FINDING COMMON GROUND:

ROLE OF MEDIA IN COMBATING POLARISATION IN WEST AFRICA

EVIDENCE FROM GHANA COUNTRY STUDY



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Media Foundation for West Africa

Promoting Media Freedom, Freedom of Expression
and Democratic Governance in West Africa

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01 - Role Of Media In Combating Polarisation In West Africa

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a systematic, mixed-methods study on the role of the media in contributing to, or combating, affective polarisation in Ghana. The study draws on three interdependent data strands: a content analysis of four major online news platforms, seven key informant interviews (KIIs) with media professionals, academics, regulatory actors, and civil society stakeholders, and five focus group discussions (FGDs) with diverse audience groups. Together these produce an integrated and evidence-grounded account of how media polarisation operates in Ghana, what drives it, and what can be done to address it.

Objectives

The study was guided by five specific objectives. It sought to establish how media content and framing in Ghana contribute to or counter affective polarisation on key national public interest issues; to explore the perceptions of media practitioners and related industry stakeholders about the roles and performances of the media in promoting inclusive discourse; to identify the political and cultural enablers of affective polarisation on issues of national interest; to assess the presence and effectiveness of media literacy and fact-checking initiatives in countering misinformation and polarisation; and to propose practice-oriented policies and professional standards interventions that could enhance the role of the media in combating affective polarisation in Ghana.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design integrating three complementary methods of data collection and analysis. The content analysis coded items published on four purposively selected online news portals, namely Graphic Online, 3News/TV3, Citi Newsroom, and ModernGhana, over a 14-day period of heightened media attention to politically salient events. Each item was coded for framing type, source attribution, tone, and polarisation potential using a Polarisation Index developed for the study, which ranges from 0 (Highly Unifying) to 42 (Highly Polarising). In total, 116 items were coded across the four platforms.

The key informant interviews were conducted with seven respondents drawn from across the media industry and related stakeholder communities. Interviews were conducted in person where possible, audio-recorded with the consent of respondents, and subjected to systematic axial coding to identify common and contrasting patterns.

Five focus group discussions were conducted with purposively sampled audience groups drawn from different demographic clusters, including groups differentiated by age, media consumption, occupation, and digital media habits. FGDs were conducted in person, in participants' preferred language, systematically coded and thematically analysed. The findings from all three strands were subsequently triangulated to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and unique contribution across methods.

Key Findings

The triangulated findings collectively point to a media landscape in which polarisation is structurally produced, institutionally enabled, commercially reinforced, and experientially felt across diverse audience groups. The following findings represent the most significant and robust conclusions of the study.

Politicised ownership is the foundational architecture of polarisation

Across all three data strands, political ownership of media organisations emerges as the primary structural driver of polarisation. The content analysis reveals consistent patterns of elite-source dominance and conflict-centred framing across all four platforms coded. Key informant respondents describe ownership as a direct and predictable ideological filter on editorial direction. Focus group participants, across all five groups and regardless of demographic profile, independently identify partisan ownership as the primary basis for their distrust of specific outlets, naming stations as belonging to the NPP or NDC without prompting.

Elections function as peak moments of polarisation

Evidence from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions indicates that electoral periods simultaneously amplify every structural driver of polarisation identified in this report. The content analysis, which was conducted outside an electoral period, cannot directly test this claim, but it does show that other types of high-salience political coverage, such as the environmental and resource governance disputes discussed below, can themselves generate elevated Polarisation Index scores. This suggests that during election periods, when several such pressures are likely to compound at once, the effect on coverage could be more pronounced still. Key informant respondents describe election coverage as acquiring the character of a "war scenario," with owner interference, sensational framing, and accusatory rhetoric all intensifying. Across all five focus groups, participants describe elections as a high-risk environment in which irresponsible media conduct, especially premature results reporting and electoral misinformation, can have direct consequences for public order.

Conflict-centred and human-interest framing dominant and most polarising

The content analysis finds that human-interest framing is the narrative mode most strongly associated with low Polarisation Index scores. Of the 64 items falling in the lowest scoring band, which represents the Highly Unifying classification, 62 employed human-interest framing. A further content analysis finding, not initially anticipated by the study design, is that environmental and resource governance coverage is both the largest subject-matter category in the dataset and the category most strongly associated with higher Polarisation Index scores, exceeding politics and elections coverage. Within this category, items attributing blame to political actors or structural failures score considerably higher than items attributing the same harms to foreign actors, indicating that media polarisation in Ghana is not confined to explicitly partisan political reporting. The study identifies a related finding of significance: items coded as professionally responsible, meaning factually accurate, appropriately attributed, and balanced between elite actors, do not consistently produce higher Polarisation Index scores than their less responsible counterparts. When conflict is normalised as an enduring feature of institutional life and coverage remains anchored in elite-source routines, procedural objectivity does not in itself produce the dialogic, inclusive, and solution-oriented content that the instrument rewards with higher scores. Solution-oriented framing is rare across all four platforms and, where it does appear, does not consistently produce higher Polarisation Index scores. This finding is significant: the presence of ostensibly constructive or forward-looking framing does not, in itself, generate the substantive source diversity, dialogic tone, and identity-inclusive content that the instrument rewards.

Digital-first and aggregator platforms intensify polarisation

Digital-first outlets record substantially higher mean Polarisation Index scores than legacy media platforms. ModernGhana records a mean score of 19.50 and Citi Newsroom 17.77, placing both in the Moderately Unifying band. By contrast, Graphic Online records a combined mean of 4.64 across both coding rounds and 3News/TV3 a mean of 4.36, both in the Highly Unifying band. These differences reflect distinct coverage logics: legacy outlets generate low scores through procedural, elite-centred restraint, while digital-first platforms produce higher scores through more varied sourcing and framing, though no outlet approaches the Moderately Polarising or Highly Polarising thresholds. Focus group participants across all groups identify social media as a significant misinformation multiplier, citing AI-generated content, misleading captions, and the unregulated spread of hoaxes as specific concerns. The study identifies a two-tier digital polarisation dynamic: mainstream digital-first platforms produce high-volume, speed-driven conflict content; social media then extends the reach and lifespan of this content in environments with even weaker accountability structures.

Regulatory weakness creates a permissive environment

Key informant respondents across all seven interviews describe the National Media Commission and related regulatory bodies as reactive rather than proactive and under-resourced, with monitoring activity concentrated at the national level and little evidence of meaningful district-level monitoring. The relative absence of dialogic, solution-oriented, and community-centred content across all four platforms throughout the 14-day coding period, alongside the dominance of elite-sourced and conflict-framed coverage, points to a gap in professional self-regulation and editorial accountability mechanisms, rather than to a deficit of statutory content regulation. Ghana's constitutional framework, reflected in the Supreme Court's rejection of the National Media Commission's Legislative Instrument 2224, constrains direct regulatory intervention in editorial content; the relevant accountability gap therefore lies in newsroom-level editorial policy, professional association oversight, and voluntary codes of conduct, rather than in a shortfall of statutory enforcement that the NMC could straightforwardly remedy. Focus group participants express strong public appetite for accountability, though they diverge on preferred remedies, with some groups favouring punitive regulatory enforcement and others emphasising professional training and procedural reform.

Economic precarity, commercial logic of attention, co-drivers of polarisation

Poor journalist remuneration, employment insecurity, and the absence of institutional protections for editorial independence render journalists structurally vulnerable to owner pressure and compromise professional autonomy. Focus group participants in multiple groups explicitly and independently link sensationalist, conflict-driven reporting to monetisation incentives, describing how bloggers and digital outlets pursue followers and advertising revenue through outrage-driven content. Polarisation is therefore not reducible to partisan intent; it is also a product of market structures that reward conflict and penalise contextual or dialogic journalism. Graphic Online, the one state-affiliated outlet in the sample and the platform least exposed to the digital advertising and engagement metrics that drive the other three, also records the lowest mean Polarisation Index score, a pattern consistent with the hypothesis that ownership and revenue models shape exposure to these market pressures. However, the content analysis was not designed to disaggregate outlets by ownership or revenue model directly, and this comparison should be treated as suggestive rather than confirmed; a dedicated comparison of polarisation patterns across non-commercial and commercially-driven outlets, ideally with a larger sample for Graphic Online, would be a valuable area for follow-up research.

Elite source capture structurally produced and experientially felt

Government officials appear in approximately 86 percent of Graphic Online items, 84 percent of 3News items, and over 90 percent of Citi Newsroom items. Civil society organisations, community groups, and

citizen voices are either absent or positioned within conflict-driven narratives. Focus group participants across multiple groups describe a profound sense of community invisibility, reporting that their communities appear in media coverage only in the context of crime or conflict and are consistently absent from coverage of development, infrastructure, and civic life.

Audience agency real but unevenly distributed

Focus group participants demonstrate active and differentiated engagement with media content, including cross-platform verification, station-switching behaviour, and the development of personalised credibility hierarchies anchored in specific journalists and presenters rather than outlets or institutions. These practices provide some moderation of the impact of polarising content, and are reinforced by social norms in Ghana that discourage overt ethnic incitement. However, this resilience is unevenly distributed across demographic and geographic contexts and cannot substitute for structural reform.

Recommendations

The study advances the following recommendations, each grounded in cross-strand evidence.

Ownership transparency and structural reform. Mandatory disclosure of beneficial ownership should be required for all broadcast and digital media licensees. Limits on political ownership of broadcast media and enforceable accountability mechanisms for owner interference in editorial direction are indicated by the robustness of the ownership-polarisation finding across all three data strands.

Proactive regulatory oversight. The National Media Commission should be resourced and mandated to shift from reactive complaint-handling to proactive monitoring, with particular attention to district-level and digital-only platforms. The strong public appetite for accountability documented across all five focus groups provides a democratic mandate for more assertive oversight.

Professional development beyond procedural ethics. The finding that professionally responsible coverage does not consistently mitigate polarisation calls for professional development programmes that equip journalists with conflict-sensitive reporting practices, contextual and solution-oriented framing skills, and the tools of dialogic journalism. Training must address not only what journalists know but what they are institutionally enabled to do within structurally constrained newsroom environments.

Journalist welfare and employment protections. The ethics-employment tension identified across the key informant interviews and focus group discussions points to the need for structural protections for editorial independence, including minimum remuneration standards, whistleblower protections for journalists who resist owner interference, building on existing whistleblower legislation and professional association grievance mechanisms where these already exist, recognising that comprehensive statutory protection is likely to be a longer-term goal requiring phased implementation, and professional association advocacy for journalist welfare.

Targeted electoral media monitoring. The convergent identification of elections as peak polarisation periods in the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, together with content analysis evidence that other types of high-salience political coverage independently generate elevated Polarisation Index scores, justifies dedicated electoral media monitoring programmes that combine regulatory oversight, civil society tracking, and real-time fact-checking,

with particular attention to premature results reporting and the spread of electoral misinformation and, particularly, disinformation on digital and social media platforms.

Media and information literacy. The audience agency documented across focus group discussions is an asset to be deliberately cultivated. Media literacy programmes, targeted at demographic groups with limited cross-platform verification habits, can strengthen the moderating capacity of audience agency against polarising content, particularly during high-risk electoral periods.

Community and development journalism. The finding about community invisibility, that Ghanaian communities feature in coverage mainly in the context of crime or conflict and are largely absent from coverage of their everyday lives, underscores the need for deliberate editorial policies and incentive structures that extend coverage beyond the political elite to encompass community development, infrastructure, health, and civic life. Such coverage serves both depolarising and democratic accountability functions and responds directly to the normative expectations expressed by focus group participants across all five groups.

The findings of this study point to a media system under structural stress, one that is 'politically captured', economically constrained, institutionally under-governed, and digitally accelerated. Individual professional commitment, audience agency, and social norms provide some moderation of these pressures. But they cannot substitute for the structural, regulatory, and professional reforms that the evidence collectively demands. The reimagination of the media as a tool for depolarisation and democratic dialogue, which is the animating purpose of this study, requires sustained commitment from media owners, practitioners, regulators, civil society, and the audiences the media is called to serve.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, West Africa has undergone a remarkable and consequential expansion of its media landscape. From the wave of media liberalisation that swept the region in the 1990s, dismantling state broadcasting monopolies and opening the airwaves to private operators, to the more recent proliferation of digital platforms and social media, the region today hosts one of the most numerically diverse media environments on the African continent. In Ghana, citizens now have access to a plurality of voices, platforms, and perspectives that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. This expansion has been widely celebrated as a signal of democratic progress, a visible expression of the freedoms of expression and information that anchor constitutional governance across the sub-region.

Yet the plurality of outlets, in and of itself, does not guarantee a plurality of perspectives, and the expansion of media supply does not automatically translate into inclusive and civic-minded journalism that democratic consolidation requires. A growing body of evidence suggests that much of the media, far from serving as a vehicle for national cohesion and informed public deliberation, has come to function as a mechanism for the amplification of partisan divisions, the reinforcement of elite interests, and the production of what scholars have come to call affective polarisation, that is, the deepening of emotional hostility and social distance between politically defined groups, irrespective of substantive policy disagreement (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). The structural conditions that give rise to this tendency are well documented: partisan and politically motivated ownerships, weak and reactive regulatory frameworks, the economic precarity of journalists and media organisations, and the competitive logic of a digital media environment that rewards outrage and conflict over contextualisation and dialogue (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Waisbord, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018).

Ghana occupies a distinctive position within this regional context as it is widely regarded as one of West Africa's most stable and consolidated democracies, and its media sector has long been held up as a model of relative openness and pluralism within the sub-region (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). Since the liberalisation of broadcasting in the 1990s, Ghana has developed a competitive and varied media environment encompassing hundreds of private radio and television stations, a growing online news sector, and an active social media ecosystem. Press freedom indices consistently rank Ghana among the highest-performing countries in Africa, and the country's peaceful electoral transitions have been regularly attributed, in part, to the role of a relatively free media in facilitating public information and political accountability (Fridy, 2007).

While these achievements are real and should not be minimised [at the same time], recent scholarship and public commentary have drawn attention to persistent and deepening tensions within the Ghanaian media landscape that sit alongside its reputation for openness. Concerns about the politicisation of media ownership, the partisanship of editorial direction, the vulnerability of journalists to economic and political pressure, and the amplifying role of social media in spreading misinformation and inflaming political sentiment have become increasingly prominent in academic, professional, and civic debates about the

state of the media in Ghana (Sakyi & Nkansah, 2021; Gbambu, Ibrahim, & Adisa, 2025; Danso, 2025). The country's political landscape, dominated by two major parties whose competition for power shapes much of public life, provides a structural context in which media polarisation finds fertile ground, and in which the consequences of irresponsible or partisan journalism can extend well beyond the media system itself into the fabric of social cohesion and democratic participation.

