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# Free vs. false: Namibia's changing media landscape presents tough choices for citizens

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 342 | Christiaan Keulder

## Summary

The World Press Freedom Index considers Namibia the African country with the freest media environment, ranking 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). This index annually evaluates media pluralism and independence, quality of the legislative framework, and safety of journalists but does not review the quality of journalism.

While the media environment may be relatively free, senior Namibian politicians are often cynical about the media and journalists. At the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding for the development of an economic free trade zone, Trade Minister Tjekero Tweya called Namibian journalists “flies making noise” and detracting from efforts to develop the country (Ngatjiheue, 2019). Shortly afterward, the investigative unit at the newspaper The Namibian published the results of an international investigation into corruption in Namibia's fishing sector, causing two ministers implicated in the transactions to resign (Immanuel & Iikela, 2019).

Relations between the country's media and its political leaders appear tentative at best. As a result, Reporters Without Borders (2019) describes the position of Namibia's media as “real freedom but frequent threats.”

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings reflect a similar ambiguity in citizens' views of the media. Namibians are frequent news consumers – most often via radio but increasingly also from the Internet and social media – and consider their media largely free. Yet fewer citizens than ever support media freedom from government interference.

Views are quite conflicted with regard to social media, which is both valued for making users more informed and effective participants in political processes and blamed for spreading fake news and intolerance.

Majorities endorse government restrictions on false news, hate speech, and even information or opinions that the government disapproves of. At the same time, more than half think unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed 1,200 adult Namibians in August 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

