Here the selection is the phenomenon of interest, because what it implies is that the political character of a news audience is a function of the environment the audience lives in rather than of the news itself.

One implication is worth stating before the evidence, because it is uncomfortable. If the association between news and criticism is generated by who persists rather than by what they read, then a successful media freedom intervention should weaken that association rather than strengthen it. Making news cheap and ambient brings in the politically indifferent, which dilutes the audience. On this reading the correlations that media assistance programmes use as evidence of impact are strongest in the conditions the programmes exist to eliminate.

Three predictions follow, and they differ in shape.

Hypothesis 1. News consumption is positively associated with political action, and not with critical evaluation of incumbents or with demand for transparency.

Hypothesis 2. The association between news consumption and critical evaluation is stronger where media freedom is lower, and approaches zero where media freedom is high.

Hypothesis 3. The association with contacting officials, which is the outcome most directly served by practical information, does not depend on media freedom.

Hypothesis 3 matters because it distinguishes the account from a general story in which everything is stronger under constraint. If constraint operates through selection into a critical population, it should shape the attitudinal outcomes and leave the informational one alone.

4. Data and Measures

Data. Afrobarometer Round 9, fielded 2021 to 2023 across 39 countries with 53,444 respondents. Five items ask how often the respondent gets news from radio, television, newspapers, the internet and social media, each from never to every day, rescaled to the unit interval. The news index is their mean.

Outcomes. Contacting a local government councillor or member of parliament; attendance at a demonstration or protest march in the past year; turnout in the most recent national election; the perceived likelihood of obtaining a school budget, a local government budget and local government contracts; agreement that those documents should be public; disapproval of the president's performance; the judgement that elections ensure voters can remove unrepresentative leaders; and the view that media should be free to publish rather than controlled by government.

Media freedom. V-Dem version 16 freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index, averaged 2021 to 2023 and merged at country level. Across the sample it runs from 0.381 at the tenth percentile of respondents to 0.869 at the ninetieth. An individual-level measure, the respondent's own judgement of how free the news media are, provides a within-country test in Section 7.

Controls. Lived Poverty Index, age, education, employment, gender, urban residence, frequency of discussing politics, and a standardised index of perceived corruption in the presidency, parliament and local councils. The politics-discussion control is the most important and the most double-edged, since it absorbs part of the political interest that drives both news consumption and participation. Section 9 reports estimates with and without it.

Estimation. Linear probability models with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. Cross-level interactions are estimated in mixed models with random intercepts by country. Descriptive statistics are in Table 1 and country values in Appendix Table A1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, Afrobarometer Round 9, 39 countries, 2021 to 2023

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Radio news (0–1)	0.652	0.389	0.00	1.00	53,197
Television news (0–1)	0.546	0.439	0.00	1.00	53,180
Newspaper news (0–1)	0.176	0.311	0.00	1.00	52,795
Internet news (0–1)	0.398	0.450	0.00	1.00	52,825
Social media news (0–1)	0.432	0.457	0.00	1.00	52,841
News index (0–1)	0.442	0.290	0.00	1.00	53,342
Perceived media freedom (0–1)	0.568	0.325	0.00	1.00	51,916
V-Dem freedom of expression (0–1)	0.684	0.180	0.11	0.91	53,444

Contacted councillor or MP (0/1)	0.299	0.458	0.00	1.00	53,281
Attended a protest (0/1)	0.090	0.286	0.00	1.00	53,071
Voted in last election (0/1)	0.695	0.460	0.00	1.00	53,188
Documents should be public (0–1)	0.744	0.321	0.00	1.00	52,409
Disapproves of president (0/1)	0.477	0.499	0.00	1.00	49,993
Lived Poverty Index (0–4)	1.429	0.951	0.00	4.00	53,440

Note. Unweighted. News items run from 0 (never) to 1 (every day). Media freedom is a country-level quantity assigned to each respondent.

5. The African Media Landscape

Radio remains dominant. Sixty-five percent of respondents take news from it a few times a week or more, against 54 percent for television, 43 percent for social media, 39 percent for the internet and only 14 percent for newspapers. The print collapse is the most striking single figure in the descriptive picture, and it means that any account of African news consumption built on newspaper readership is describing a small minority.