It is against this backdrop that the present study was undertaken. This report presents the findings of a systematic, mixed-methods inquiry into the role of the media in contributing to, or combating, affective polarisation in Ghana. The study proceeds from the conviction that the media's capacity to deepen or to heal social divisions is not merely a matter of individual journalistic conduct or professional ethics, important as those are, but is shaped in fundamental ways by the structural, institutional, economic, and political conditions in which media organisations and journalists operate. Understanding polarisation in the Ghanaian media context therefore requires an analytical framework that is attentive to these structural conditions and their interactions, and a methodological approach capable of triangulating evidence across multiple levels of media practice, from the content that media organisations produce, to the explanations that media professionals and stakeholders offer for why they produce it as they do, to the ways in which audiences receive, interpret, and respond to that content in their everyday lives.

Ghana approaches each electoral cycle with a media environment that, by the accounts of practitioners, stakeholders, and audiences alike, becomes more polarised and more prone to sensationalism and partisanship as political competition intensifies. The rise of digital platforms and social media has introduced new vectors for the amplification of divisive content, the spread of electoral misinformation, and the fragmentation of shared informational spaces. And the institutional frameworks intended to moderate these tendencies, including regulatory bodies, professional associations, and civil society watchdogs, remain, by most accounts, reactive rather than preventive and under-resourced relative to the scale and pace of the challenges they face. The need for empirically grounded, evidence-based analysis of how polarisation operates in the Ghanaian media context, and of what levers might most effectively be pulled to address it, has rarely been more pressing.

This study sought to contribute to that analysis and was guided by five specific research objectives, which are concerned respectively with the nature and extent of media-induced affective polarisation in Ghana's online media content, the perceptions and experiences of media practitioners and stakeholders regarding the media's role in inclusive discourse, the political and cultural enablers of polarisation, the presence and effectiveness of media literacy and fact-checking initiatives, and the identification of practice-oriented policy and professional standards interventions. These objectives are elaborated in the section on research questions that follows.

The study employed a mixed-methods design integrating content analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. This triangulated approach enabled the study to bring together structural measurement, institutional explanation, and experiential testimony in a way that no single method could achieve alone. The content analysis provides systematic evidence of what polarisation looks like in practice at the level of media output. The key informant interviews illuminate the institutional and structural mechanisms that enable and sustain it. The focus group discussions capture how polarisation is experienced, interpreted, and contested by Ghanaian audiences in their everyday engagement with media. These three strands of evidence are brought into dialogue in the triangulated findings section of the report, which forms the analytical core of the study.

Background

Media Systems, Political Parallelism, and Partisan Ownership

The relationship between media organization and political actors has long been central to scholarly understanding of how media systems shape democratic life. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) foundational typology of media systems distinguishing the Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, and Polarized Pluralist models identifies political parallelism, the degree to which media organisations align with and reflect the orientations of political parties, as one of the defining axes along which media systems vary. In highly parallel systems, media organisations function as extensions of political actors, shaping public opinion along partisan lines and reinforcing ideological divisions, while outlets in low-parallelism systems are expected to maintain professional autonomy and promote diverse perspectives (Gentzkow et al., 2015). Other studies have however, demonstrated that even nominally independent media systems are increasingly susceptible to polarisation driven by market pressures, audience preferences, and the structural incentives of the digital economy (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Lelkes et al., 2017).

A significant body of scholarship situates the production of editorial bias within the political economy of media, examining how ownership structures, financial incentives, and institutional constraints shape news content independently of individual journalistic intent. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) propose that media organisations maximise engagement and revenue by tailoring content to the ideological preferences of their target audiences, while Prat and Stromberg (2013) and Cage (2016) demonstrate how supply-side factors, including ownership interests and organisational procedures, further mediate editorial choices. In contexts where owners hold direct political affiliations, these dynamics are particularly pronounced: media organisations become vehicles for protecting political allies and undermining opponents, a pattern extensively documented in hybrid and emerging democracies where political actors control media through ownership, advertising dependence, or regulatory pressure (Besley & Prat, 2006; Djankov et al., 2003; Mabweazara, 2015).

Framing, Agenda-Setting, and the Production of Polarisation

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to understanding how media content produces polarising effects: agenda-setting theory and framing theory. Agenda-setting research, originating with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) landmark study, establishes that the issues to which media devote attention become the issues audiences regard as most important, with subsequent research extending this insight to attribute salience, that is, the capacity of media to shape not only which issues matter but how they are understood (McCombs, 2014). Framing theory, as elaborated by Entman (1993), addresses the mechanisms through which media construct meaning by selecting and emphasising particular aspects of events or issues, defining problems, attributing causality, offering moral evaluations, and suggesting remedies. Together, these frameworks explain how media that consistently foreground conflict, blame

attribution, and political antagonism can deepen affective polarisation even in the absence of deliberate partisan intent.

Research on framing in African media systems highlights how coverage of political events is frequently shaped by the partisan affiliations and commercial interests of outlets, resulting in coverage that reinforces existing divisions rather than providing the contextual and deliberative information that democratic discourse requires (Mabweazara, 2015; Gbambu et al., 2025). The concept of conflict framing, in which news stories are structured around opposition, blame, and contestation rather than context, solutions, or civic dialogue, has been identified as a particularly potent mechanism of affective polarisation, operating through its cumulative normalisation of political antagonism as an enduring and unavoidable feature of public life (Entman, 2007; Prior, 2013).

African and Ghanaian Media Systems

Scholars have increasingly argued that Western-derived media system typologies inadequately capture the structural conditions and institutional dynamics of African media contexts (Voltmer, 2013; Waisbord, 2015). African media systems frequently exhibit characteristics drawn from multiple typologies simultaneously: formal commitments to press freedom and professional journalism coexist with significant political influence, ownership concentration, economic fragility, and informal networks of patronage and clientelism (Moehler & Singh, 2011; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Chadwick's (2017) concept of the hybrid media system is instructive here, capturing how traditional and digital media interact with political actors in fluid and often unpredictable ways that resist classification within conventional frameworks. In such contexts, media organisations frequently serve as instruments of political competition alongside their democratic functions of public information and accountability (Waisbord, 2015), and journalists navigate complex and competing pressures from owners, political patrons, and audiences.

Ghana occupies an important position within African comparative media scholarship. Since the liberalisation of its media sector in the 1990s, Ghana has developed one of the continent's most pluralistic and competitive media environments, and the country is consistently cited as a relative success story in terms of press freedom and democratic consolidation (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009; Fridy, 2007). Yet recent scholarship has identified persistent structural tensions within this apparent success. Sakyi and Nkansah (2021) document patterns of ownership concentration that qualify the diversity implied by the sheer number of outlets, while Gbambu et al. (2025) trace the evolution of partisan media politics under successive NPP and NDC governments, showing how party alignment and ideological division consistently accompany and at times overwhelm the formal plurality of Ghana's media landscape. Danso (2025) further demonstrates how economic pressures and political patronage undermine editorial independence, producing both real and perceived biases in reporting. These findings suggest that Ghana's media achievements and its polarisation challenges are not contradictory but are, rather, two faces of the same structural reality.

Digital Platforms, Social Media, and Algorithmic Amplification

The emergence and rapid expansion of digital platforms and social media have introduced new and powerful dynamics into the relationship between media and political polarisation. Algorithms designed to maximise engagement systematically amplify content that is contentious, emotionally charged, or ideologically polarising, since such content generates higher rates of interaction and, consequently, greater advertising revenue (Aral, 2021; Bakshy et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2018). This political economy of attention creates structural incentives for conflict-driven content that operate independently of, and

reinforce, the partisan editorial pressures produced by ownership structures in legacy media. The related phenomenon of echo chambers, in which selective exposure to algorithmically curated content reinforces pre-existing beliefs and reduces engagement with contrary perspectives, has been extensively debated in the literature, with research offering mixed conclusions about the extent and consequences of ideological segregation in digital environments (Barberá, 2020; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Stroud, 2011).

In African contexts, including Ghana, the consequences of digital media expansion for political polarisation are mediated by local factors including uneven digital access, variable media literacy, and the particular dynamics of mobile-first connectivity and social media reliance (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Sanny & Selormey, 2020). Social media influencers, bloggers, and digital activists have emerged as significant actors in Ghana's political communication ecosystem, particularly among younger audiences, amplifying and extending the reach of political narratives produced elsewhere in the media system (Tawiah, 2025; von Sikorski et al., 2025). Crucially, the digital media environment does not simply replicate the polarisation dynamics of legacy media, it also accelerates and intensifies them, extending the lifespan of conflict-driven narratives, enabling the rapid spread of misinformation, and creating new opportunities for politically motivated actors to target and mobilise specific audience segments.

Misinformation, Information Disorder, and Electoral Integrity

The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation across digital media platforms has emerged as a significant and cross-cutting concern for democratic governance, public discourse, and media credibility. Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) influential framework of information disorder distinguishes between misinformation, content that is false but not deliberately deceptive, disinformation, content that is false and deliberately so, and malinformation, content that is factually grounded but deployed with intent to harm. These distinctions are analytically important because they point toward different causal mechanisms and, consequently, different intervention strategies. The electoral context is particularly significant. The false claims about candidates, voting processes, and election results can reshape voter perceptions, depress or inflate turnout, and undermine the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, with consequences that extend well beyond the media system itself (Dahlke & Hancock, 2022; Suherman et al., 2026).

The spread of misinformation is shaped by structural conditions, including uneven digital literacy, mobile-first media consumption, and the circulation of unverified content through closed messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, particularly in African contexts (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Adisa et al., 2024). Research specifically on Ghana's 2020 general elections documents how social media deepened political divisions, particularly through the spread of false information about voting dates, electoral procedures, and preliminary results (Boateng et al., 2024). Responses to misinformation in the Ghanaian and wider African context have centred on fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programmes, though evidence on their effectiveness remains mixed, with research suggesting that the combination of both approaches is more effective than either pursued in isolation (Matanji et al., 2024; Hameleers, 2022).

Journalistic Norms, Professionalism, and the Ethics-Employment Tension

Professional norms of objectivity, balance, accuracy, and fairness are widely regarded as foundational to journalism's democratic function, providing the shared standards against which media performance can be evaluated and held accountable. Yet a substantial body of research demonstrates that these norms are neither universal nor consistently applied, but are shaped by the institutional, economic, and political

contexts in which journalists work (Gibrilu, 2023; Schmidt, 2024). In African media contexts, professional norms are further complicated by the tension between Western-derived models of journalistic objectivity and local ways of knowing and communicating that do not always map cleanly onto those models (Gibrilu, 2023). The result is a landscape in which formal professional codes coexist with significant variation in actual practice, and in which the stated commitments of journalists and media organisations frequently diverge from their observable conduct.

Of particular relevance to this study is what the literature characterises as the ethics-employment tension, the structural condition in which journalists' awareness of professional standards is undermined by the economic and political pressures of the newsroom environments in which they operate. Herzog (2022) describes a media system in which high-minded professional ideals sit alongside financial constraints and power relationships, forcing journalists into constant negotiation between what they know they ought to do and what they are institutionally permitted or economically incentivised to do. In Ghana, this tension is exacerbated by the combination of low journalist remuneration, high employment insecurity, and the direct or indirect pressure of politically affiliated ownership, producing conditions in which professional autonomy is structurally compromised even among journalists who are fully aware of the standards they are failing to meet (Amadu et al., 2023; Danso, 2025).

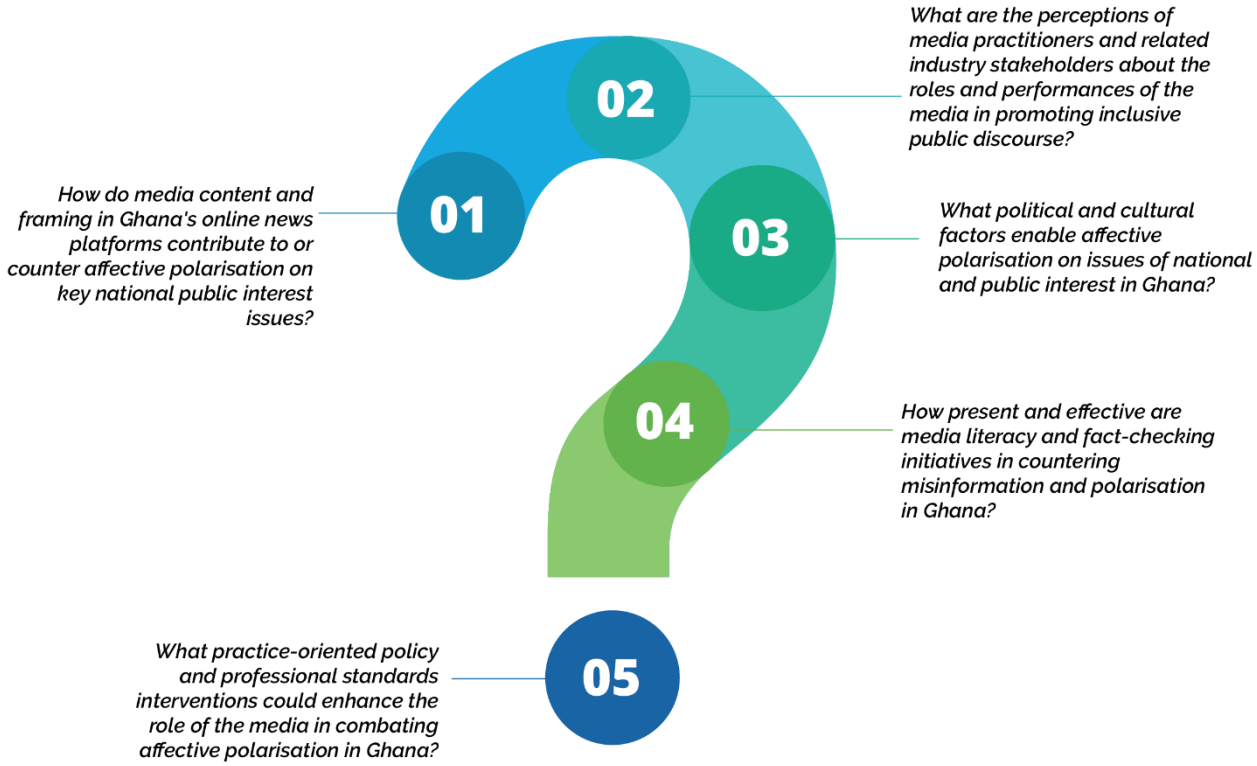
Audience Fragmentation, Selective Exposure, and Media Trust

The fragmentation of media audiences along lines of partisanship, identity, and platform preference has been identified as both a consequence and a driver of media polarisation. Selective exposure theory, drawing on Frey's (1986) foundational work on information avoidance and subsequently extended by Stroud (2011) in her analysis of niche news consumption, proposes that audiences actively seek out media content that confirms their existing beliefs and avoid content that challenges them, a pattern that is reinforced and accelerated by the algorithmic curation of digital media feeds. In Ghana, Abubakar's (2013) concept of selective believability adapts this framework to African contexts, arguing that audiences assess the credibility of media content through the lens of local norms and lived experience, producing trust hierarchies that are shaped as much by community identity and social context as by formal indicators of journalistic quality. Recent research by Amponsah and Okyere (2024) confirms that political orientation, education, and age all significantly influence Ghanaian audiences' evaluation and verification of news content.