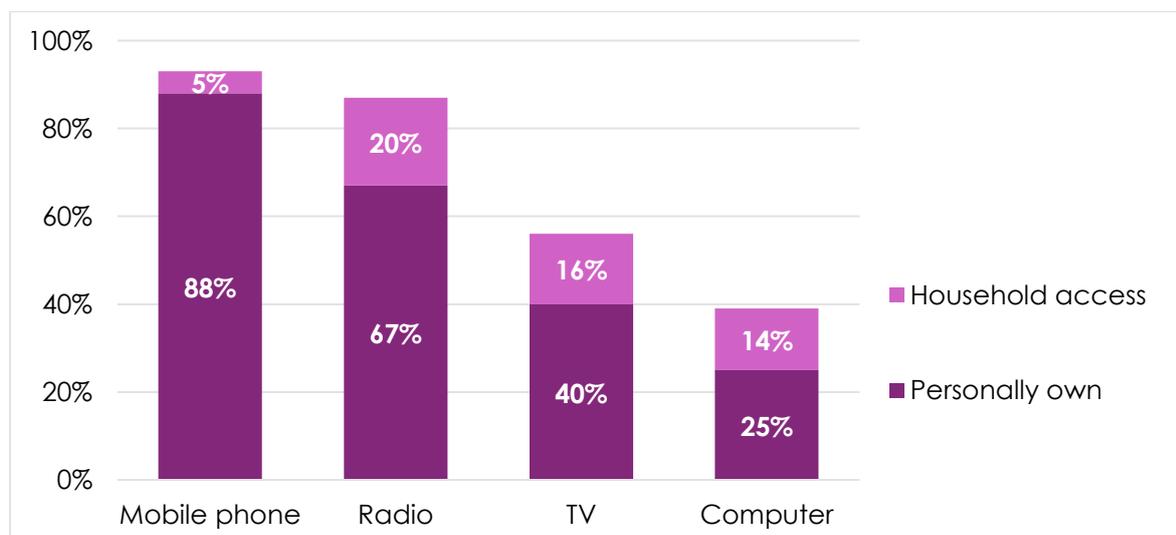
## Key findings

- Most adult Namibians own mobile phones (88%) and radios (67%). Four in 10 (40%) own television sets, and one in four (25%) own computers.
- Daily Internet use has multiplied over the past decade, increasing from 5% in 2008 to 28% in 2019. But more than four in 10 Namibians (44%) still “never” use the Internet.
- The most common source of daily news for Namibians is the radio (62%), followed by TV (40%), the Internet (27%), social media (27%), and newspapers (23%).
- Among the three-fourths (76%) of adult Namibians who have heard of social media, half (51%) see its effects on society as positive, while one-fourth (24%) see them as negative.
- Social media users are most frequently blamed as sources of false (fake) news (by 67% of respondents), followed by journalists (62%) and politicians (60%).
- Eight out of 10 Namibians regard the country’s news media as “completely free” (47%) or “somewhat free” (33%). But a majority (56%) think the government should have the right to prevent publications it disapproves of – more than twice as many as a decade ago.
- Moreover, majorities say the government should be able to limit or prohibit the sharing of false news (64%), of information or opinions that it disapproves of (54%) or that criticize or insult the president (62%), and of hate speech (62%).
- Yet more than half (55%) of citizens say that unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected.

## Access to communication devices

Almost nine out of 10 adult Namibians (88%) own a mobile phone, and almost as many either own a radio (67%) or have access to one owned by someone else in the household (20%) (Figure 1). A majority own a television (40%) or live in a household that has one (16%). Only one in four (25%) own a computer; a further 14% have access to a computer through someone in their household.

**Figure 1: Access to communication devices | Namibia | 2019**



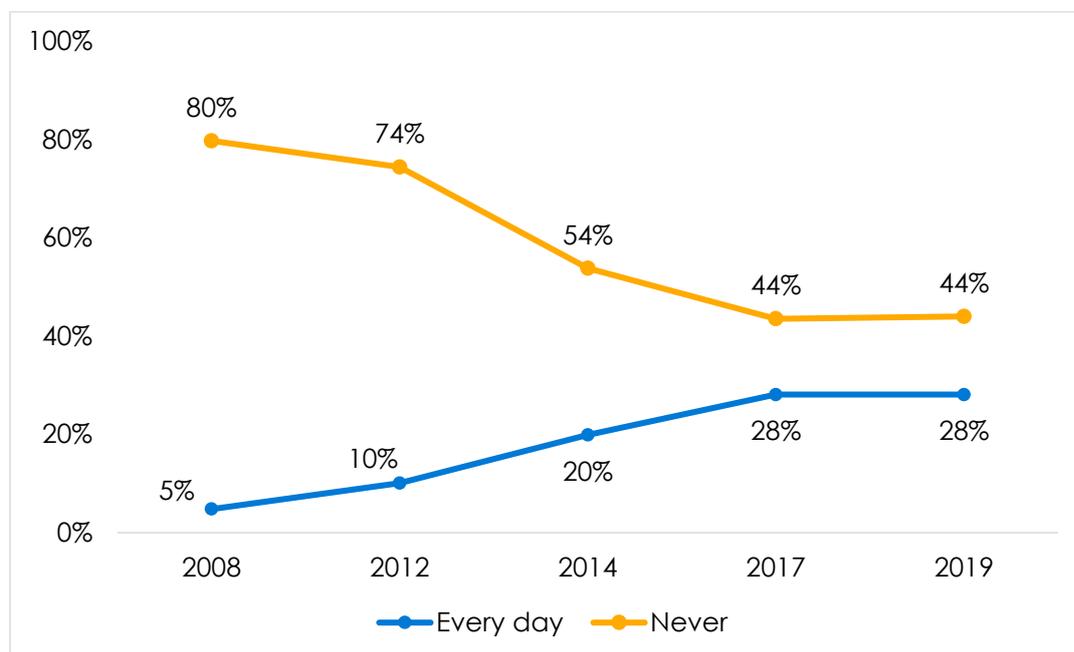
**Respondents were asked:** Which of these things do you personally own? [If “no”:] Does anyone else in your household own one?

Most Namibians (90%) say they use their mobile phones on a daily basis. Daily use of the Internet has multiplied over the past decade, increasing from 5% in 2008 to 28% in 2019 (Figure 2). But more than four in 10 Namibians (44%) say they never use the internet.