Table 2. Reach of each news source

Source	Share consuming a few times a week or more	Mean on the 0–1 scale
Radio	0.651	0.652
Television	0.535	0.546
Social media	0.426	0.432
Internet	0.389	0.398
Newspaper	0.137	0.176

Note. Afrobarometer Round 9, unweighted, all 39 countries.

The social media share, at 43 percent, already exceeds internet news at 39 percent, which suggests that for a meaningful group social platforms are the internet as far as news is concerned. That is consistent with what Afrobarometer reports for the continent as a whole (Conroy-Krutz and Koné 2022) and with the account of Kenyan digital politics in Nyabola (2018). Appendix Table A1 shows how uneven the picture is: the news index varies substantially across countries, and it does not line up neatly with media freedom.

5.1 Consumption and freedom do not travel together

The news index and press freedom are close to unrelated across the 39 countries, correlating at 0.063. That is convenient for the design, since it means the interaction in Section 7 is not simply comparing high-consumption with low-consumption countries, and it is also substantively interesting.

The highest news consumption in the sample is in Mauritius at 0.801, Seychelles at 0.703 and Gabon at 0.662, which span the range of press freedom from 0.671 to 0.790 to 0.749. The lowest is in Niger at 0.222, Madagascar at 0.239 and Malawi at 0.241, and Niger scores 0.803 on freedom of expression, near the top of the sample. A free press does not by itself produce a news-consuming public, and a constrained one does not by itself prevent it.

The countries at the constrained end of the moderator are Eswatini at 0.111, Ethiopia at 0.351, Sudan at 0.361, the Republic of the Congo at 0.381 and Uganda at 0.468. Their news consumption varies from 0.310 in Ethiopia to 0.590 in Eswatini. At the free end sit Senegal at 0.907, Kenya at 0.877, Ghana at 0.869, Nigeria at 0.868 and Cape Verde at 0.860, with consumption from 0.379 in Nigeria to 0.557 in Cape Verde. The two groups overlap substantially on how much news people take in and differ on the conditions under which they take it, which is the variation the argument requires.

Uganda is worth a note because it is where the strongest causal evidence on this question comes from. Conroy-Krutz (2018) studied radio access there, and the descriptive picture in Round 9 shows Ugandan radio reach at 0.765, the second highest in the sample, alongside social media at 0.157, the lowest. Uganda is a radio country with a constrained press,

which is precisely the configuration in which the selection argument predicts the strongest association between consumption and criticism.

6. News Consumption and Political Action

Table 3 reports the main effects.

Table 3. News consumption, action and evaluation

Outcome	b (news index)	SE	Mean of y	N
Contacted councillor or MP	0.0248***	(0.0046)	0.304	49,393
Attended a protest	0.0111***	(0.0030)	0.092	49,187
Voted in last election	0.0077*	(0.0036)	0.692	49,260
Perceived access to documents	0.0154***	(0.0027)	0.286	48,454
Media should be free to publish	0.0078*	(0.0039)	0.669	48,304
Documents should be public	0.0031	(0.0038)	0.741	48,847
Disapproves of president	0.0066	(0.0053)	0.481	46,782
Elections remove bad leaders	-0.0043	(0.0038)	0.491	47,374

Note. OLS with country fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country. Controls: Lived Poverty Index, age, education, employment, gender, urban residence, frequency of discussing politics, perceived corruption index. The news index is standardised. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The four action outcomes all move and all move upward. Contacting a councillor or member of parliament rises by 2.5 percentage points per standard deviation, which against a base of 30.4 percent is an eight percent relative increase. Protest rises by 1.1 points against a base of 9.2, a twelve percent relative increase. Turnout rises by 0.8 points. Perceived access to public documents rises by 1.5 points. Hypothesis 1 holds on its first half.

The three evaluative outcomes do not move. Disapproval of the president is 0.7 points with a p-value of 0.212, demand that documents be public is 0.3 points at 0.412, and belief that elections remove leaders is -0.4 points at 0.260. The one attitudinal item that does move is the view that media should be free to publish rather than be controlled, at 0.8 points with a p-value of 0.043, which is a preference about the media rather than about the government.