Media trust in Ghana is characterised by a complex and differentiated landscape in which credibility is not uniformly assigned to institutions or platforms but is calibrated at the level of individual journalists, programme formats, and specific outlets (Acquaye & Ofosu-Boateng, 2021). Research consistently finds lower levels of trust in social media relative to established broadcast and print outlets, but even within legacy media, trust varies significantly according to perceived ownership and partisan alignment. These audience dynamics have important implications for understanding how polarisation operates: in a media environment where audiences actively construct personalised credibility hierarchies and engage in selective verification, the impact of polarising content is neither uniform nor straightforwardly determined by what media organisations produce.

Research Questions

The study is guided by five research questions that collectively address the structural, institutional, experiential, and practical dimensions of media polarisation in Ghana. Together, they are designed to produce an integrated account of how polarisation operates across the media system, from the content that media organisations produce to the conditions that enable it, the audiences that receive it, and the interventions that might most effectively address it. The questions, and the rationale and method underpinning each, are set out below.



1. *How do media content and framing in Ghana's online news platforms contribute to or counter affective polarisation on key national public interest issues?*

The question is premised on the recognition that polarisation is produced not only by deliberate partisan intent but also through the cumulative effect of routine editorial choices about framing, sourcing, and narrative emphasis. It also takes seriously the possibility, suggested by the background literature on procedural objectivity, that professionally responsible reporting may not, of itself, mitigate polarising outcomes. This question is addressed through the content analysis strand of the study, which codes items published on the online portals of four purposively selected Ghanaian media outlets using a Polarisation Index instrument designed to measure framing type, source diversity, tone, and polarisation potential.

2. ***What are the perceptions of media practitioners and related industry stakeholders about the roles and performances of the media in promoting inclusive public discourse?***

   This question draws on the literature on journalistic role conceptions and professional norms (Gibrilu, 2023; Herzog, 2022), which demonstrates that the gap between what journalists believe their role to be and what they are institutionally enabled to do is a significant driver of the divergence between professional ideals and actual media practice. It is also informed by the political economy of media literature (Prat & Stromberg, 2013; Cage, 2016), which situates journalistic behaviour within the structural constraints of ownership, economic precarity, and regulatory environment. By seeking the perspectives of media practitioners, managers, regulatory actors, academics, and civil society stakeholders, the question aims to produce an institutional and explanatory account of the conditions that shape media performance in Ghana. It is addressed through the key informant interview strand of the study, which draws on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with respondents drawn from across the media industry and related stakeholder communities.

3. ***What political and cultural factors enable affective polarisation on issues of national and public interest in Ghana?***

   The question considers both macro-level structural enablers, such as ownership arrangements, regulatory weaknesses, and electoral dynamics, and micro-level cultural factors, like social norms, identity-based communication, and audience behaviour, which influence how polarisation emerges and is moderated in practice. It is explored through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, offering both institutional insights and experiential accounts of the political and cultural conditions that facilitate or mitigate affective polarisation in Ghana.

4. ***How present and effective are media literacy and fact-checking initiatives in countering misinformation and polarisation in Ghana?***

   This question is informed by the growing body of research on information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and the scholarly debate on the effectiveness of fact-checking and media literacy interventions as responses to misinformation and polarisation (Matanji et al., 2024; Hameleers, 2022). The literature suggests that fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programmes are more effective when deployed in combination than when pursued in isolation, and that their impact is shaped significantly by the broader media environment and audience characteristics in which they operate. This question is addressed through the media literacy resources, and through the key informant interviews, which canvass the perspectives of practitioners and stakeholders on the current state and limitations of these initiatives.

5. ***What practice-oriented policy and professional standards interventions could enhance the role of the media in combating affective polarisation in Ghana?***

   This question moves from diagnosis to prescription, seeking to derive from the evidence produced by the study a set of actionable recommendations addressed to media practitioners, regulatory bodies, civil society organisations, and policymakers. It is informed by the literature on media regulation (Karanicolas & Kwoka, 2022; Stockmann, 2023), professional development in journalism (Appiah-Adjei, 2025; Muringa & Adjin-Tettey, 2025), and the broader argument, advanced by scholars of peace journalism and constructive journalism, that depolarising media practice requires not only ethical awareness but structural enablement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design that integrated three complementary methods of data collection and analysis: a systematic content analysis of online news content, key informant interviews with media professionals and related stakeholders, and focus group discussions with diverse audience groups. The design is convergent in orientation, in that all three methods were implemented within the same study period and their findings subsequently brought into dialogue through triangulation, rather than sequentially with the output of one informing the design of the next. This approach was chosen because the research questions are heterogeneous, addressing the structural, institutional, experiential, and practical dimensions of media polarisation that no single method could adequately capture. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) observe, mixed-methods designs are particularly appropriate when the phenomenon under study is complex and when evidence from multiple sources is needed to produce a comprehensive and credible account.

The triangulation of evidence across the three strands is the methodological core of the study. Each strand contributed a distinct analytical perspective: the content analysis provided systematic, replicable measurement of polarisation at the level of media output; the key informant interviews furnished institutional explanation grounded in the knowledge and experience of those who produce and regulate the media; and the focus group discussions supplied experiential testimony from the audiences whose perceptions, trust hierarchies, and verification practices shape how media content is received and how its polarising effects are mediated in practice. Where evidence converged across strands, findings were treated as robust. Where strands diverged, the divergence itself was treated as analytically significant and examined rather than resolved.

Content Analysis

Selection of outlets

Four online news platforms were purposively selected to represent the diversity of media types operating within Ghana's digital news environment. The selection criteria were guided by three considerations: the size and audience reach of the outlet within Ghana's national news space; the outlet's observed tendency or inclination to act as an echo chamber for particular political perspectives; and the diversity of audience interests and preferences that the four platforms collectively represent. The selected outlets were Graphic Online, the digital platform of Ghana's leading state-owned newspaper; 3News, the online portal of the major private television broadcaster TV3; Citi Newsroom, a digital-first platform linked to broadcast media; and ModernGhana, a digital-only news aggregator. Together, these four outlets span the range of media types relevant to Ghana's online news ecosystem, encompassing

state-affiliated legacy media, commercially owned broadcast-linked media, digital-first journalism, and aggregator-based content distribution. Table 1 below summarises the outlets and the volume of items coded from each.

Table 1: Content analysis outlets and items coded

Media outlet	Type	Items coded
Graphic Online	Newspaper (online)	28
3News / TV3	Television (online)	39
Citi Newsroom	Digital-first (broadcast-linked)	43
ModernGhana	Digital-only aggregator	6
Total		**116**

Item counts reflect all articles coded within the 14-day sampling window per outlet that met the inclusion criteria for substantive portrayal of polarising issues.

Coding instrument and Polarisation Index

Each item was coded using a structured coding instrument developed for the study, which required coders to record or classify units of content according to a supplied coding scheme covering eight variable clusters, labelled A to H, addressing respectively the outlet and publication date, the issue or topic of the item, the primary framing type, the sourcing profile, the tone of coverage, the presence or absence of dialogic or solution-oriented elements, the language and rhetorical devices employed, and the overall polarisation potential of the item. The instrument was applied to each item in its entirety, with coders required to answer all variable queries before moving to the next item.

From the scores recorded across sections D, F, and G of the coding instrument, a composite Polarisation Index was computed for each item. The index ranges from 0 to 42, with higher scores indicating more polarising content and lower scores indicating more unifying content. The five classificatory bands of the index, and their interpretation, are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Polarisation Index classification bands

Score range	Classification	Interpretation
00 - 12	**Highly Unifying**	Content strongly promotes cohesion, dialogue, and inclusive civic engagement
13 - 20	**Moderately Unifying**	Content promotes dialogue, inclusion, or shared civic values to a notable degree
21 - 28	**Neutral**	Content neither strongly polarises nor unifies; balanced or ambiguous framing
29 - 36	**Moderately Polarising**	Content displays notable partisan framing but with some counterbalancing elements
37 - 42	**Highly Polarising**	Content strongly reinforces partisan divisions, hostility, or exclusion

The index was applied consistently across all four outlets, used to rank content from polarising to unifying, and to compare platforms and issue areas within the dataset.

Sampling and coding period

Within each of the four online portals, coders identified and coded all items that met the inclusion criterion of direct presence and substantive portrayal of polarising issues or topics. Relevant issue areas included politics and elections, ideology, security, ethnicity, and religion. Items were eligible for inclusion if the issue or topic to which they related had recently received high media attention and attracted strong public opinion. Coding commenced from the date of the first occurrence or reporting of the relevant event or issue and continued for a period of 14 consecutive days, during which the event or issue was at its most topical in terms of media coverage and public commentary. In total, 116 items were coded across the four platforms within the study period.

Key Informant Interviews

Respondent selection and composition

Seven key informant interviews were conducted with respondents drawn from across the media industry and related stakeholder communities in Ghana. Respondents were purposively selected to ensure inclusiveness of perspectives from the diversity of roles, institutional contexts, and media types relevant to the study's questions. The selection was guided by the principle that the respondent pool should collectively represent the full range of actors whose knowledge, experience, and perspectives bear on how polarisation is produced, enabled, regulated, and experienced in the Ghanaian media. Table 3 below summarises the composition of the KII respondent group.

Table 3: Key informant interview respondents

	Role	Institutional context	Analytical contribution
1	Media manager	Public broadcaster	Senior editorial leadership; national media
2	Media manager	Private broadcaster	Senior editorial leadership; commercial media
3	Journalist	Private broadcaster	Practising reporter; political and governance beat
4	Journalist	Online platform	Practising reporter; digital media
5	Senior official, journalism practitioners' association	Professional association	Industry leadership; professional standards
6	Academic	University	Political communication; Media studies
7	Religious leader / media consumer	Faith community	Civil society; audience perspective

Respondent identities are anonymised in the analysis. Institutional affiliations are described in general terms to protect confidentiality while preserving the analytical context of each respondent's perspective.

The respondent group encompasses two media managers drawn from public and private broadcasting respectively, two practising journalists from private broadcast and online platforms, a senior official of a national association of journalism practitioners in Ghana, an academic with expertise in media studies and political communication, and a religious leader whose participation provided both a civil society perspective and an audience-level counterpoint to the practitioner and institutional views represented

by the other respondents. No more than one respondent was drawn from any single media institution, and the group collectively spans public, private, and community media, both online and offline.

Interview administration and analysis

Interviews were conducted in English, in person wherever possible, and via Zoom where in-person meeting was not feasible. Each interview lasted between 45 and 55 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed for the study. The guide was designed to elicit responses on respondents' understandings of the nature and extent of media polarisation in Ghana, the structural and institutional conditions that enable it, the role of ownership, regulation, and professional standards, the behaviour of audiences, and the interventions that might most effectively address the problem. Interviewers used probes and follow-up questions as appropriate to deepen responses and pursue emergent themes. With the informed consent of respondents, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in full.

Transcripts were subjected to systematic axial coding to distil responses, identify common and contrary experiences and expectations, and develop and refine emergent themes across the respondent group. The identities of respondents are anonymised throughout the analysis, with respondents identified by number and general role category rather than by name or specific institutional affiliation. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to identify the higher-order thematic patterns that cut across individual interviews, and to map areas of convergence and divergence across the respondent group.

Focus Group Discussions

Group composition and selection

Five focus group discussions were conducted with purposively sampled audience groups drawn from different demographic clusters. The composition of each group was guided by the principle of internal demographic consistency, to facilitate meaningful discussion among participants with broadly similar backgrounds and media habits, while the five groups collectively reflect a high degree of inter-group diversity across the key demographic dimensions relevant to the study. The six demographic cluster dimensions specified in the study design, namely age, location, gender, education, media habits, and occupation, are all represented across the five groups, with each group differentiated primarily by one or two defining characteristics. Each group comprised between five and eight participants. Table 4 below summarises the profile of each focus group.

Table 4: Focus group discussion profiles

	Group profile	Age cluster	Location	Media habits
1	Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience	18 - 34 years	Urban	Traditional media users
2	English-speaking / digitally oriented youth	18 - 34 years	Urban	Active social media users
3	Mixed / structured media consumers	35 - 60 years	Urban / peri-urban	Mixed platform users
4	Politically attentive citizens	35 - 60 years	Urban	Mixed platform users
5	Diverse occupations	18 - 60 years	Urban	Mixed platform users

All five focus group discussions were conducted in Accra. Groups 1 and 3 included participants from peri-urban communities within the Greater Accra region.

Administration and analysis

All five focus group discussions were conducted in person, with each session lasting between 80 and 110 minutes. Sessions were facilitated using a discussion guide developed for the study, structured around the key themes of media consumption habits, perceptions of media bias and polarisation, trust and credibility hierarchies, awareness of misinformation, and normative expectations of the media's role in public life. Facilitators used probes and follow-up questions to deepen discussion and ensure that all participants had the opportunity to contribute. Sessions were conducted in the language preferred by participants: Groups 1 and 3 were conducted primarily in Twi, while Groups 2, 4, and 5 were conducted in English. With the informed consent of participants, all sessions were audio-recorded and accompanied by detailed facilitator notes.