Both ownership of communication devices and daily use of mobile phones and the Internet are significantly/somewhat/slightly more common among citizens who are employed, are economically better off, have more education, and live in urban areas, though respondents' gender seems to make little difference.

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**Figure 2: Frequency of using the internet | Namibia | 2008-2019**

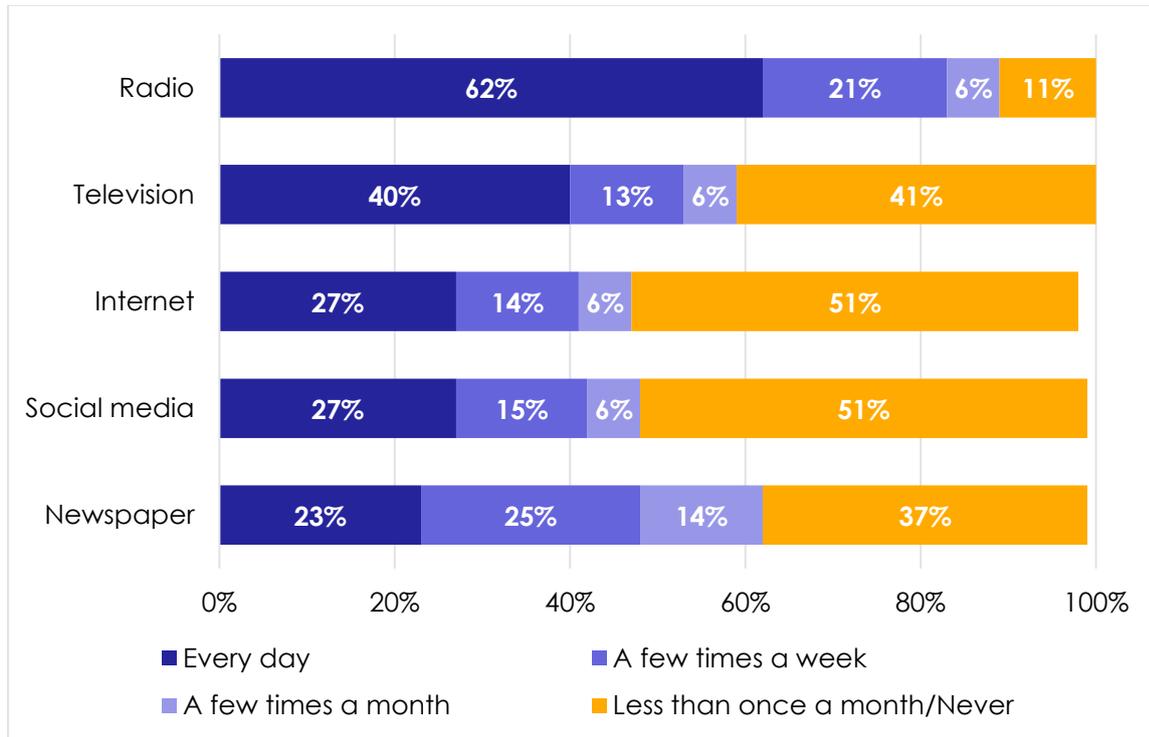


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you use the Internet? (% who say "every day" or "never")

### News sources

Radio is by far the most frequent source of news for Namibians: More than eight out of 10 say they use the radio daily (62%) or "a few times a week" (21%) to obtain news (Figure 3). Television is the second-most-popular source of daily news (40%). The Internet and social media (each used daily by 27% of respondents) outrank newspapers (23%) as daily news sources, although newspapers have more occasional consumers ("a few times a week" or "a few times a month") than digital media.

