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Moroccans support media's watchdog role but endorse government restrictions on information

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 505 | Mhammed Abderebbi

Summary

Morocco's 2011 Constitution states that "freedom of the press is guaranteed and may not be limited by any form of prior censorship. To the extent expressly provided for by law, everyone has the right to free expression and dissemination of information, ideas, and opinions" (constituteproject.org, 2021).

In recent years, the government has introduced legal reforms refining the Constitution's provisions, including a press code that recognizes online media, a law providing for public access to information, and an amendment enhancing the ability of the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) to promote a diverse and open media market (ERIM, 2019; OECD, 2019). Access to the Internet and social media gets a boost from the government's New Development Model, which promotes the development of digital platforms as a lever for rapid transformation (CSMD, 2021).

While welcoming these advances, critics say they don't go far enough and have not shielded media outlets and journalists/bloggers from persecution (ERIM, 2019). The 2021 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2021) ranks Morocco's media among the least free in the world (136th out of 180 countries). Similarly, Freedom House (2021) rates Morocco only "partly free" in terms of Internet freedom.

The latest Afrobarometer survey offers citizens' perspectives on Morocco's media scene. While television is the most popular news source, seven out of 10 Moroccans also regularly obtain news via social media and the Internet. Views on media freedom are mixed: Most respondents support the media's watchdog role over government, but majorities also endorse the government's right to limit the dissemination of false news, hate speech, and information that criticizes the prime minister or that the government disapproves of.

While Moroccans see both positive and negative aspects of social media, they don't want the government to regulate access to social media and the Internet.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Morocco, led by Global for Survey and Consulting (GSC), interviewed 1,200 adult Moroccans in February 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Morocco in 2013, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

- Television is the most popular source of news in Morocco, used at least “a few times a week” by 92% of citizens.
 - The Internet (70%) and social media (69%) beat out radio (49%) and newspapers (11%) as regular news sources.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Moroccans say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- But fewer than half (45%) insist on media freedom, while 55% endorse the government’s right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
 - In particular, majorities support the government’s right to prohibit the sharing of false information (88%), of hate speech (82%), and of information that “criticizes or insults the head of government” (57%).
- Almost six in 10 Moroccans (58%) say the country’s media is “somewhat free” or “completely free” to report and comment on the news without government interference.
- Moroccans think social media users (84%) and the news media (67%) are the most likely suspects when it comes to knowingly sharing false information.
- Among Moroccans who have heard of social media, majorities say it makes people more informed about current events (96%) and helps them have more impact on political processes (64%), but also makes them more likely to believe false news (85%).
 - Overall, 60% of respondents see the impact of social media on society as positive.
- A majority (57%) of Moroccans say unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected.

Sources of news

Moroccans are loyal to their television, which is by far the most widely used mass media channel for getting news. More than nine in 10 citizens (92%) say they get news via television “every day” or “a few times a week.” Only 4% say they “never” use the television as a news source (Figure 1).

Survey findings show that after television, the Internet (70%) and social media (69%) are the most popular sources of news – a finding in line DataReportal (2021) data showing that the number of Internet users in Morocco increased by 2.3 million (9.1%) between 2020 and 2021.

Half (49%) of Moroccans regularly obtain news from the radio, while only 11% turn to newspapers as regular news sources.

News consumption varies widely by demographic group. Among young Moroccans (aged 18-35), social media (88%) and the Internet (87%) are about as popular as television (89%) as regular sources of news (Figure 2). Their elders, meanwhile, are far more likely to obtain their news from television than from new digital media. The radio is more popular among those above age 35 (54%-55%) than among the young (42%).