Audio recordings were transcribed and the resulting data subjected to systematic thematic analysis following a two-stage coding process. In the first stage, open coding was applied to each transcript to identify descriptive codes capturing the range of themes, experiences, and perspectives expressed by participants. In the second stage, axial coding was applied to cluster these descriptive codes into higher-order thematic categories and to identify the patterns of convergence and divergence both within and across groups. The resulting thematic codes were then used to develop a cross-group synthesis that identifies the audience-level findings most relevant to the study's research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social research. Informed consent was obtained from all key informant interview respondents and all focus group discussion participants prior to the commencement of data collection. Respondents and participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to protect the confidentiality of their contributions. All audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely and accessible only to members of the research team. The identities of key informant interview respondents are anonymised throughout the analysis and reporting of findings, and focus group participants are not individually identified in the data or the report. No personally identifiable information is included in any published output of the study.

Triangulation of Findings

The findings from the three data strands were brought into systematic dialogue through a structured triangulation process. This involved, first, the development of a thematic coding framework derived inductively from the data across all three strands and used to identify common analytical themes. Second, for each identified theme, the evidence from each strand was examined separately and then compared to determine the nature and degree of convergence or divergence across strands. Third, the direction and meaning of both convergences and divergences were interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks established in the Background section, and the implications for the study's research questions and recommendations were drawn out. This triangulation process is reported in full in the Triangulated Findings section of the report, which constitutes the analytical core of the study and from which the Discussion and Recommendations sections are derived.

Findings

Content Analysis Findings

This section presents the findings of the systematic content analysis of 116 items published across the online portals of four Ghanaian media outlets, namely Graphic Online, 3News/TV3, Citi Newsroom, and ModernGhana, over a 14-day coding period. The findings are organised around four dimensions: the scope and distribution of coverage across outlets; the intensity of polarisation as measured by the Polarisation Index; the distribution of framing types and their relationship to polarisation scores; and the dominant sourcing patterns at the level of individual outlets.

Scope and Distribution of Coverage

The volume of coverage varied across outlets, with Citi Newsroom and 3News/TV3 accounting for the largest share of items analysed, reflecting their prominence as agenda-setting platforms within Ghana's digital news environment, particularly during periods of heightened political activity. Graphic Online contributed 28 items across two coding rounds, while ModernGhana, a content aggregator with a comparatively narrower editorial focus on politically charged topics, yielded the smallest sample of six items. Although the distribution of items is uneven across platforms, the dataset provides sufficient diversity across media types encompassing state-affiliated newspaper media, privately owned broadcast-linked platforms, a digital-first outlet, and a digital-only aggregator to enable meaningful comparison of polarisation patterns.

Table 5: Distribution of Coded Items by Media Outlet and Type

Media outlet	Media type	Coding rounds	Items coded	Share of dataset
Citi Newsroom	Digital-first (broadcast-linked)	1	43	37.1%
3News / TV3	Television (online)	1	39	33.6%
Graphic Online	Newspaper (online, state-affiliated)	2	28	24.1%
ModernGhana	Digital-only aggregator	1	6	5.2%
Total			**116**	**100%**

Intensity of Polarisation across Media Outlets

Analysis of the Polarisation Index reveals clear and consistent differences in polarisation intensity across the four outlets. As illustrated in Figure 1 and summarised in Table 6 below, digital-first and digital-only platforms record markedly higher mean polarisation scores than legacy media outlets. ModernGhana and Citi Newsroom are the most polarising on average, while Graphic Online and 3News/TV3 exhibit comparatively lower mean scores.

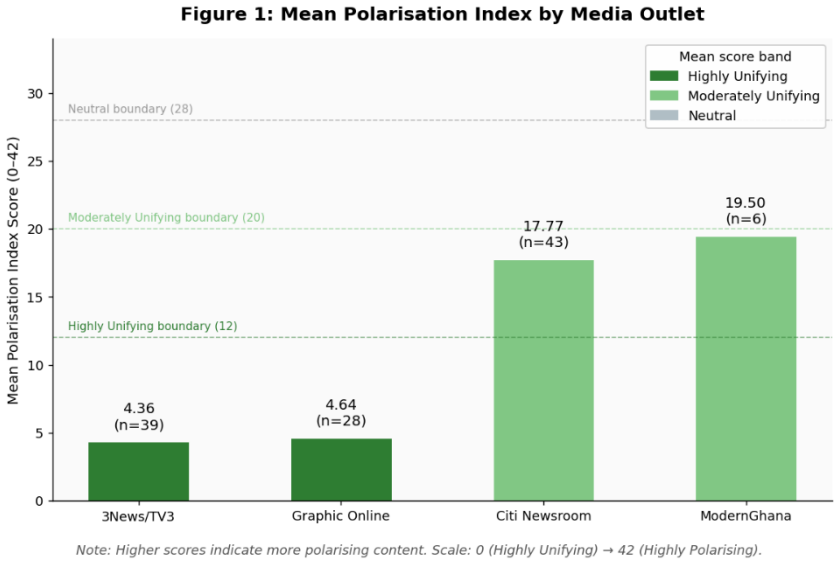


Figure 1: Mean Polarisation Index by Media Outlet (Ghana)

Table 6: Mean Polarisation Index and item count by media outlet

Media outlet	Mean Polarisation Index	Number of items
3News (TV3)	4.36	39
Graphic Online	4.64	28
Citi Newsroom	17.77	43
ModernGhana	19.50	6

Higher scores indicate more polarising content on the 0–42 index scale.

These differences are not merely a matter of degree but reflect qualitatively distinct coverage logics across outlet types. Graphic Online records the lowest mean score of the four outlets, placing it within the Highly Unifying band. This does not indicate genuinely dialogic or constructive journalism: the low score reflects the systematic absence of hostile tone, source imbalance, and identity-based polarisation markers that the instrument captures. Coverage is procedurally restrained and elite-centred, generating what the analysis characterises as procedural unification: an appearance of balance produced by official-source dominance, restrained tone, and the avoidance of explicit partisan framing, rather than by any active promotion of dialogue, inclusion, or civic engagement. As the analysis demonstrates, the dominance of official and institutional sources constructs an elite-centred version of public affairs in which governance is presented as a purely institutional process, systematically excluding community voices, civil society perspectives, and pathways for resolution.

3News/TV3 also falls within the Highly Unifying band, with a mean score of 4.36. Like Graphic Online, this score reflects the limited hostile tone and restrained partisan framing of the content as coded, rather than any positive promotion of dialogue or inclusion. Coverage is characterised by a personalised and confrontational editorial style, placing emphasis on political actors as individuals and foregrounding government and opposition voices through interviews, soundbites, and reactive commentary. The format positions political rivalry and blame attribution as the organising logic of coverage, yet the absence of strongly hostile language, stereotyping, or identity-based polarisation markers keeps scores within the

Highly Unifying range. Citi Newsroom, which records the highest item count of the four outlets, has a mean PI score of 17.77, placing it in the Moderately Unifying band, the highest of the four outlets. The relatively higher score reflects more varied sourcing and framing than the legacy platforms, though the speed-driven, high-volume production model, characterised by sequential reporting structured around accusation, response, and counter-response, leaves limited room for contextualisation or conciliation. ModernGhana has the highest mean PI score of the four outlets, at 19.50, also placing it in the Moderately Unifying band, though its small sample of six items shows the widest dispersion across index bands, including the only item in the dataset to reach the Moderately Polarising threshold. As a content aggregator with comparatively weaker editorial gatekeeping, ModernGhana functions less as an independent news producer than as a platform that reproduces and extends conflict-laden narratives generated elsewhere in the media system, amplifying their reach and prolonging their lifespan.

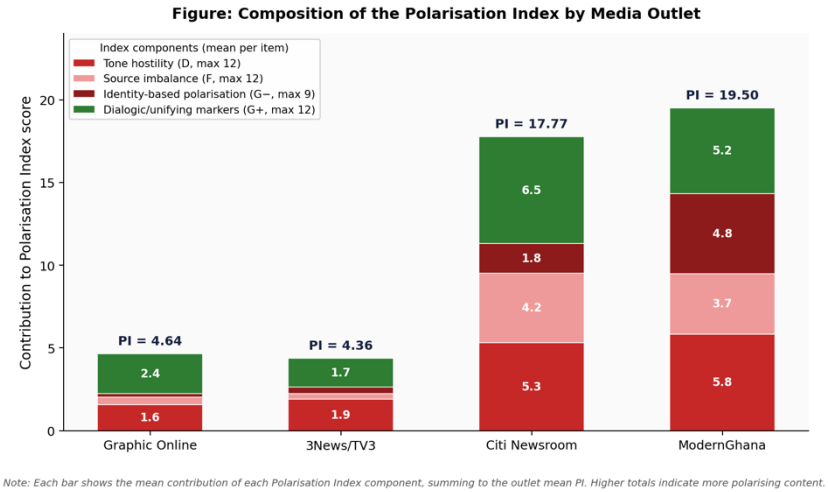


Figure 2: Composition of the Polarisation Index by Media Outlet (Ghana)

Figure 2 puts the mean Polarisation Index score for each outlet into its constituent elements: tone hostility, source imbalance, identity-based polarisation markers, and dialogic or unifying content. This breakdown clarifies that the differences between outlets are not simply differences of degree on a single scale, but differences in the underlying mix of content characteristics. Graphic Online and 3News/TV3 score low across all four components, reflecting a generally restrained, procedural style of coverage. Citi Newsroom's higher overall score is driven by a more even spread across tone, source balance, and dialogic content, consistent with its more varied editorial mix. ModernGhana stands out for its identity-based polarisation component, which is markedly higher than for any other outlet and is the largest single contributor to its overall score, and is the clearest indication in the data of where ModernGhana's coverage departs most sharply from the other three platforms.

Distribution of Polarisation Patterns by Outlet

Beyond average scores, the distribution of Polarisation Index bands across outlets provides further insight into outlet-level tendencies. Figure 3 shows the proportion of items falling within each polarisation band for each of the four outlets.

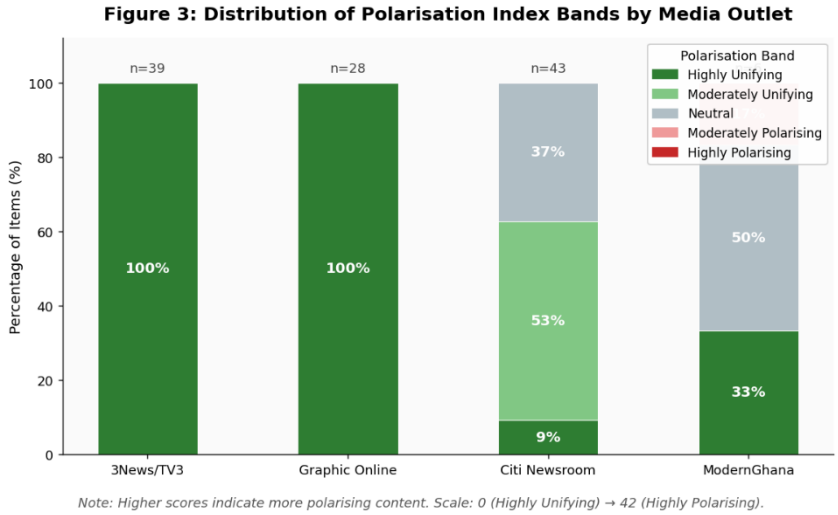


Figure 3: Distribution of Polarisation Index Bands by Media Outlet

Coverage by Graphic Online and 3News/TV3 is highly consistent, with the overwhelming majority of items falling within the Highly Unifying band. This uniformity does not, however, indicate dialogic or constructive journalism; rather, it reflects the comparatively low scores generated by these outlets on the tone, source diversity, and identity-based polarisation variables, consistent with the procedural and elite-source-centred character of their coverage. Citi Newsroom exhibits greater variation, with content distributed across the Moderately Unifying and Neutral bands, reflecting the platform's mix of conflict-heavy accountability reporting and more contextualised, explanatory pieces. ModernGhana, despite its small sample, shows the widest dispersion, with items distributed across the Highly Unifying, Neutral, and Moderately Polarising bands, including the only item in the dataset to reach the Moderately Polarising threshold. This variability is consistent with the platform's role as a content aggregator, in which the polarisation level of reproduced content varies with what is being circulated at any given time.

Framing Choices and Polarisation

Framing analysis clarifies the mechanisms through which polarisation is produced across outlets. As illustrated in Figure 4 and documented in Table 7 below, human-interest framing is the narrative mode most strongly and consistently associated with highly polarising content across the dataset.

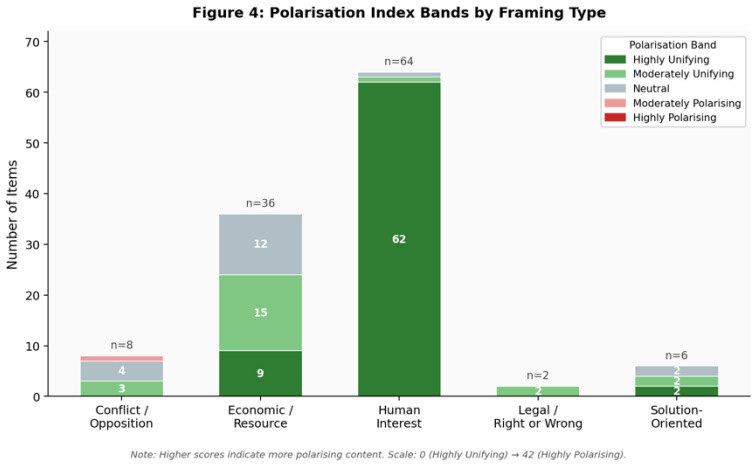


Figure 4: Polarisation Index Bands by Framing Type

Table 7: Polarisation Index bands by issue framing type (frequency distribution)

Issue framing type	Polarisation index band	Frequency
Conflict / Opposition	Moderately Unifying	3
Conflict / Opposition	Moderately Polarising	1
Conflict / Opposition	Neutral	4
Economic / Resource	Highly Unifying	9
Economic / Resource	Moderately Unifying	15
Economic / Resource	Neutral	12
Human Interest	Highly Unifying	62
Human Interest	Moderately Unifying	1
Human Interest	Neutral	1
Legal / Right or Wrong	Moderately Unifying	2
Solution-Oriented	Highly Unifying	2
Solution-Oriented	Moderately Unifying	2
Solution-Oriented	Neutral	2

Human Interest framing accounts for 62 of 64 items in the Highly Unifying band across the full dataset.