**Figure 3: News sources** | Namibia | 2019

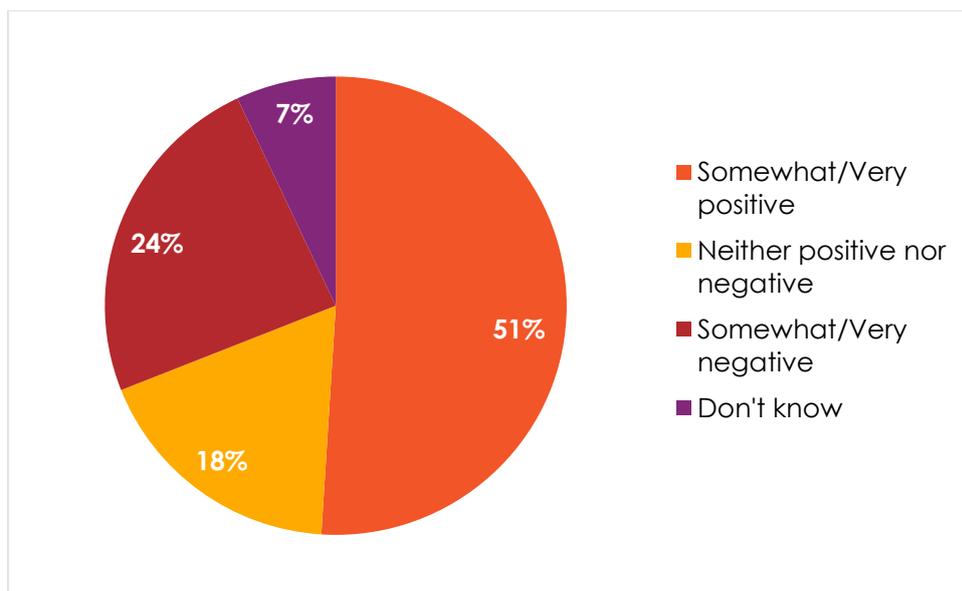


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources?

**Views on social media**

Among the three-fourths (76%) of adult Namibians who say they have heard of social media, half (51%) say it has “somewhat” or “very” positive effects on society, while one in four (24%) see its impacts as negative (Figure 4).

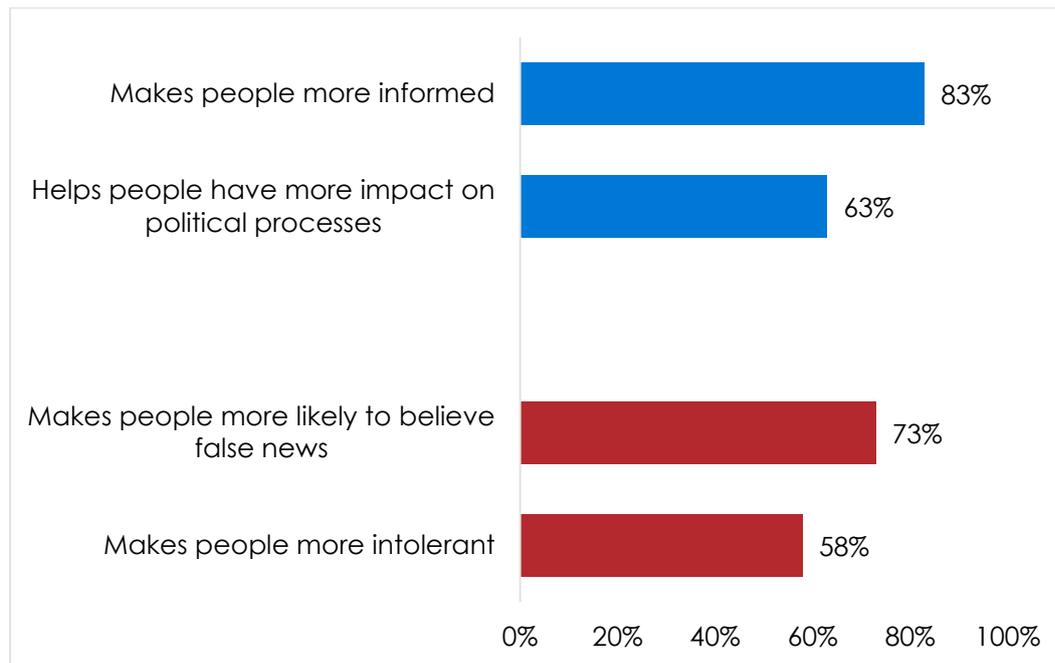
**Figure 4: Effects of social media on society** | Namibia | 2019