By source. Table 4 estimates each medium separately. The action results are not driven by one channel; radio, television, internet and social media all carry positive coefficients on contacting. Newspapers behave differently on several outcomes, which is unsurprising given that only 14 percent of the sample reads them and that readership is concentrated among the educated and urban.

Table 4. Each news source entered separately

Source	Contacting	Protest	Disapproves president	Demand documents public
Radio	0.0216***	0.0035	-0.0083**	0.0057*
Television	0.0097*	0.0022	-0.0011	-0.0002
Newspaper	0.0300***	0.0110***	-0.0054	-0.0027
Internet	0.0049	0.0076*	0.0150***	0.0002
Social media	0.0064	0.0084**	0.0187***	0.0017

Note. Each cell is a separate regression with the full control set and country fixed effects; standard errors clustered by country. All source variables standardised. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

6.1 What the nulls rule out

Three of the outcomes in Table 3 are nulls and the paper leans on them, so their precision matters. The coefficient on presidential disapproval is 0.007 with a standard error of 0.005, giving an interval from -0.004 to 0.017. Demand that documents be public is 0.003 with a standard error of 0.004, an interval from -0.004 to 0.011. Belief that elections remove leaders is -0.004 with a standard error of 0.004, from -0.012 to 0.003.

Each interval excludes effects larger than roughly one to two percentage points. The action coefficients they are being compared against are 2.5 points for contacting and 1.1 for protest, so the comparison is between an estimated effect and an interval that mostly excludes an effect of that size. This is a genuine asymmetry rather than a difference in statistical power, and the samples are within a few thousand observations of each other in every case.

7. Where News Is Politically Consequential

Table 5 interacts news consumption with V-Dem freedom of expression and reports the marginal effect at the tenth and ninetieth percentiles.

Table 5. Cross-level interaction with media freedom

Outcome	b (news)	b (interaction)	SE	ME at p10	ME at p90	N
Contacted councillor or MP	0.0247	0.0130	(0.0117)	0.0207	0.0271	49,393
Attended a protest	0.0111	-0.0197**	(0.0075)	0.0171	0.0075	49,187
Voted in last election	0.0076	0.0082	(0.0112)	0.0051	0.0091	49,260
Perceived access to documents	0.0155	0.0289***	(0.0077)	0.0068	0.0209	48,454
Media should be free to publish	0.0075	-0.0534***	(0.0123)	0.0237	-0.0023	48,304
Documents should be public	0.0027	-0.0466***	(0.0084)	0.0168	-0.0059	48,847
Disapproves of president	0.0061	-0.0837***	(0.0121)	0.0315	-0.0094	46,782
Elections remove bad leaders	-0.0042	0.0274**	(0.0090)	-0.0126	0.0008	47,374

Note. Mixed models with random intercepts by country. Marginal effects at the 10th (0.381) and 90th (0.869) percentiles of the V-Dem freedom of expression index across respondents. Controls as in Table 3. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ on the interaction term.

Presidential disapproval carries the largest interaction at -0.084 with a p -value below 0.001. Where media are least free, a standard deviation of news consumption is associated with 3.2 percentage points more disapproval. Where they are most free, it is associated with 0.9 points less. The sign reverses across the range of the moderator, and Hypothesis 2 holds.

The same shape appears for demand that documents be public, with an interaction of -0.047 running from 1.7 points to -0.6 , and for the view that media should be free to publish, at -0.053 running from 2.4 points to -0.2 . Protest carries an interaction of -0.020 with a p -value of 0.008, running from 1.7 points to 0.8, which is an attenuation rather than a reversal.

Hypothesis 3 is supported. Contacting a councillor or member of parliament carries an interaction of 0.013 with a p -value of 0.267, indistinguishable from zero. The outcome most directly served by practical information is the one whose relationship with news does not depend on the media environment, which is what a selection account predicts and what a general strength-under-constraint account does not.