Stories that personalise political issues, foreground elite grievances, or dramatise conflict between political actors tend to generate the lowest Polarisation Index scores regardless of outlet, reflecting the instrument's sensitivity to the absence of source diversity, dialogic tone, and constructive framing rather than the presence of inflammatory rhetoric alone. Of the 64 items classified within the Highly Unifying band across the full dataset, 62 employed human-interest framing. Economic and resource-related frames display a more mixed pattern across polarisation bands, suggesting that issues of economic governance are not inherently polarising but become so depending on the narrative emphasis and source selection choices that accompany their coverage. Solution-oriented framing is rare across all four outlets and, where it does appear, does not consistently correspond with lower polarisation scores. This finding is significant: the presence of ostensibly constructive or forward-looking framing does not, in itself, counteract the polarising effects of the broader narrative structure within which it is embedded.

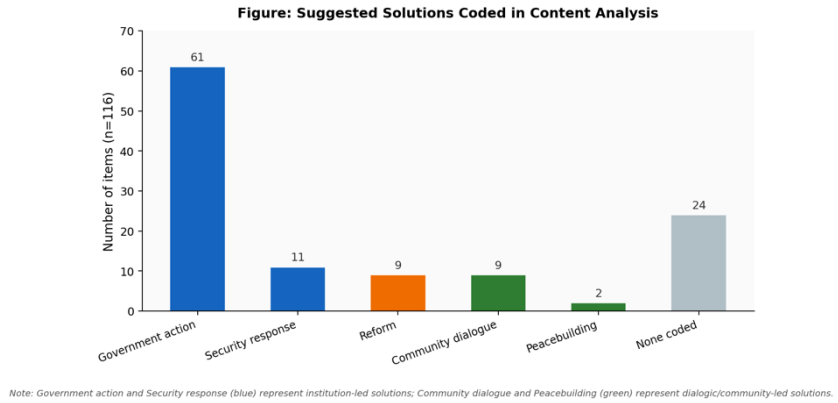


Figure 5: Suggested Solutions Coded in Content Analysis

Figure 5 provides additional detail on the "suggested solutions" dimension of coverage, coded for 92 of the 116 items in the dataset. The most common solution type by a wide margin is government action, accounting for 61 items, followed by security responses (11 items) and calls for reform (9 items). Community dialogue and peacebuilding approaches each appear least frequently, at 9 and 2 items respectively. This pattern refines the finding above: it is not that solutions are absent from coverage, but that the solutions presented are overwhelmingly framed as the responsibility of government and security institutions, with comparatively little space given to dialogue-based or community-led approaches to resolving the issues being reported on. This narrow framing of "who solves problems" is itself a feature of the elite-centred news logic identified in this report, and helps explain why the presence of a "solution" in a story does not, on its own, make that story more dialogic or unifying.

A further finding of significance concerns the relationship between professional reporting norms and Polarisation Index scores. Items coded as professionally responsible, meaning characterised by factual tone, appropriate attribution, and balance between opposing elite actors, do not score higher on the Polarisation Index than less formally responsible content. This pattern is most evident in the Graphic Online and 3News/TV3 datasets, both of which score in the Highly Unifying band despite employing elite-source-dominant, conflict-centred coverage. The finding points to a significant tension: procedural compliance with journalistic norms does not in itself generate the substantive source diversity, contextual depth, or dialogic framing that higher Polarisation Index scores reflect.

Subject Matter and Blame Attribution

The content analysis also coded each item for its primary subject matter and, where attribution was made, for who or what was held responsible. These two variables were not addressed in the framing analysis above but provide a further lens on where polarisation concentrates in the dataset.

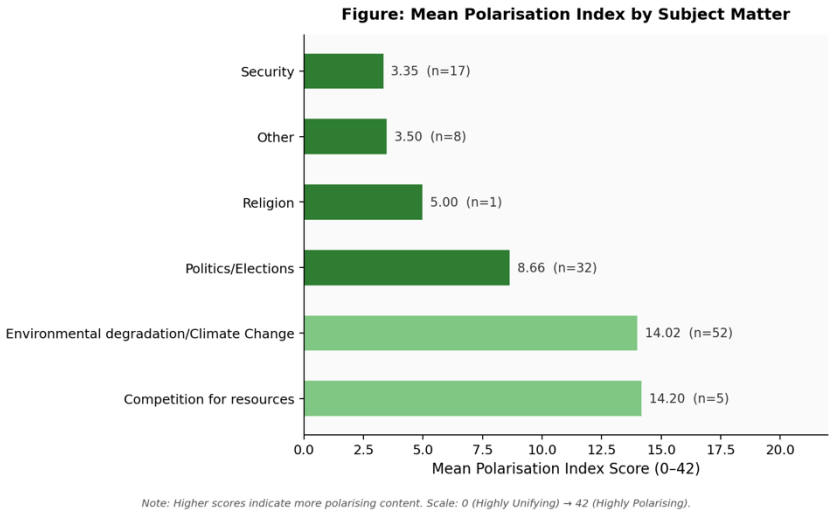


Figure 6: Mean Polarisation Index by Subject Matter

Figure 6 shows that environmental degradation and climate change is both the largest single subject-matter category in the dataset, accounting for 52 of the 115 items for which subject matter was coded (one item in the full dataset of 116 has no subject-matter code), and the category with the highest mean Polarisation Index score (14.02), alongside the smaller category of competition for resources (14.20, n=5). Both of these resource-related categories score nearly twice as high as politics and elections coverage (8.66, n=32), and considerably higher than security-related coverage (3.35, n=17). This is a notable finding: in this dataset, the subject matter most strongly associated with higher Polarisation Index scores is not party politics but the reporting of environmental and resource governance issues, most

likely reflecting coverage of illegal mining (known in local parlance as *galamsey*) and related disputes. This suggests that efforts to address media polarisation in Ghana should not focus solely on explicitly partisan political coverage, but should also attend to how environmental and resource-related stories are framed and sourced.

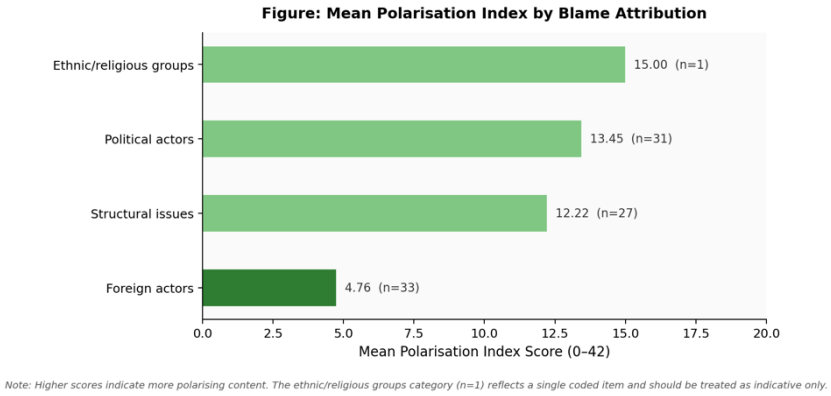


Figure 7: Mean Polarisation Index by Blame Attribution

Figure 7 examines the 92 items in which blame for the issue being reported was explicitly attributed. Items attributing blame to political actors score highest on the Polarisation Index (13.45, n=31), followed closely by items attributing blame to structural issues (12.22, n=27). Items attributing blame to foreign actors, a category that in this dataset corresponds closely to coverage of foreign nationals involved in illegal mining, score considerably lower (4.76, n=33). Read together with Figure 6, this suggests that coverage of environmental and resource issues, while frequent and comparatively high-scoring overall, divides into two distinct patterns: stories that attribute the problem to foreign actors tend toward the unifying end of the scale, while stories that attribute it to political actors or to unspecified structural failures tend toward the more polarising end. The single item attributing blame to ethnic or religious groups scored 15.00, above the politics/elections average but below the political-actor and structural-issue averages. With only one item in this category, this figure is indicative rather than conclusive, but it does not contradict the broader pattern observed for the other categories.

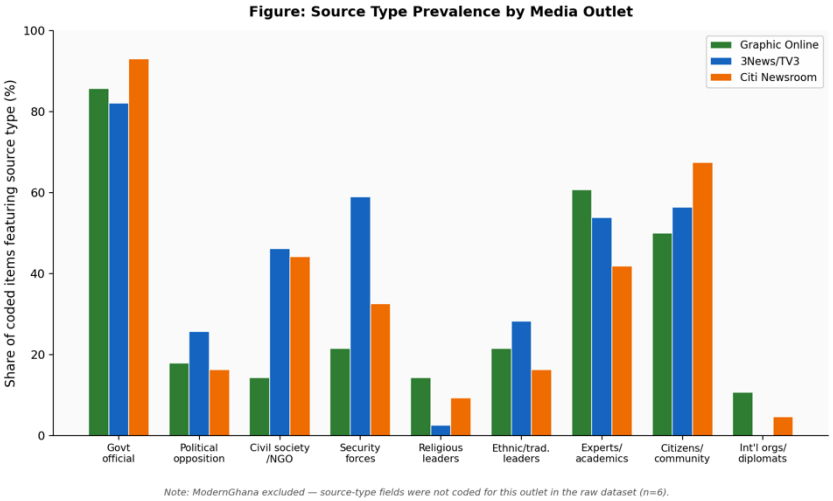


Figure 8: Comparative Source Type Prevalence by Media Outlet

Before turning to the outlet-by-outlet framing and sourcing profiles below, Figure 8 places the source-type data for Graphic Online, 3News/TV3, and Citi Newsroom side by side. (ModernGhana is not included in this comparison, as source-type fields were not coded for this outlet in the available data.)

The comparison makes clear that government officials are the dominant source category for all three outlets, appearing in 82–93% of items, with Citi Newsroom relying on government sources most heavily of the three. Citizens and community members are the second most prominent source category across all three outlets, appearing most frequently in Citi Newsroom coverage (67%) and least in Graphic Online (50%). Civil society and security force sources show the greatest variation between outlets: 3News/TV3 makes substantially more use of both civil society (46%) and security force sources (59%) than Graphic Online does (14% and 21% respectively). Despite these differences in the breadth of sourcing, government officials remain the single most cited source type across all three outlets by a wide margin, reinforcing the elite-centred sourcing pattern identified throughout this report.

Dominant Frames and Sourcing Patterns by Outlet

Graphic Online

Coverage by Graphic Online is overwhelmingly characterised by human-interest framing, with only a negligible presence of solution-oriented or conflict/opposition frames. As shown in Figure 9, stories frequently centre on individual experiences, allegations, and institutional actions, narrated through personalised accounts of wrongdoing or accountability processes. The near-absence of solution-oriented framing reflects limited editorial emphasis on pathways for resolution or reconciliation.

Figure: Dominant Frames in Graphic Online

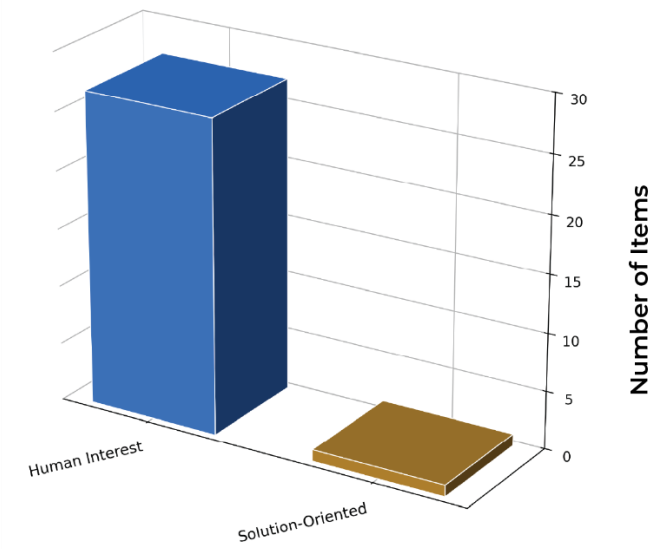


Figure 9: Dominant Framing Profile, Graphic Online

Sourcing at Graphic Online is heavily concentrated in government officials, who appear in approximately 86% of analysed items, as shown in Figure 10. Expert and academic sources feature with moderate frequency, while citizen voices appear in approximately half of the coverage. Civil society organisations, religious leaders, and international actors appear far less frequently. This sourcing configuration reflects an institution-centred news logic in which authority and formal expertise are systematically privileged over community, civil society, or pluralistic perspectives.

Figure: Sourcing Patterns in Graphic Online

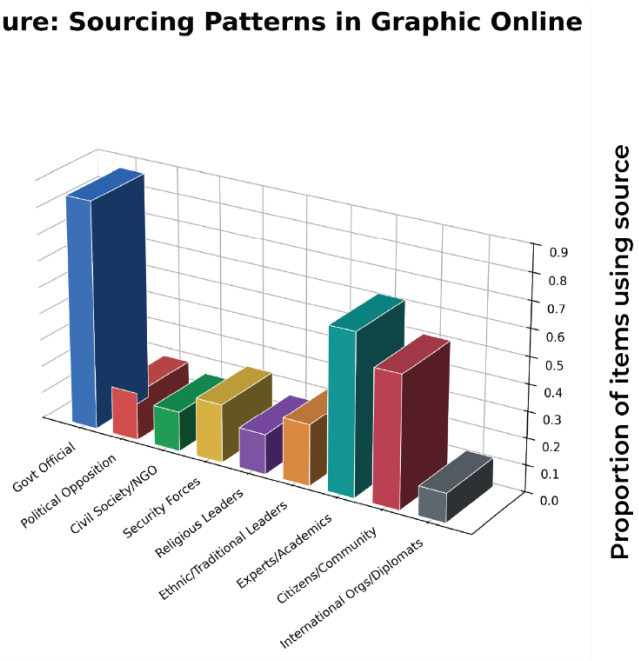


Figure 10: Source Types, Graphic Online

3News / TV3

3News coverage is similarly dominated by human-interest framing, accounting for the vast majority of items analysed. Economic and resource-based frames appear occasionally, while solution-oriented framing is marginal. The emphasis on human interest in a broadcast-linked platform reflects the outlet's storytelling orientation, which foregrounds personalities, grievances, and political contestation through interviews and soundbites.