**Respondents who said they had heard of social media were asked:** Overall, do you think that the effects of social media on society are mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Asked about several specific ways in which social media might impact society, both positive and negative effects are perceived by a majority of respondents (Figure 5). More than eight out of 10 Namibians (83%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that social media makes people more informed, but almost three-fourths (73%) also think it makes people more likely to believe false news. And while 63% say social media helps people have more impact on political processes, almost as many (58%) see it as making people more intolerant of those who hold different political opinions.

**Figure 5: Effects of social media | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents who said they had heard of social media were asked:** Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media:

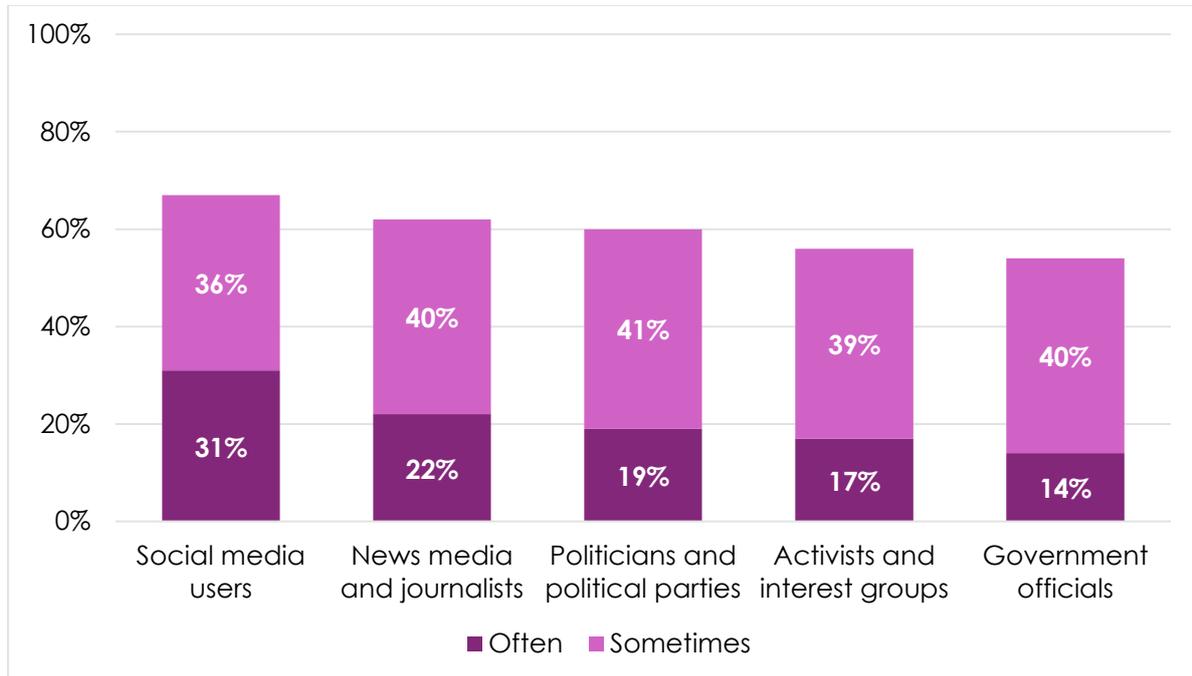
- Makes people more informed about current events?
- Makes people more likely to believe false news?
- Helps people have more impact on political processes?
- Makes people more intolerant of those who have different political opinions?