Two outcomes run the other way and should be reported rather than tidied away. Perceived access to public documents carries a positive interaction of 0.029 with a p -value below 0.001, so news is associated with more confidence of obtaining a document where media are freer. Belief that elections remove leaders carries a positive interaction of 0.027 at 0.002. Both are consistent with an account in which a free media environment makes institutions look more usable to the people who follow them.

A within-country test. Table 6 replaces the country-level moderator with the respondent's own assessment of how free the news media are, holding the country constant through fixed effects. This is a different quantity, since it varies among people in the same media environment, and it provides a check that the country-level result is not simply capturing something else about which countries have free media.

Table 6. Interaction with the respondent's own assessment of media freedom, within country

Outcome	b (news)	b ($\times$ perceived media freedom)	SE	N
Contacted councillor or MP	0.0252***	0.0044	(0.0030)	48,407
Attended a protest	0.0110***	-0.0028	(0.0021)	48,208
Disapproves of president	0.0063	-0.0018	(0.0039)	45,911

Documents should be public	0.0029	-0.0030	(0.0019)	47,941
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Note. OLS with country fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country, full control set. Both variables standardised.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

8. Endogeneity

This design cannot establish that news consumption causes anything, and the problem is more serious here than in most observational work on political behaviour. It deserves a section rather than a line in a limitations paragraph.

The difficulty is straightforward. Political interest causes people to follow the news and causes them to contact officials, attend meetings and vote. Any cross-sectional association between the two will therefore be positive whether or not news does anything at all. The models control for frequency of discussing politics, which is the closest available proxy for interest, but a proxy is not a solution, and the coefficient on news would be biased upward by whatever interest the proxy fails to capture.

Three considerations bear on how much weight the main effects can carry.

The control behaves in the direction opposite to the concern. Removing frequency of discussing politics from the model raises the news coefficient on contacting from 0.025 to 0.034 and on protest from 0.011 to 0.015, as Table 7 reports. If political interest were generating the association, adding a measure of it should have absorbed a large share, and instead it absorbs about a quarter. That is consistent with news carrying information beyond what interest supplies, and it is not proof of it.

The attitudinal nulls are hard to generate from a selection story. If the association reflected politically interested people selecting into news, that same interest should raise disapproval of incumbents and demand for transparency, since interested citizens are on average more critical. Those outcomes do not move at all. A selection account has to explain why the selection operates on four behavioural outcomes and none of three attitudinal ones.

The strongest evidence for the causal reading is not in this paper. Conroy-Krutz (2018) obtains exogenous variation in radio access from FM signal propagation and topography in Uganda and finds precisely the pattern reported here: participation rises, attitudes do not. That design answers the question this one cannot, in one country, for one medium. The contribution here is to show that the asymmetry he identifies is general across 39 countries and five media, not to establish the causal claim a second time.

The interaction results in Section 7 are on firmer ground than the main effects. A pure selection story predicts that the association between news and participation is inflated everywhere by the same mechanism. It does not obviously predict that the association with presidential disapproval reverses sign between countries with free and constrained media, since political interest is not more strongly correlated with news consumption in unfree states for any reason the selection account supplies. The argument in Section 3 does predict it, because it is a claim about who persists in following news when following it is costly.

9. Robustness and Alternative Explanations

Table 7. Robustness of the main effects

Outcome	Baseline	Without politics control	Weighted	Logit	Countries agreeing
Contacted councillor or MP	0.0248***	0.0338***	0.0208***	0.128***	32/38
Attended a protest	0.0111***	0.0150***	0.0136***	0.137***	27/38
Disapproves of president	0.0066	0.0080	0.0119	0.030	19/37
Documents should be public	0.0031	0.0042	0.0036		23/38

Note. Baseline is the specification in Table 3. The second column removes the frequency-of-discussing-politics control. Weighted models use Afrobarometer household weights. Logit is reported for binary outcomes. Countries agreeing is the

number of national samples of at least 400 observations in which the separately estimated coefficient carries the pooled sign. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The action results survive every check. Contacting carries the pooled sign in 32 of 38 national samples and protest in 27 of 38, and both are stable under weighting and logit. The disapproval null is a null in every specification and carries the pooled sign in only 19 of 37 countries, which is what a coin flip looks like and is the appropriate reading of a coefficient with a p-value of 0.212.