Figure: Dominant Frames in 3News (TV3)

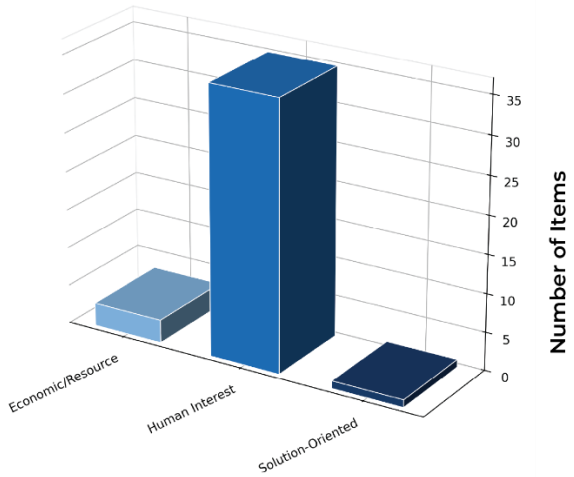


Figure 11: Dominant Framing Profile, 3News/TV3

3News exhibits a relatively broader sourcing mix than Graphic Online. Government officials remain the most frequently cited source, appearing in approximately 84% of items, but the outlet also makes substantive use of security forces, civil society organisations, expert voices, and citizens. Despite this

comparatively diverse sourcing profile, the dominance of human-interest framing means that these voices are typically positioned within conflict-driven narratives rather than deliberative or solution-oriented contexts.

Figure: Sourcing Patterns in 3News (TV3)

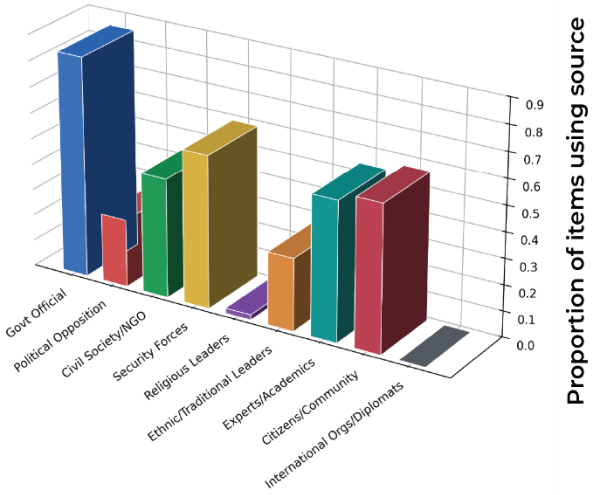


Figure 12: Source Types, 3News/TV3

Citi Newsroom

Citi Newsroom displays a more varied framing profile than the other outlets. While economic and resource-related framing is the most prominent category, the outlet also employs conflict/opposition, legal/right-or-wrong, human-interest, and solution-oriented frames. This diversity reflects the platform's digital-first orientation and its role as a fast-paced agenda-setter. However, the presence of multiple frame types does not produce depolarising outcomes, as conflict and accountability narratives remain structurally central, and the format of rapid sequential updates reinforces rather than moderates antagonistic narrative cycles.

Figure: Dominant Frames in Citi Newsroom

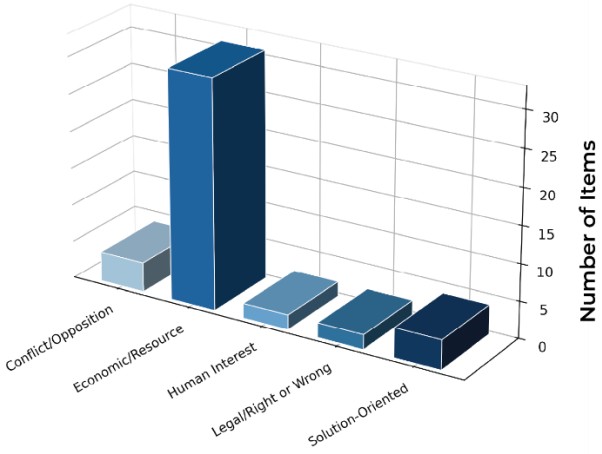


Figure 13: Dominant Framing Profile, Citi Newsroom

Citi Newsroom relies heavily on government officials, who appear in over 90% of items analysed. Citizen voices are also highly visible, appearing in more than two-thirds of items. Civil society organisations and expert sources are moderately represented. The combination of elite and citizen sourcing suggests an attempt at inclusivity, but the framing context positions these voices predominantly within cycles of accusation and rebuttal rather than in deliberative or explanatory roles.

Figure: Sourcing Patterns in Citi Newsroom

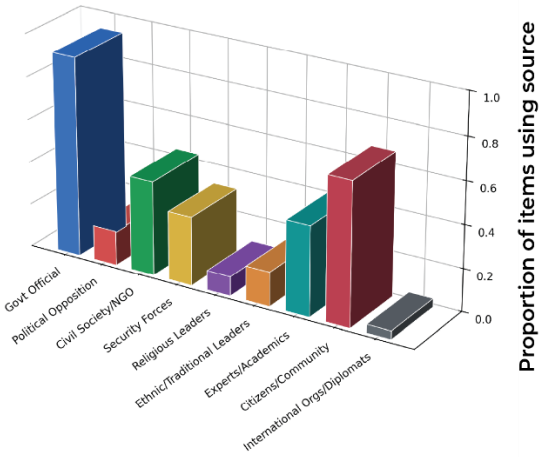


Figure 14: Source Types, Citi Newsroom

ModernGhana

ModernGhana's limited sample reveals a strong emphasis on conflict/opposition framing, with economic/resource framing as a secondary category. Human-interest and solution-oriented frames are notably absent. This pattern is consistent with the platform's role as a content aggregator, in which opinion-driven and conflict-centred narratives are frequently reproduced and circulated with minimal editorial mediation or contextual balancing.

Figure: Dominant Frames in ModernGhana

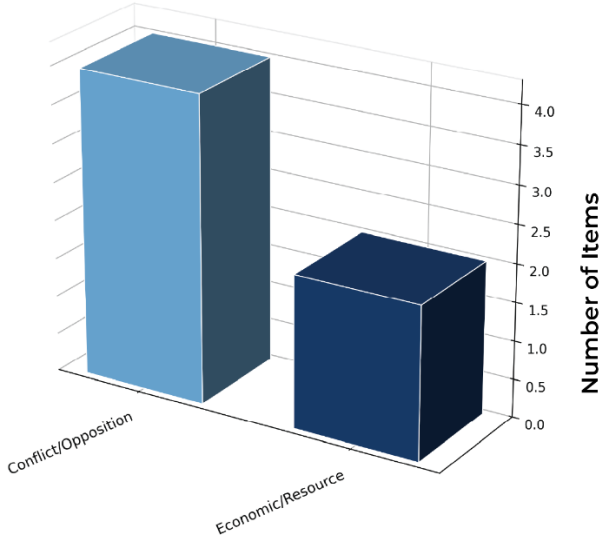


Figure 15: Dominant Framing Profile, ModernGhana

Summary of Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis yields three principal findings. First, the content measured by the Polarisation Index skews towards the lower end of the 0–42 scale across all four outlets, with no item reaching the Highly Polarising threshold. Digital-first and aggregator platforms record substantially higher mean scores than legacy outlets, positioning Citi Newsroom and ModernGhana in the Moderately Unifying to Neutral range, while Graphic Online and 3News/TV3 fall within the Highly Unifying band. Second, this differentiation reflects qualitatively distinct coverage logics across outlet types, not merely differences in degree: legacy outlets generate low scores through procedural, elite-centred restraint, while digital-first platforms generate higher scores through more varied sourcing and framing. Third, human-interest and conflict-oriented frames are disproportionately associated with low Polarisation Index scores, while solution-oriented framing, though rare, does not reliably generate higher scores, pointing to the absence of institutionalised dialogic journalism practices across Ghana's online media landscape.

Fourth, subject matter and blame attribution provide an additional dimension that cuts across the outlet-level and framing-level findings above. Environmental and resource governance coverage emerged as both the largest single subject-matter category in the dataset and the category most strongly associated with higher Polarisation Index scores, exceeding even politics and elections coverage. Within this category, the pattern of blame attribution matters: coverage attributing environmental harms to foreign actors scores towards the unifying end of the index, while coverage attributing the same harms to political actors or unspecified structural failures scores considerably higher. This indicates that polarising content in Ghana's digital news environment is not confined to explicitly partisan political reporting, and that resource governance issues, not just elections and party politics, warrant attention in any strategy to address media polarisation.

Key Informant Interview Findings

This section presents the findings of seven key informant interviews conducted with media managers, practising journalists, a professional association leader, an academic, and a religious leader. The interviews were analysed using axial coding, and the findings are organised around six thematic clusters that emerged consistently across the respondent group. Where respondents' views converge, this is noted; where significant divergence exists, both perspectives are reported and the nature of the disagreement identified. Respondents are anonymised and identified by role and institutional context throughout.

Politicised Ownership and Editorial Direction

Across all seven interviews, the politicisation of media ownership emerges as the most consistently and emphatically identified driver of polarisation in Ghana's media landscape. Respondents describe a media environment in which political actors and allied interests establish or control outlets, directly or indirectly shaping editorial priorities, framing choices, and the boundaries of acceptable coverage. Ownership influence is characterised as direct, predictable, and structurally determinative rather than incidental or episodic. One senior media manager described the relationship between ownership and editorial direction in unambiguous terms:

> "*You can just predict how this platform will approach the issue based on who owns it.*" (Media manager, public broadcaster)

A respondent from a private broadcasting background was equally direct, stating simply that ownership influences reporting entirely. Several respondents described the mechanism through which this influence is transmitted to journalists: the imperative to conform to the platform's preferred narrative or face professional consequences. As one practising journalist recounted:

> "*You have to sing a certain song... else you will be taken off.*" (Journalist, private broadcaster)

The result, respondents observed, is a media environment in which outlets function as echo chambers for their owners' political affiliations, defending allies and attacking opponents irrespective of journalistic merit or public interest considerations. The academic respondent introduced a partial qualification to this picture, noting that the fragmented and competitive character of Ghana's ownership landscape in contrast to the consolidated corporate control that characterises media polarisation in some other national contexts may limit the depth of ideological polarisation that politically affiliated ownership can produce. Nevertheless, even this perspective accepted that ownership demonstrably shapes tone, agenda, and the framing of national issues across the media system.

The Ethics-Employment Tension

A closely related theme across the interviews concerns the gap between journalists' professional ethical awareness and the realities of their newsroom environments. Respondents are consistent in their view that Ghanaian journalists broadly understand their professional obligations, but that the structural conditions of their employment systematically undermine their capacity to fulfil them. One experienced broadcaster described how the presence of a camera and the demands of a live platform override professional judgement at the moment of production:

> "*Immediately you sit there and put the camera on, you put the ethics aside through the interest of the platform.*" (Media manager, public broadcaster)

Poor remuneration, job insecurity, and the absence of meaningful institutional protections for editorial independence are identified as the underlying conditions that produce this tension. Respondents note that journalists who resist owner interference risk dismissal or reassignment, creating a structural incentive to align coverage with platform expectations even among those who are fully aware of the standards they are failing to meet. One respondent summarised the dynamic as follows:

> "*They throw away what they are supposed to do to please their owners.*" (Journalist, online platform)

Importantly, respondents are consistent in their view that this ethics-employment tension represents a structural rather than an individual failure. Polarisation, in their account, is not primarily produced by journalists who lack ethical training or professional awareness, but by journalists whose autonomy is structurally compromised by the conditions in which they work.

Regulatory and Institutional Weakness

Regulatory bodies, and the National Media Commission in particular, are characterised across the interviews as reactive rather than proactive, under-resourced, and possessing little to no monitoring presence at the district level, particularly in relation to smaller and digital-only outlets. One respondent, speaking from within a media leadership position, acknowledged the fundamental posture of the regulatory environment with notable candour:

> "*We are reactive instead of proactive.*" (Senior official, journalists' association)

Another respondent highlighted the pronounced disparity in standards across the media landscape, noting that while the larger and more established outlets may maintain editorial policies and some degree of accountability to professional norms, the majority of outlets operating in Ghana do not:

> *"The big players have editorial policies. The majority don't."* (Media manager, private broadcaster)

Respondents note that regulatory intervention is typically triggered by political controversy after the fact rather than by systematic monitoring of content standards, and that the absence of meaningful legal deterrence captured in the observation that ethics is not law leaves polarising practices free to become normalised within the media system. The rapid expansion of digital and online media is identified as a particular challenge for regulatory capacity, as the pace of growth in the number and variety of platforms operating in Ghana's information environment has outstripped the resources and institutional frameworks available to monitor and hold them accountable.

Competitive News Logic and Conflict-Centred Framing

Respondents identify competitive pressures among media outlets as a significant driver of polarising coverage, independent of and reinforcing the influence of partisan ownership. The desire to break news first, attract and retain audiences, and satisfy the demands of politically affiliated owners creates a news logic that consistently privileges conflict, blame attribution, and political drama over contextualisation, nuance, or solutions. One respondent described the character of election coverage in terms that echo the content analysis findings:

> *"When there is a by-election, it becomes a war scenario."* (Journalist, private broadcaster)

Respondents are also attentive to the role of tone in producing or moderating polarising effects, and several make an observation consistent with the content analysis finding that factual accuracy alone does not determine whether a story deepens or reduces affective polarisation:

> *"The same story can be reported in a way that will not bring anger."* (Media manager, public broadcaster)

The academic respondent offered a broader framing of this dynamic, observing that the sustained media focus on corruption as a dominant governance narrative, however grounded in legitimate public interest concerns, has produced cumulative delegitimising consequences for the Ghanaian state:

> *"The obsession with corruption has delegitimised the state."* (Academic, university)

Elections as a Polarisation Accelerator

All seven respondents identify elections and electoral periods as the moments at which media polarisation reaches its most acute and consequential intensity. Political competition heightens the stakes of coverage, owner interference in editorial direction intensifies, and the media become active arenas for strategic partisan communication, reputation management, and counter-narrative operations. One respondent identified the conditions under which polarisation becomes most pronounced:

> *"The polarisation only comes when the issue is a hotly contested partisan issue."* (Academic, university)

This observation is significant for the comparative picture it implies: outside of electoral cycles and high-stakes partisan contests, several respondents suggest that Ghana's media environment is relatively moderate in its polarisation a characterisation that points to the episodic rather than continuously acute nature of affective polarisation in the Ghanaian context, and that has implications for the design of regulatory and professional interventions.

