In the digital age, a citizen in a remote village may now be as informed about government corruption as a resident of the capital city. This transformation in information access has profound implications for how citizens view their governments across geographic space. A rich literature has shown that trust in national institutions varies with isolation from capital cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. In weak state capacity settings, national institutions struggle to reach the hinterland, such that isolated areas interact less with national institutions. This spatial decay in information over distance from the center of power creates a trust gradient: citizens closer to the capital, who have greater access to information about government performance, develop informed critique and skepticism. Meanwhile, those in isolated areas exhibit default trust because they lack detailed information about institutional shortcomings.

In this paper, we document how information technology mitigates this decay of information over distance from the capital city across Sub-Saharan African countries. By democratizing access to information regardless of geographic location, modern communication technology disrupts traditional spatial patterns of institutional trust in Africa. We find that this mitigating effect of information technology occurs exclusively in contexts characterized by poor governance and captured traditional media. In these settings, where official information channels fail to provide transparent accounts of institutional performance, alternative information sources become essential in reshaping the relationship between distance and institutional trust. These results suggest that as information asymmetries diminish, the relationship between distance and trust in national institutions fundamentally changes, with implications for governance, political participation, and institutional accountability.

Hooks:

Digital age:

In the digital age, a citizen in a remote village may now be as informed about government corruption as a resident of the capital city. This transformation in information access has profound implications for how citizens view their governments across geographic space.

Nation building/trust:

Building a nation requires citizens to trust in institutions they rarely encounter directly. This trust—the invisible foundation of governance—has historically been shaped by geography, with profound implications for state legitimacy and cohesion.