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree with each statement)

### Sources of false (fake) news

Amid a growing variety of available news sources, one common concern globally has been the wealth of opportunities to spread false or “fake” news. When asked who they think knowingly spreads false information in Namibia, survey respondents most frequently blame social media users. Two-thirds of respondents say people using social media “sometimes” (36%) or “often” (31%) spread information they know to be untrue. About six in 10 lay the blame at the feet of the news media and journalists (62%) and politicians and political parties (60%). Activists and interest groups (56%) and government officials (54%) are also commonly seen as sources of fake news (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Sources of fake news | Namibia | 2019**

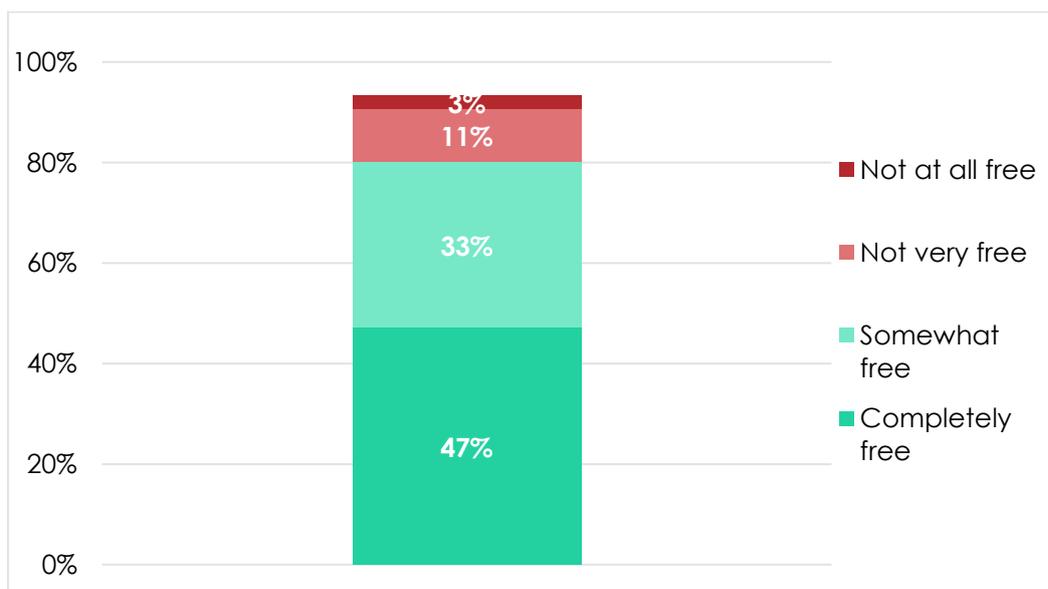


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false. (% who say "sometimes" or "often")

### Views on media freedom

Namibians generally concur with the World Press Freedom Index assessment: Eight out of 10 perceive the country's news media as "somewhat free" (33%) or "completely free" (47%) from government censorship or interference (Figure 7). Only about one in seven respondents (14%) say the media is "not very free" or "not at all free."