Local Conflict Contexts and Social Resilience

A particularly significant theme to emerge from the interviews concerns the heightened vulnerability of local and ethnic conflict contexts to the polarising effects of irresponsible reporting. The religious leader respondent, drawing on experience of media coverage of communal violence in the northern regions of Ghana, described how reporting choices can move from documentation to instigation:

> "*Instead of reporting in a way that unites people, they put information inside that instigates.*" (Religious leader / media consumer)

Announcing the details of killings, framing inter-communal events in explicitly tribal terms, or adopting a provocative tone in reporting on localised conflicts are identified as practices that can trigger retaliation and escalate tensions. In such contexts, tone, language choice, and the timing of information release acquire consequences that extend well beyond the media system. At the same time, respondents particularly the academic and the religious leader note that Ghanaian society possesses social and cultural norms that generally discourage overt ethnic incitement, and that religious institutions and the Ghana Peace Council have played meaningful moderating roles in past periods of political tension. These social buffers are described as real but not unconditional: they provide a degree of insulation against the most acute expressions of identity-based polarisation at the national level while remaining vulnerable to being overwhelmed in specific local conflict contexts.

Media Literacy and Audience Agency

Views on the extent and significance of public media literacy diverge notably among respondents. Some argue that Ghanaian audiences lack the critical discernment necessary to navigate a polarised media environment effectively, with one respondent characterising the state of media literacy as poor. Others offer a more nuanced assessment, pointing to evidence of audience agency in the form of cross-platform verification and the selective use of credible outlets as reference points:

> "*I don't quickly embrace online news; I check Joy News.*" (Religious leader / media consumer)

The academic respondent takes a distinctive position, questioning what he describes as an overstatement of the misinformation problem in mainstream media and suggesting that social media platforms pose a greater risk than established news outlets for the spread of false or misleading content. These divergent assessments point to the complexity of the media literacy picture in Ghana, and suggest that audience behaviour varies significantly according to educational background, platform habits, and demographic context.

Summary of Key Informant Interview Findings

The key informant interviews collectively portray polarisation in Ghana's media landscape as structurally rooted in politicised ownership, reinforced by the economic precarity of journalists and the weakness of their professional autonomy, enabled by reactive regulatory systems, and amplified during elections through intensified partisan framing. Respondents converge strongly on the institutional mechanisms that produce polarisation, while diverging on questions of severity, the relative weight of mainstream versus social media misinformation, and the strength of audience media literacy. An integrative causal pathway emerges from the interviews: politicised ownership and economic precarity reduce journalist autonomy, which weakens verification practices and strengthens platform-driven conflict framing, which is amplified during elections and enabled by regulatory weakness, producing affective polarisation that is moderated but not eliminated by social norms and audience agency.

Focus Group Discussion Findings

This section presents the findings of five focus group discussions conducted with purposively sampled audience groups in Ghana. The groups varied by age, language of media consumption, occupation, and digital media habits, as described in the Methodology section. The findings are organised around eight cross-cutting themes that emerged consistently across all five groups through systematic thematic analysis. Where significant variation exists between groups, demographic differences are noted. Participants are not individually identified; where views are attributed, they are described by group number and profile.

Audience Recognition of Politicised Ownership

Across all five focus groups and all demographic clusters represented, participants demonstrate high and independently developed awareness that specific media outlets are owned by or affiliated with political actors or parties. This awareness is not abstract or theoretical but is expressed in concrete and specific terms, with participants naming particular stations as belonging to the NPP or NDC without prompting and describing how coverage predictably reflects partisan alignment. In FGD 1, participants whose primary media consumption is Akan-language radio were the most emphatic in this regard:

> "*A station like Wontumi TV is said to be NPP... TV3 is NDC.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

> "*They speak purely on behalf of the party.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

Participants in FGD 2, a younger, digitally oriented group consuming media predominantly through social media platforms, framed the same recognition in more analytical terms:

> "*The owners determine what issues should be topical.*" (FGD 2, English-speaking / digitally oriented youth)

FGD 5, comprising participants from diverse occupational backgrounds including security personnel and health workers, expressed the most categorical verdict on private media ownership:

> "*Most of the private media sources are for politicians.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

A significant analytical observation from across the groups is that audiences do not passively receive this partisan framing but actively identify it and adjust their engagement accordingly. Participants describe habitual practices of station-switching, cross-platform verification, and the selective calibration of trust based on perceived ownership affiliation. This active navigation of a polarised media landscape is documented across all five groups, with variation in the platforms and strategies employed rather than in the fundamental behaviour.

Elections as High-Risk Period for Media Conduct

All five focus groups treat electoral periods as distinctly and qualitatively more dangerous than the media environment at other times, characterising elections as moments when the consequences of partisan or irresponsible media conduct extend directly into public order and community safety. The concern is not only with coverage that is explicitly partisan but also with specific practices premature reporting of election results, the spread of false information about voting procedures, and the amplification of politically motivated misinformation whose consequences participants understand as directly connected to social tension and the delegitimisation of electoral outcomes.

FGD 3 and FGD 5 participants were particularly vocal about the dangers of premature results reporting:

> "*They report results that are not certified... when the actual comes, people find it difficult to accept.*" (FGD 3, mixed / structured media consumers, above 35 years)

FGD 2 cited the spread of false voting-date information during Ghana's 2024 general election as a concrete illustration of how social media content during electoral periods can directly endanger public safety:

> "*If care wasn't taken, it could have created a lot of tension.*" (FGD 2, English-speaking / digitally oriented youth)

Sensationalism and the Political Economy of Attention

A striking finding across the focus group discussions is the extent to which participants independently of academic or professional media discourse identify and articulate the role of economic incentives in driving sensationalist, conflict-driven reporting. FGD 3 and FGD 5 participants make the connection between exaggerated coverage and monetisation logic explicitly and without prompting:

> "*They monetize it. The more followers you have, the more money you can make.*" (FGD 3, mixed / structured media consumers, above 35 years)

> "*They exaggerate so they can get money.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

FGD 5 participants offer a concrete illustration of commercially motivated distortion in their reporting of a specific local incident:

> "*It was just a little push, but the media brought a swollen face picture.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

FGD 1 and FGD 2 frame the same dynamic in terms of clickbait culture and the profit-driven behaviour of bloggers and social media content creators:

> "*With the aim of making money, our bloggers go beyond.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

This audience-level articulation of the political economy of attention the commercial logic through which conflict and outrage are incentivised represents a significant convergence with the structural findings of the key informant interviews, and adds an important experiential dimension to the institutional account.

Personalised Trust and Presenter-Based Credibility

A consistent and analytically significant finding across all five groups is that audience trust in media is not uniformly institutional but is calibrated at the level of individual journalists and presenters. Participants consistently name specific journalists as trustworthy on the basis of their perceived neutrality, composure, professional discipline, and transparency about the limits of verified information. This presenter-based credibility operates independently of, and sometimes contrary to, participants' overall assessment of the outlet for which the trusted journalist works. In FGD 1, the use of allegation disclaimers the practice of explicitly flagging claims as unverified is identified as a specific trust signal:

> "*When he says it's alleged, I'm happy.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

FGD 3 participants name specific journalists from multiple outlets including Omanhene Kobina Asante, Alfred Ocansey, Johnny Hughes, Bernard Avle, Umaru Sanda, and Kwame Sefa Kayi as trusted on the basis of their professional conduct and non-partisan stance. The trust attributed to these individuals rests on their perceived willingness to challenge all political actors equally, to moderate panel discussions firmly and fairly, and to maintain composure in confrontational broadcast environments. As one participant in FGD 3 summarised:

> "*They should be firm and fair.*" (FGD 3, mixed / structured media consumers, above 35 years)

FGD 2, the most digitally oriented group, extends this personalised trust to investigative journalists and fact-checking platforms, citing Manasseh Azure and the Fourth Estate as examples of credible sources.

Across all groups, the common thread is that credibility is earned through demonstrated professional conduct rather than conferred by institutional affiliation.

Social Media as Double-Edged Platform

All five groups acknowledge the speed, accessibility, and participatory value of social media as an information environment, while simultaneously and consistently identifying it as the primary vector for the spread of misinformation, misleading content, and polarising narratives. The characterisation of social media as valuable but ungoverned appears across groups in different formulations. FGD 2, the group most reliant on social media for news, offers the most analytically precise description:

> "*On social media, it's not guided.*" (FGD 2, English-speaking / digitally oriented youth)

FGD 1 participants foreground the specific threat of AI-generated content and manipulated imagery as an emerging and particularly insidious form of digital misinformation:

> "*It wasn't true, it was AI-generated.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

FGD 5 focuses on the spread of death hoaxes on TikTok as a concrete example of the harm caused by unregulated digital content, while FGD 3 and FGD 4 both describe habitual practices of cross-platform verification, turning to established broadcast outlets to confirm or refute claims first encountered on social media. The layered media ecology that emerges from these accounts in which social media provides first contact with information and traditional media provides verification reflects a sophisticated and self-aware audience navigation of a complex and unreliable information environment.

Everyday Social Consequences of Polarised Media

FGD 4 contributes a finding that is distinct in its emphasis: the documentation of polarisation's spillover from the media environment into interpersonal and family life. Participants in this group describe the consequences of partisan and conflict-driven media consumption in terms of direct social harm disputes within families and between friends along political lines, reduced tolerance for opposing political views, and the hardening of political identities in ways that damage personal relationships:

> "*Politics is dividing families.*" (FGD 4, politically attentive citizens)

> "*The way they talk makes people angry.*" (FGD 4, politically attentive citizens)

This evidence of affective polarisation operating at the level of personal and social relationships not only at the level of political opinion or media trust gives the study's central concern its most human and immediate expression, and underscores the significance of what might otherwise be treated as a primarily institutional or professional problem.

Nation-Building Expectations and Community Invisibility

A normative strand runs through all five focus group discussions: a strong and consistently expressed expectation that the media should function as a vehicle for national unity, cultural affirmation, and community development, and a correspondingly strong sense that these expectations are systematically unmet. Participants across groups describe their communities as largely invisible in media coverage except when associated with crime or conflict, and express frustration at the disjunction between the media's actual focus on political drama and elite competition and what they believe its public purpose should be. FGD 5 captures this sense of exclusion with particular directness:

> "*Unless there is robbery or murder, they won't mention our community.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

FGD 1 and FGD 3 point to specific programmes Heritage Ghana, Heritage Caravan, Ghana Most Beautiful, By the Fireside as positive examples of content that fulfils what participants regard as the media's proper cultural and nation-building function, providing a concrete model of what depolarising media practice might look like in the Ghanaian context. The contrast between these programmes and the dominant political and conflict content of most news coverage is drawn explicitly and with evident frustration:

> "*Heritage Ghana shows we are one.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

FGD 1 also flags the moral and cultural dimension of this expectation gap, with participants expressing concern not only about political polarisation but about what they perceive as the moral deterioration of media content the prevalence of sexualised material, the exposure of young people to inappropriate programming, and the sense that media institutions have abandoned their responsibility to model and sustain community values:

> "*They should stand for Ghana.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

Demand for Accountability and Divergent Preferences on Reform

All five focus groups converge on the need for greater accountability in media practice, expressing this as a strong and genuine public demand. However, the preferred form of accountability differs significantly across groups in ways that map onto demographic differences. FGD 1, FGD 3, and FGD 5 groups that skew older, less digitally oriented, and more institutionally cautious in their media consumption favour punitive regulatory intervention, including the revocation of broadcasting licences and, in some cases, the closure of party-owned stations:

> "*If it were left to me, the government should close down all party-owned stations.*" (FGD 1, Twi-speaking / radio-heavy audience)

> "*The National Media Commission should revoke licenses.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

FGD 2, the youngest and most digitally literate group, places greater emphasis on professional training, ethical development, and the removal of politically exposed presenters from editorial roles, rather than on punitive regulatory measures:

> "*They should not forget the ethics of journalism. Training, training, training.*" (FGD 2, English-speaking / digitally oriented youth)

FGD 4 advocates for a procedural fairness approach balanced panel composition, transparent ownership disclosure, and calibrated sanctions for repeated breaches that sits between the regulatory and professional development positions. FGD 5 introduces a minority perspective that challenges the adequacy of any externally imposed solution, locating the ultimate basis for ethical media conduct in moral and spiritual commitment rather than professional training or regulatory enforcement:

> "*If they have the fear of God, they don't need training.*" (FGD 5, diverse occupations)

Summary of Focus Group Discussion Findings

The focus group discussions provide three principal contributions to the study's evidence base. First, they confirm at the audience level the structural drivers of polarisation identified in the content analysis and key informant interviews particularly the centrality of partisan ownership, the intensification of polarisation during elections, and the role of commercial incentives in driving sensationalist content giving these institutional findings their experiential and social grounding. Second, they add dimensions of the polarisation picture that neither of the other two methods can provide: the presenter-based trust

hierarchies through which audiences navigate a polarised media environment; the moral and cultural register of audience expectations; and the direct social consequences of media polarisation in interpersonal and community life. Third, they document a strong, consistent, and cross-demographically held public demand for media accountability, whose specific form varies by demographic context but whose urgency is uniform across the five groups.



Discussion

This section steps back from the individual findings to look at what they add up to, and why they matter for anyone working to make Ghana's media environment more constructive and less divisive. Each theme below draws on all three parts of the study: the content analysis of news coverage, the interviews with media professionals and stakeholders, and the focus group discussions with audiences. Together they show where the evidence points in the same direction, and where it reveals something that might not be obvious from any single source on its own.

Who Owns the Media Shapes What It Says

The single strongest finding of this study is that political ownership of media houses is the root cause behind much of the polarising content Ghanaians encounter. This will not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Ghana's media scene: it is widely known that many outlets are seen as aligned with the NPP or the NDC. What this study adds is a clear, evidence-based picture of how that alignment plays out in practice: in the sources journalists are encouraged to call, in which voices get left out of a story, and in how issues are framed for the audience.

Importantly, this is not a problem confined to a handful of openly partisan stations. The content analysis found traces of this pattern across all four outlets studied, including the state-owned platform. This suggests that political influence over editorial decisions is a feature of the system as a whole, not just a few "bad actors" that could be singled out and fixed in isolation. Any reform effort that focuses only on the most obviously partisan outlets is likely to miss most of the problem.