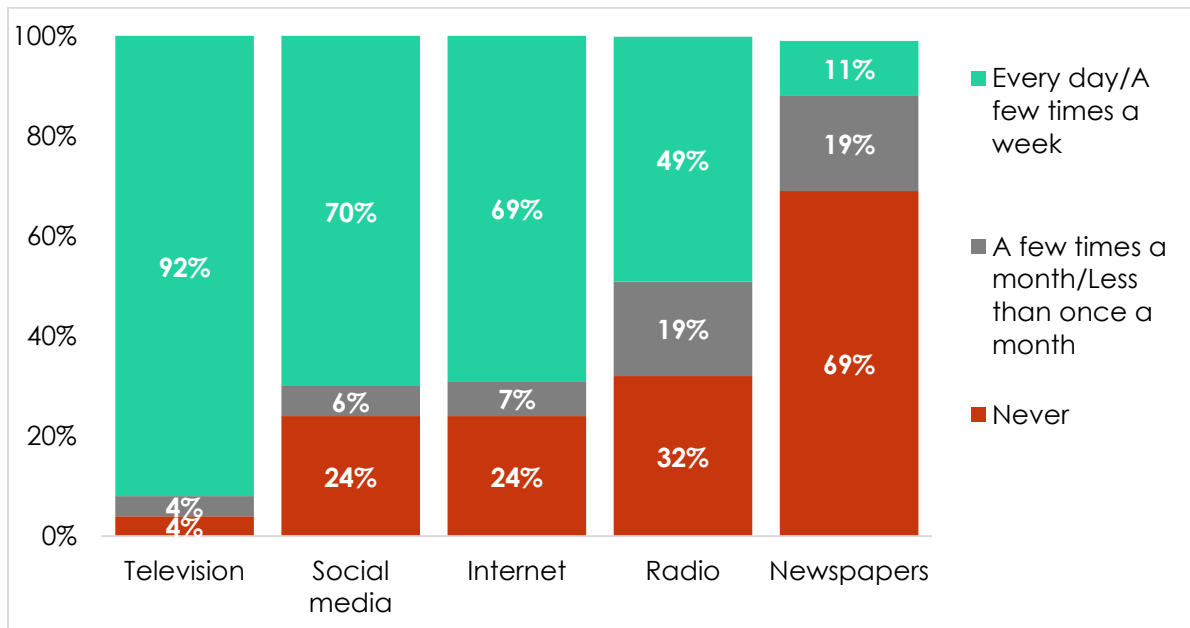
While television is king across all education levels, the use of social media, the Internet, and newspapers increases dramatically with respondents’ education level (Figure 3). The radio is

less widely used by citizens with at least a secondary education (44%) than by their less educated counterparts (52%-57%).

Reflecting the same pattern, social media, the Internet, and newspapers are more popular news sources in the cities than in rural areas, while radio is more widely used in rural areas (Figure 4).

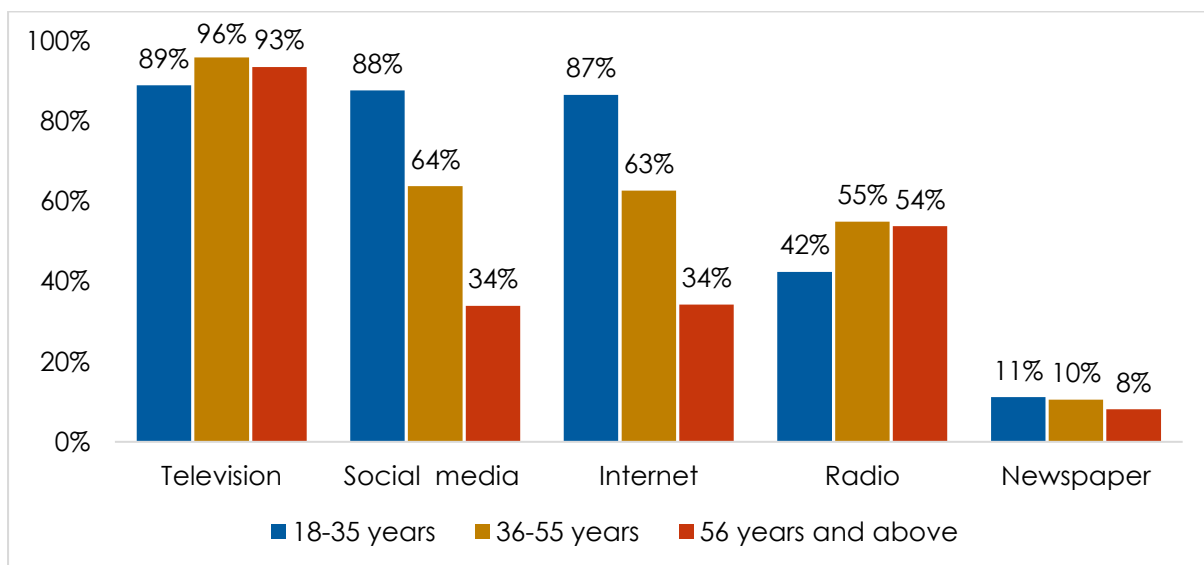
Men are more likely than women to consume news via social media (76% vs. 64%), the Internet (76% vs. 62%), and newspapers (15% vs. 6%), while slightly more women than men get news via television (95% vs. 90%) (Figure 5).