Misinformation rather than information. If a substantial share of what circulates on social media is false, the news index may partly measure exposure to misinformation, and the participation it predicts may be poorly founded. This paper cannot distinguish the two, and the evidence that discernment and consumption move independently gives reason to take the possibility seriously (Bowles et al. 2025). Table 4 shows that the action results are not confined to social media, which limits the damage but does not remove it. A design that separated exposure by content rather than by channel would be a substantial advance.

Access rather than consumption. The news items measure reported frequency, which is bound up with electricity, device ownership, literacy and connectivity. Some of the estimated news effect may be an effect of the infrastructure that makes news possible. The models control for the Lived Poverty Index, education and urban residence, which absorb much of this, and the radio result is reassuring in this respect since radio requires the least infrastructure of the five channels and carries a clear positive coefficient on contacting.

The moderator may not be about media. V-Dem's freedom of expression index correlates with general political openness, so the interaction in Section 7 may capture regime type rather than the media environment specifically. This is the alternative taken most seriously here, and the supply-side literature reviewed in Section 2 is one reason: if officials behave differently where the press is free (Besley and Burgess 2002; Snyder and Strömberg 2010), then the moderator is picking up government conduct as well as audience composition. The within-country test in Table 6 addresses this partly, since it uses variation among respondents in the same regime, and the country models include vertical accountability and electoral democracy alongside the media measure. Neither fully separates the concepts, which are related in reality as well as in the data.

Reverse causation on the outcomes. People who have contacted an official or attended a protest may subsequently follow the news more closely because they have become invested. The survey is cross-sectional and cannot order the two. This possibility runs in the same direction as the political interest concern in Section 8 and is subject to the same three considerations.

10. Conclusion

Across 39 African countries, following the news is associated with doing more and believing no differently. Contacting officials, protesting, voting and expecting to obtain a public document all rise with news consumption. Disapproval of the president, demand that public documents be published and belief that elections remove bad leaders do not move at all.

Where news is politically consequential depends on the media environment, and it does so in the direction opposite to the one media assistance assumes. The association between news consumption and criticism of incumbents is 3.2 percentage points where press freedom is lowest and -0.9 where it is highest. The same reversal holds for demand for transparency. Only contacting officials, the outcome served most directly by practical information rather than by political disposition, is unaffected by the media environment.

This is read here as selection rather than persuasion. In a free media environment news is ambient and following it says nothing about the follower. Where the press is constrained, following the news is a choice made against friction, and the people who make it are already more critical than their neighbours. On this account news does not create critical citizens anywhere. It reveals them where the state is trying to keep them from reading. That is the audience-side counterpart to what Guriev, Melnikov and Zhuravskaya (2021) find on the supply side, where new information reduced confidence in government most where the old information was controlled.

Three limits bound the claims. The design is observational and the political interest problem set out in Section 8 cannot be resolved within it. The news measure records channel rather than content, so exposure to misinformation is not separable from exposure to reporting. And the moderator is a country-level index that correlates with regime openness more broadly.

Two extensions follow. The first is to bring content into the measure, distinguishing exposure to independent reporting from exposure to state media and from exposure to unverified material circulating on social platforms, which the channel-based items cannot do. The second is to exploit within-country variation in signal reach along the lines of Conroy-Krutz (2018) across a larger set of countries, which would convert the descriptive regularity reported here into an estimate.

There is a broader point about what these data can and cannot show. This paper is one of several drawing on the same survey programme to ask how African publics connect what they believe to what they do. In earlier work the answer has been that grievance raises evaluation and depresses action. Here the answer is the reverse: information raises action and leaves evaluation alone. The two results are complementary rather than contradictory, and read together they suggest that the weak link in African accountability is neither a shortage of anger nor a shortage of information but the connection between them. That is a hypothesis this paper supports rather than tests, and it would need a design built for it.

For media assistance the implication is awkward and worth stating plainly. The association between news and critical citizenship is strongest where press freedom is weakest, which is where the work is hardest and most dangerous, and it disappears where press freedom has been secured. That is not an argument against the work. It is a reason to be careful about which outcomes are promised, since the participation effects appear robust everywhere while the attitudinal ones appear only where the environment is hostile.