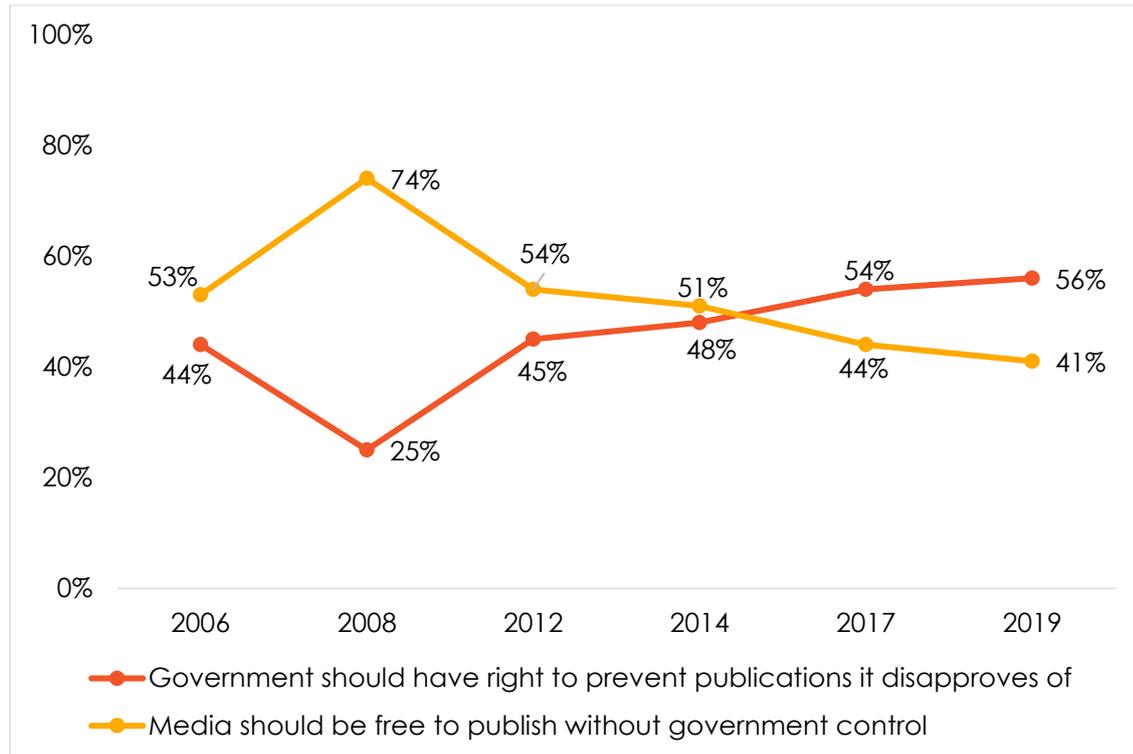
**Figure 7: Perceived media freedom | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?

But while Namibians see their news media as largely free, popular support for the media's freedom to publish views and ideas without government control has declined sharply, from 74% in 2008 to 41% in 2019 (Figure 8). Support for the view that government should have the right to prevent publications it disapproves of has more than doubled over the same period, from 25% to 56%.

**Figure 8: Should the media be free from government control? | Namibia | 2006-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

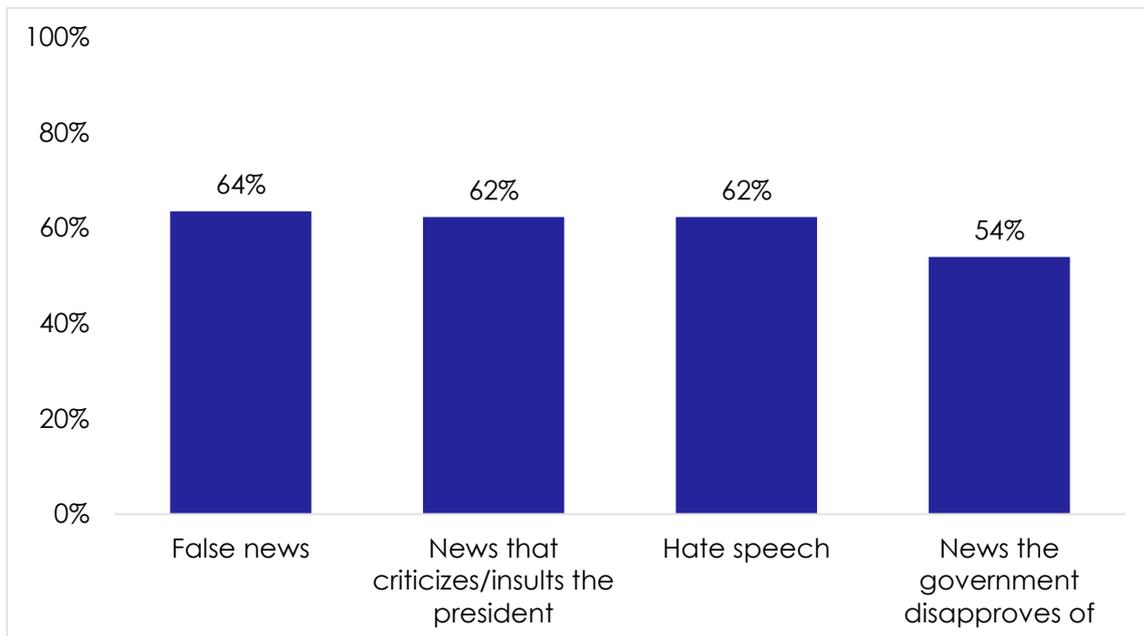
Moreover, majorities endorse a role for the government in controlling the sharing of certain kinds of news, information, and opinions through communications channels (Figure 9). Almost two-thirds (64%) of Namibians "agree" or "strongly agree" that "the government should be able to limit or prohibit the sharing of news or information that is false." Six out of 10 also