Figure 1: Source of news | Morocco | 2021



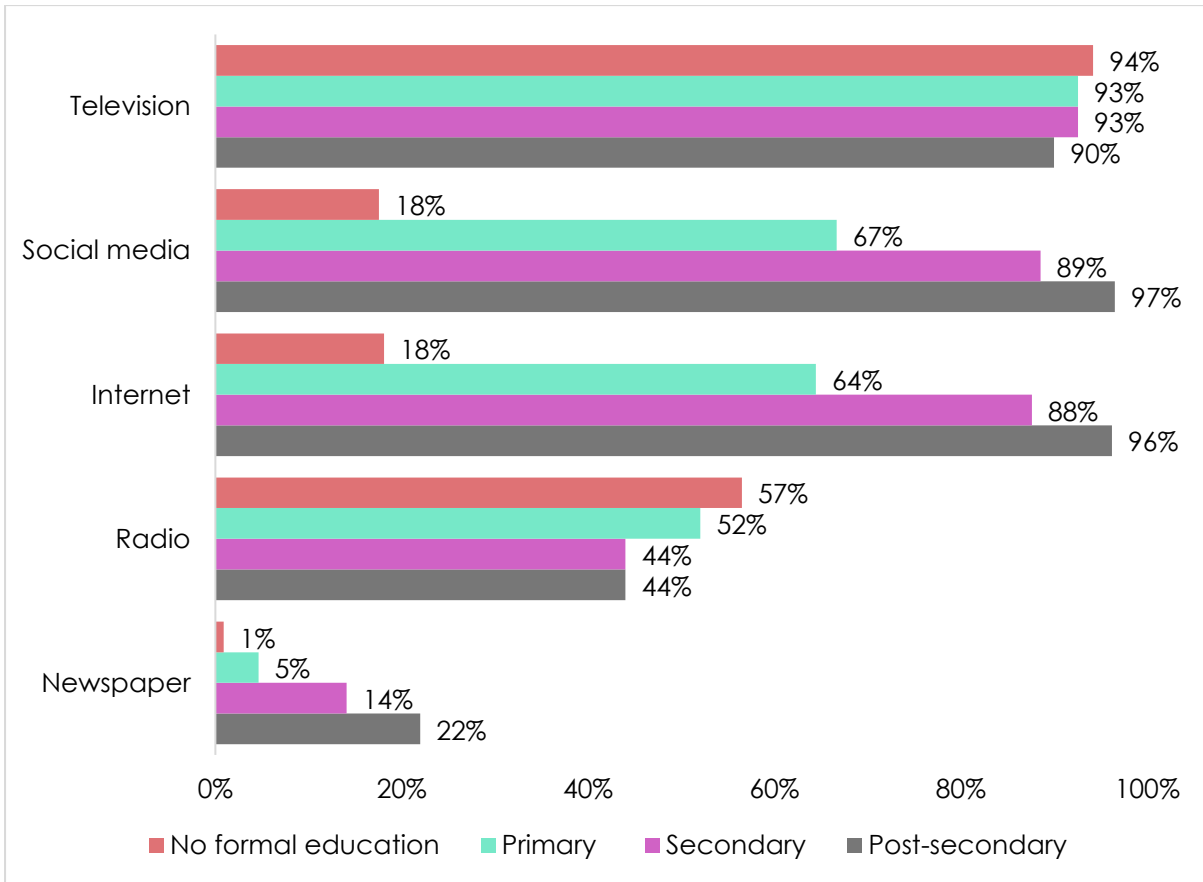
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources?