Following the Rules of “Good Journalism” Doesn't Always Help

One of the most important, and perhaps surprising, findings from the content analysis is this: stories that ticked the boxes of conventional good journalism (accurate, properly sourced, and giving "both sides" a say) did not score any better on the unifying-versus-polarising scale than stories that made no such effort.

Why would this be? The answer lies in what "balance" usually means in practice in Ghanaian newsrooms: quoting a government official and an opposition spokesperson against each other, without making room for community voices, independent experts, ordinary citizens, or any discussion of possible solutions. A story can follow every rule of fair reporting and still leave the audience with nothing but two sides shouting past each other.

This has a direct and practical implication for journalism training and newsroom practice. Ticking the boxes of "objectivity" (accuracy, attribution, hearing from both political camps) is necessary, but it is not enough on its own to produce coverage that brings people together. What seems to matter much more

is whose voices get included beyond the usual political actors, and whether a story opens up space for dialogue and shared solutions rather than simply restaging the same political quarrel.

Digital Platforms and the Race to Publish First

The content analysis found that the two digital-first platforms studied, Citi Newsroom and ModernGhana, scored noticeably differently from the two legacy outlets, Graphic Online and 3News/TV3, on the Polarisation Index. This fits with what is increasingly understood globally about digital news: the pressure to publish quickly and frequently, in a crowded and competitive online space, tends to favour conflict-driven and emotionally charged content over considered, contextual reporting.

ModernGhana's position as a content aggregator, a platform that republishes and circulates content originally produced elsewhere, adds a further dimension to this picture. Aggregators do not just add new polarising content to the media ecosystem; they extend the reach and lifespan of polarising content that has already been produced by others, effectively amplifying it without adding any editorial check of their own.

The focus group discussions paint a similarly double-edged picture of social media. Participants across all five groups recognise its value (speed, accessibility, the ability to participate) while also identifying it, without prompting, as the primary source of misinformation and divisive content in their media diets. A particular and growing concern, raised most strongly by younger participants, is AI-generated content: fake images, video, and audio that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the real thing, and that several participants had personally encountered and been fooled by.

Elections Raise the Temperature, But Not All Year Round

All three strands of this study agree on one thing: elections are when Ghana's media environment is at its most polarised. During electoral periods, owners get more involved in editorial decisions, the competition to break news intensifies, conflict-driven framing becomes the norm rather than the exception, and misinformation, particularly on social media, spreads faster and further. The combined effect, as several respondents put it, turns coverage into something resembling a "war scenario."

What is equally important, however, is what several key informants told us about the periods between elections: that Ghana's media environment, while still imperfect, is comparatively calmer outside of election season. This is a useful and practical insight. It suggests that media polarisation in Ghana is not a constant, unchanging problem but one that spikes predictably around election cycles. Interventions, whether monitoring, fact-checking, or public awareness campaigns, may therefore be most effective when they are concentrated and intensified around these periods, rather than spread thinly across the whole year.

Weak Oversight Means Few Checks on Harmful Content

Across the key informant interviews, regulatory bodies, and the National Media Commission in particular, are consistently described as reactive rather than proactive: stepping in only after a controversy has already broken, rather than monitoring content on an ongoing basis. The content analysis adds weight to this picture. Over the full 14-day period studied, across all four outlets, there was little evidence of genuinely dialogic, solution-focused, or community-oriented coverage, and no sign that any external body had flagged or corrected this pattern during that time.

What is striking is that the public itself wants more action on this front. All five focus groups expressed a clear demand for greater accountability in the media, in some cases including calls for the National

Media Commission to revoke the licences of stations seen as the worst offenders. At the same time, the groups did not agree on what "accountability" should look like. Older and less digitally connected participants tended to favour these kinds of punitive measures, while younger, more digitally engaged participants placed more emphasis on professional training and ethical development for journalists rather than sanctions. This points to the need for a reform agenda that combines both approaches rather than choosing one over the other, and that also tackles the underlying issues of ownership and journalist welfare, not content rules alone.

Audiences Are More Discerning Than They're Often Given Credit For

A recurring and encouraging theme across the focus groups is that Ghanaian audiences are far from passive consumers of media. Participants in every group could readily name which stations they associate with the NPP and which with the NDC, and they factor this knowledge into how they interpret what they watch, read, and hear. Many described habitually switching between stations, checking claims they first saw on social media against established broadcasters, and generally treating what they consume with a healthy dose of scepticism.

Perhaps the most practically useful finding here is that trust in Ghana's media is built around individual journalists and presenters, not institutions. Across all five groups, participants named specific journalists they trust, citing qualities like fairness, composure, and a willingness to challenge politicians from all parties equally, often independently of how they feel about the station that journalist works for. This matters because it means that individual professional conduct can make a real difference to public trust, even within media houses that are otherwise seen as partisan. Supporting and recognising journalists who embody these qualities may be one of the more achievable levers for change in the shorter term.

A Different Kind of Division: Moral and Cultural Concerns

Alongside the more familiar story of political polarisation, this study uncovered a separate but equally significant set of concerns that came up repeatedly in two of the focus groups. Participants spoke about the amount of sexualised content on air, worries about its effect on young people, the growing problem of AI-generated deception, and a broader sense that media institutions have drifted away from their role in promoting national unity and community pride.

These concerns are not about NPP versus NDC, or about any single outlet's political leanings. They reflect something more fundamental: a feeling among many Ghanaians that there is a broken understanding between media institutions and the communities they are meant to serve. This is not just about politics, but about values, culture, and what the media is for in the first place. This dimension is easy to miss in studies that focus narrowly on political bias, but the strength of feeling it generated among participants suggests it deserves serious attention in any conversation about media reform in Ghana, alongside the more familiar issues of ownership, regulation, and professional standards.

Taken together, these findings describe a media environment shaped most fundamentally by who owns it, stretched by economic pressures on journalists, loosely overseen by regulators who tend to act after the fact rather than before it, and at its most intense during elections. At the same time, the picture is not without hope: audiences engage critically with what they consume, pockets of trusted and professional journalism exist and are recognised by the public, and there is a clear public appetite for change. The recommendations that follow are built directly on these findings, and are aimed at the people and institutions best placed to act on them.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to find out how the media in Ghana contributes to, or could help to reduce, the kind of division that makes it harder for people to talk to and trust one another across political lines. To do this, it combined three sources of evidence: a content analysis of news coverage, interviews with media professionals and stakeholders, and focus group discussions with audiences. Taken together, these point in the same direction: the conditions that allow polarising media practices to take root in Ghana are built into how the media system works. They are produced by who owns media houses, made worse by the financial pressures journalists work under, allowed to continue by regulators who tend to act only after problems have already happened, and intensified during elections. The content analysis found that, by the measure used in this study, coverage across the four outlets studied tilts towards the unifying end of the scale, with digital-first and aggregator platforms producing more varied and moderately polarising content than the legacy outlets. At the same time, the interviews and focus groups make clear that audiences experience this same media environment as partisan, divisive, and falling short of what they expect from it. That gap, between what the content measure shows and what people actually experience, is itself one of the most important things this study found.

A few findings stand out as especially important. First, the content analysis shows that polarising patterns in Ghana's media are not only the result of sensational or irresponsible reporting. They also show up in the routine, day to day practices of outlets that are, in many respects, following the rules of professional journalism. The finding that procedurally responsible journalism does not reliably produce more unifying content is a challenge to the assumption that following standard professional rules is enough on its own. It points to the need for a fuller idea of what depolarising journalism actually requires in practice. Second,

the interviews make clear that this is not mainly a problem of individual journalists failing to do their jobs well. It is a problem of structure. Journalists who understand what good, depolarising coverage would look like are often prevented from producing it by their working conditions, by pressure from owners, and by the absence of any real consequence for not doing so.

Third, the focus groups bring two things to this study that the other methods could not. They show the human side of media polarisation, the family arguments, the hardening of political identities, the sense that some communities simply do not see themselves reflected in the news, which is what gives the more institutional findings their real weight and urgency. They also show that Ghanaian audiences are not passive. People navigate a difficult media environment with real skill, working out for themselves which journalists and outlets to trust, checking claims across platforms, and holding clear expectations of what they want from their media. That public appetite for something better is itself a resource. It is evidence that people both want and are ready for a media environment that serves them better than the current one does.

None of this is a call for an idealised media that does not exist anywhere. It is a case for practical, achievable change, grounded in what this study found and the specific conditions that stand in the way. The recommendations that follow set out where that change could begin, and who is best placed to take it forward.

Recommendations

The following seven recommendations are grounded in cross-strand evidence from the study and are addressed to the actors best positioned to act on them. They are sequenced in a logic that moves from the most structurally fundamental conditions that produce polarisation toward the more audience-oriented practices that moderate its effects, reflecting the causal chain the findings have established.

Ownership Transparency and Structural Reform

The study's most robust finding that politicised ownership is the foundational driver of media polarisation makes regulatory attention to ownership structures an urgent priority. The National Media Commission and relevant government bodies should introduce mandatory public disclosure of beneficial ownership for all broadcast and digital media licensees and establish enforceable limits on the direct ownership of media organisations by serving political office-holders or active party officials. Accountability mechanisms for demonstrable owner interference in editorial direction should accompany these structural measures. Without transparency of ownership and meaningful limits on partisan control of media institutions, no other reform in the system can be fully effective.

Proactive Regulatory Oversight

The NMC's effectiveness is currently limited by resource and capacity constraints that fall within its existing constitutional mandate, separate from the question of editorial content regulation addressed elsewhere in this report. The Commission may require enhanced resources and technical capacity to extend its monitoring presence beyond the national level, including to district-level and digital-only outlets, and to strengthen its role in areas it is constitutionally empowered to oversee, such as ownership disclosure compliance, licensing standards, and the convening of industry-wide self-regulatory mechanisms. Rather than expanding the NMC's authority over editorial content, a more constitutionally sound and practically achievable reform is for the NMC to play a coordinating role: publishing comparative data on outlet practices, supporting the development of voluntary editorial codes led by professional associations, and channelling findings from civil society monitoring (see the recommendation

on electoral media monitoring below) into professional accountability processes rather than regulatory sanction. Development partners should consider dedicated funding for this kind of capacity-building and coordination function, recognising that it complements, rather than substitutes for, the structural reforms to ownership addressed above.

Dedicated Electoral Media Monitoring

The convergent finding from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions that elections are peak periods of media polarisation, together with the content analysis finding that other types of high-salience political coverage can independently generate elevated Polarisation Index scores, justifies the establishment of a permanent, cycle-specific electoral media monitoring infrastructure. Such an infrastructure should combine regulatory oversight from the NMC, independent civil society content tracking, and real-time fact-checking capacity, with particular attention to social media platforms and digital-only outlets during the pre-election and post-election periods. Monitoring findings should be published in real time and made publicly accessible to create a dimension of civic accountability that complements formal enforcement mechanisms and contributes to building a culture of media responsibility around electoral periods.

Professional Development Beyond Procedural Ethics

The finding that journalists understand professional obligations but cannot consistently fulfil them under structural constraints calls for a professional development response that goes beyond ethics awareness training. Programmes led by the Ghana Journalists Association and journalism training institutions should incorporate conflict-sensitive reporting, constructive and solution-oriented framing, contextual sourcing that includes community voices, and the practical skills required to resist editorial interference without professional jeopardy. Training must be accompanied by institutional support mechanisms clear editorial policies, internal complaints procedures, and professional association advocacy that enable journalists to apply what they learn within the newsroom environments in which they actually work. The study's finding that procedural responsibility does not reliably translate into more unifying coverage, even when journalists are following the formal rules of good practice, makes this a matter of curricular redesign, not merely skills upgrading.

Structural Protections for Journalist Welfare and Editorial Independence

Economic precarity is a co-driver of polarisation because it renders journalists structurally dependent on owner goodwill and unable to exercise the professional autonomy that ethical practice requires. Media organisations should establish minimum remuneration standards aligned with the cost of living, transparent and enforceable editorial independence policies, and whistleblower protections for journalists who resist partisan editorial interference. The Ghana Journalists Association can pursue legislative protections for editorial independence as a component of press freedom advocacy, and government and development partners should explore the feasibility of a journalist welfare fund for community and smaller outlets operating without sustainable business models. The ethics-employment tension documented across the key informant interviews will not be resolved by training alone; it requires structural protection.

Targeted Media and Information Literacy Programmes

The audience agency documented across the focus group discussions is a democratic resource that deliberate investment in media and information literacy can strengthen and extend. Programmes should be targeted at demographic groups with more limited digital literacy and cross-platform verification

habits, including older audiences and communities in peri-urban and rural areas currently underserved by existing initiatives. Programme design should build practical skills in source evaluation, misinformation identification, and the use of credible verification platforms, drawing on the personalised trust hierarchies that the focus group evidence reveals as already present in audience behaviour. Given the documented risk of electoral misinformation, media literacy initiatives should be intensified in the period preceding each general election cycle, with particular attention to the specific misinformation formats that participants across the focus groups identify as most prevalent and most harmful: misleading captions, AI-generated content, and false procedural information.

Incentives for Community-Oriented and Development Journalism

The community invisibility finding that Ghanaian communities feature in media coverage predominantly in the context of crime and conflict and are systematically absent from coverage of development, infrastructure, health, and civic life points to a structural gap in the media's democratic function that editorial policy and funding incentives can begin to address. Media organisations can establish explicit commitments to community and development reporting as part of their editorial mandates, and should consider the creation of dedicated community desks or beat reporters for under-represented geographic areas and social groups. Development partners and corporate advertisers should explore sponsorship models that incentivise this coverage without compromising editorial independence. Civil society organisations should document and publicly recognise outlets that demonstrate sustained community-oriented reporting, creating positive reputational incentives alongside structural ones. The focus group evidence is unambiguous on this point: audiences do not only want media that is politically fair; they want media that sees them, reflects them, and serves them.

These recommendations address the full causal chain that the study has identified, from the structural conditions that produce polarising media, through the institutional and professional environments that enable it, to the audience-level practices that moderate its impact. No single recommendation will, by itself, produce a depolarised media environment in Ghana. Sustained progress requires coordinated commitment across all the actors, and the political and institutional will to hold the media system to the democratic standard that Ghanaian audiences, as this study documents, already expect.



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