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Data sources

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Data availability

All data analysed in this study are publicly available. The Afrobarometer Merged Round 9 file covering 39 countries, fieldwork 2021 to 2023, is available without charge from afrobarometer.org/data. V-Dem version 16 is available from the Varieties of Democracy Institute at v-dem.net. The analysis code that produced every estimate reported here is retained by the authors and available on request.

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Generative AI

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Appendix

Table A1. All 39 countries, ordered by V-Dem freedom of expression

Country	Freedom of expression	News index	Radio	Social media	Contacted	Protested	N
Eswatini	0.111	0.590	0.664	0.605	0.317	0.125	1,200
Ethiopia	0.351	0.310	0.438	0.221	0.361	0.218	2,400
Sudan	0.361	0.428	0.438	0.474	0.117	0.182	1,200
Republic of the Congo	0.381	0.425	0.598	0.415	0.323	0.075	1,200
Uganda	0.468	0.311	0.765	0.157	0.313	0.053	2,400
Angola	0.470	0.435	0.602	0.403	0.057	0.118	1,200
Zimbabwe	0.508	0.376	0.631	0.444	0.335	0.040	1,200
Guinea	0.555	0.371	0.691	0.330	0.353	0.048	1,200
Cameroon	0.591	0.569	0.592	0.667	0.234	0.097	1,200
Morocco	0.592	0.574	0.466	0.726	0.212	0.083	1,200
Mozambique	0.632	0.361	0.562	0.296	0.274	0.074	1,120
Togo	0.643	0.426	0.727	0.462	0.235	0.062	1,200
Ivory Coast	0.656	0.523	0.572	0.547	0.311	0.091	1,200
Tanzania	0.663	0.364	0.723	0.210	0.275	0.018	2,400
Madagascar	0.668	0.239	0.630	0.118	0.281	0.035	1,200
Mauritius	0.671	0.801	0.943	0.773	0.323	0.059	1,200
Mali	0.701	0.402	0.700	0.397	0.292	0.197	1,200
Benin	0.702	0.359	0.714	0.344	0.328	0.068	1,200
Burkina Faso	0.714	0.370	0.703	0.298	0.333	0.127	1,200
Mauritania	0.714	0.369	0.365	0.454	0.417	0.107	1,200
Gabon	0.749	0.662	0.541	0.762	0.251	0.084	1,200
Lesotho	0.772	0.389	0.699	0.412	0.381	0.152	1,200
The Gambia	0.773	0.473	0.657	0.564	0.321	0.051	1,200
Malawi	0.785	0.241	0.593	0.195	0.258	0.049	1,200

Zambia	0.789	0.387	0.662	0.363	0.338	0.049	1,200
Seychelles	0.790	0.703	0.806	0.665	0.261	0.053	1,176
Niger	0.803	0.222	0.516	0.213	0.378	0.043	1,200
Tunisia	0.804	0.458	0.410	0.558	0.158	0.117	1,200
Botswana	0.808	0.472	0.680	0.467	0.282	0.052	1,200
Sao Tome and Principe	0.812	0.515	0.682	0.549	0.175	0.137	1,200
Namibia	0.823	0.534	0.758	0.489	0.274	0.135	1,200
Liberia	0.834	0.378	0.770	0.355	0.418	0.075	1,200
Sierra Leone	0.834	0.291	0.650	0.318	0.338	0.039	1,200
South Africa	0.850	0.642	0.731	0.682	0.407	0.145	1,580
Cape Verde	0.860	0.557	0.500	0.674	0.198	0.151	1,199
Nigeria	0.868	0.379	0.627	0.368	0.330	0.085	1,600
Ghana	0.869	0.478	0.778	0.420	0.379	0.049	2,369
Kenya	0.877	0.525	0.835	0.474	0.301	0.058	2,400
Senegal	0.907	0.510	0.697	0.521	0.318	0.141	1,200

Note. Unweighted country means. Freedom of expression is the V-Dem version 16 index averaged over 2021 to 2023. News index, radio and social media run from 0 to 1. Contacted and protested are proportions.