Figure 2: Source of news | by age group | Morocco | 2021



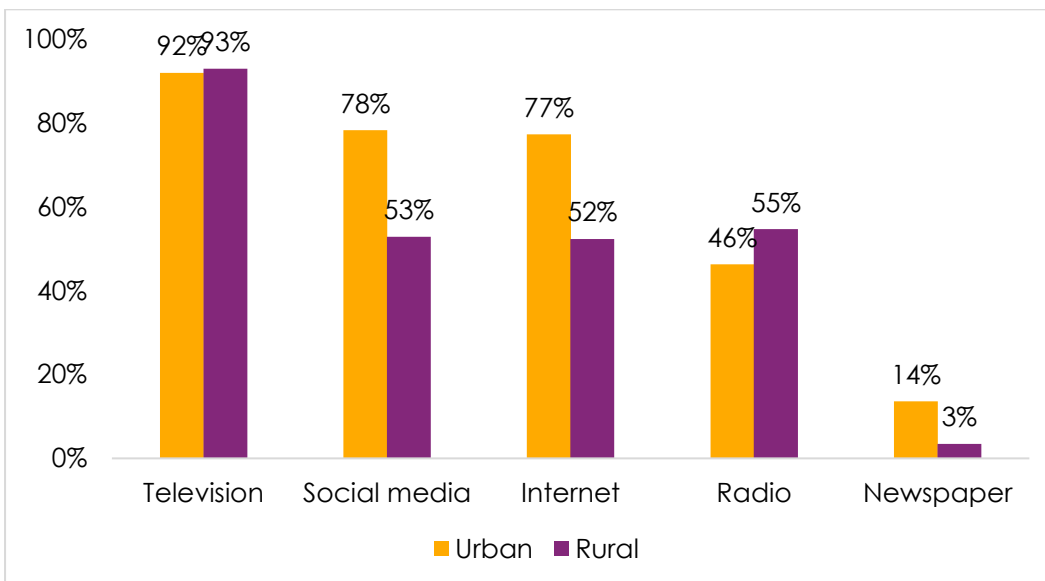
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say "every day" or "a few times a week")

Figure 3: Source of news | by education | Morocco | 2021



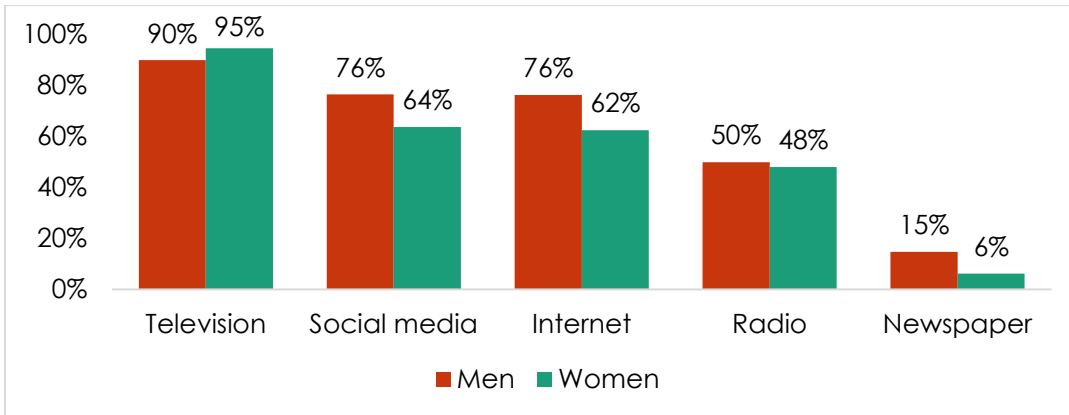
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say "every day" or "a few times a week")

Figure 4: Source of news | by rural-urban residence | Morocco | 2021



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say "every day" or "a few times a week")