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endorse restrictions on information or opinions that criticize or insult the president (62%) as well as on hate speech (62%). A smaller majority (54%) approve of government restrictions on information or opinions it disapproves of.

Yet more than half (55%) of citizens also "agree" or "strongly agree" that unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected, since it "helps people to be more informed and active citizens" (Figure 10). About one-third (35%) prefer that the government regulate Internet and social media access.

**Figure 9: Should government be able to limit sharing of information? | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of:

News or information that is false.

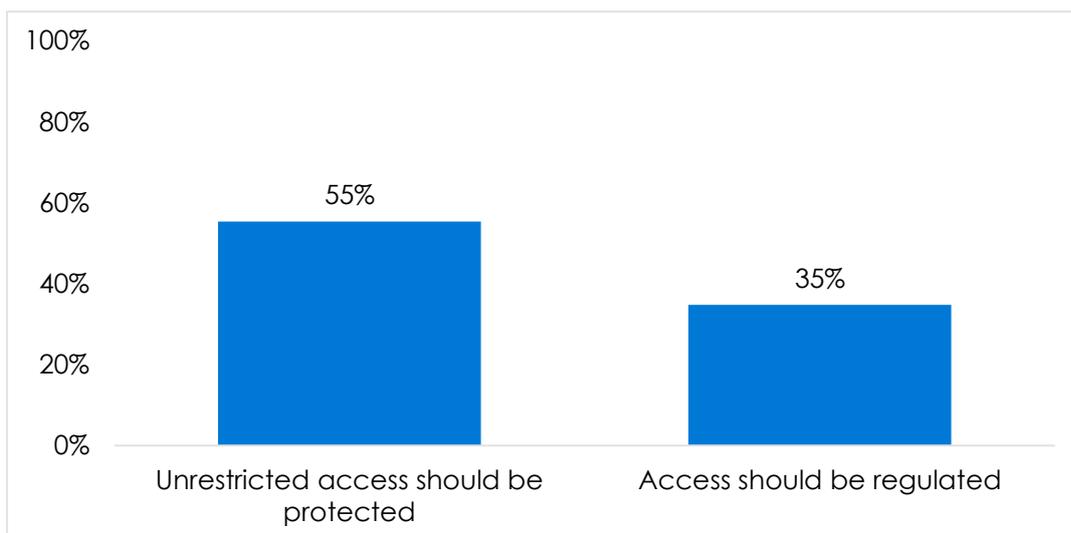
News, information, or opinions that the government disapproves of.

News, information, or opinions that criticize or insult the president.

Hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each)

**Figure 10: Internet and social media access | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing Namibians, so access should be regulated by the government.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

## Conclusion

The Namibian media landscape is undergoing important changes. Traditional media such as radio and TV remain important sources of news at the same time as the use of the Internet and social media is gaining popularity. A substantive proportion of adult Namibians recognize these digital media as frequent purveyors of false news, though overall they regard their impact as more positive than negative.

Namibians appreciate the country's free media environment, yet more citizens than ever endorse the notion of government censorship.

This may be a reaction to the false news that Namibians believe is generated by social media users, journalists, and politicians. A majority of Namibians show themselves willing to accept government interference to limit false news, insults to the president, and hate speech. Where citizens want to draw the line – whether they truly want to suppress information and opinions that are critical of the president or that the government disapproves of – may take time, and greater experience with this changing landscape, to tell.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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