Figure 5: Source of news | by gender | Morocco | 2021



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

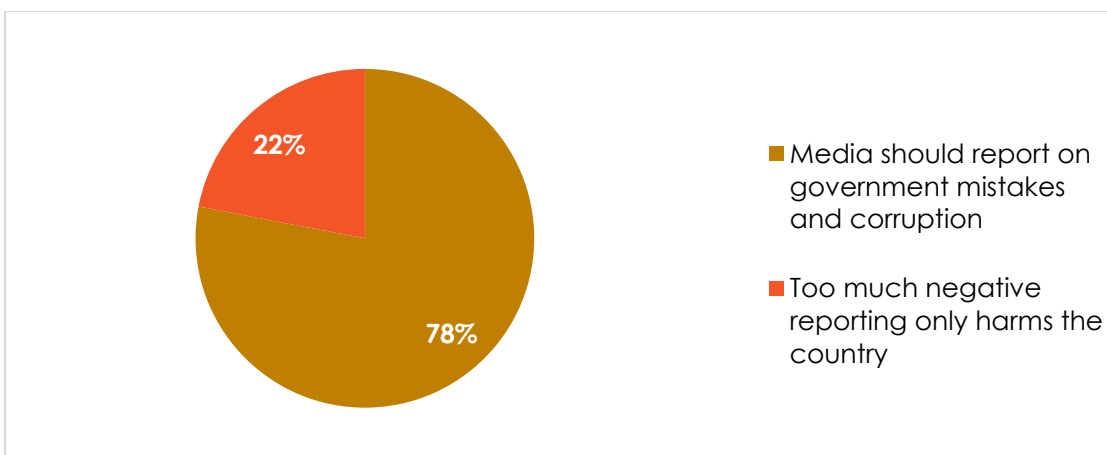
Role and freedom of the media

Most Moroccans want a media that aids in holding the government to account. More than three-fourths (78%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 22% instead emphasize that “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country” (Figure 6).

Yet Moroccans’ views on media freedom are quite mixed. Fewer than half (45%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while a majority (55%) hold that the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 7).

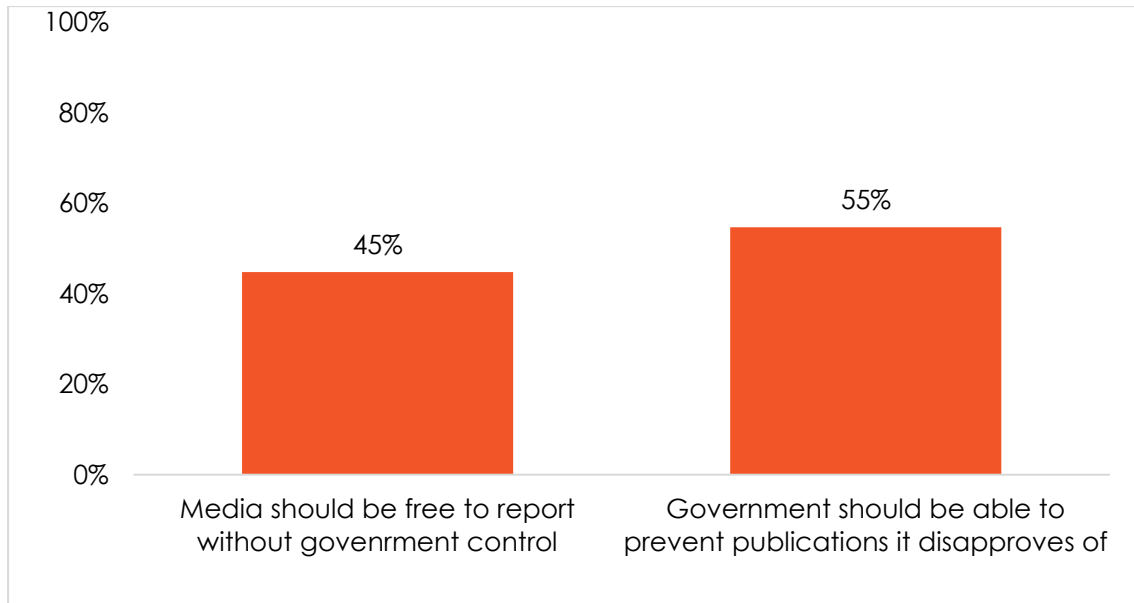
Support for media freedom is stronger among men (49%) and urban residents (48%) than among women (41%) and rural residents (38%). Even among respondents with post-secondary education, only a slim majority (52%) support media freedom (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Media’s watchdog role | Morocco | 2021



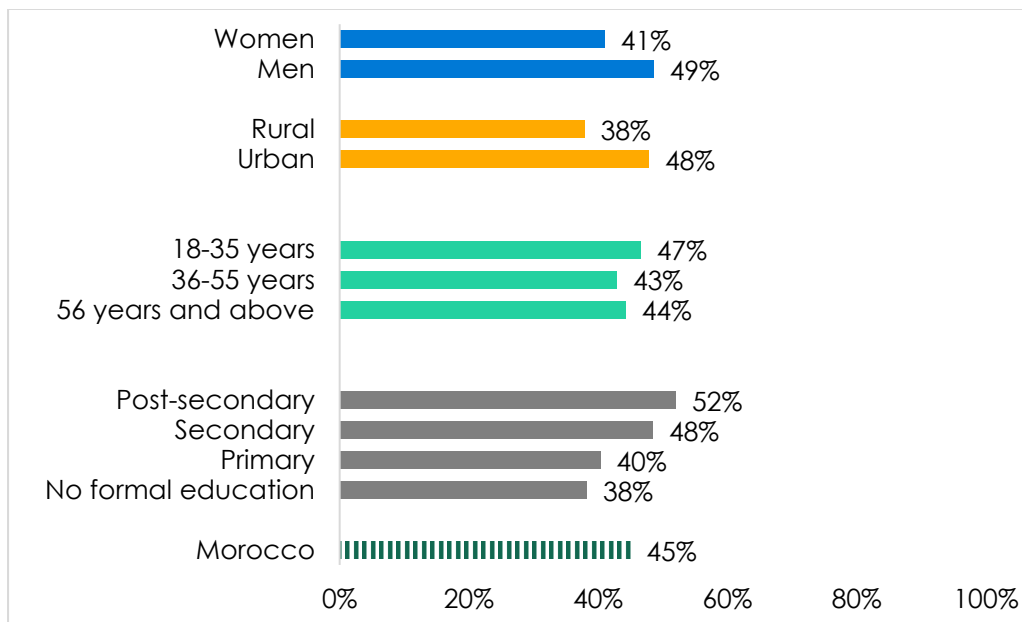
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Figure 7: Should the media be free? | Morocco | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your views?
 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 "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 8: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Morocco | 2021

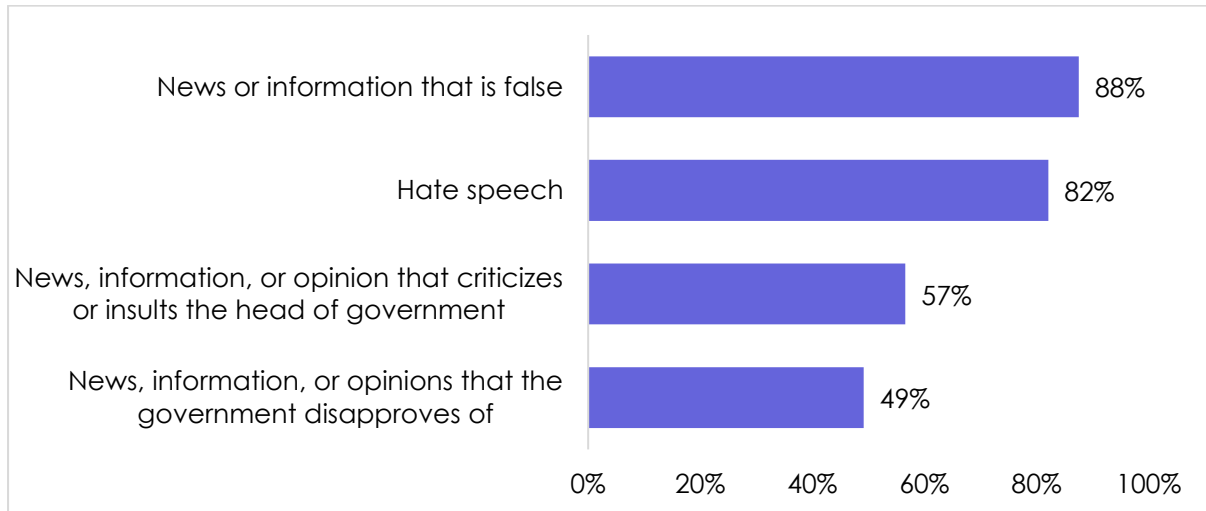


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your views?
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

In particular, strong majorities endorse their government's right to prohibit the sharing of false information or news (88%) and of hate speech (82%) (Figure 9).

A majority (57%) also support the government's right to block information that "criticizes or insults the head of government," while about half (49%) would allow restrictions on news, information, and opinions that the government disapproves of.

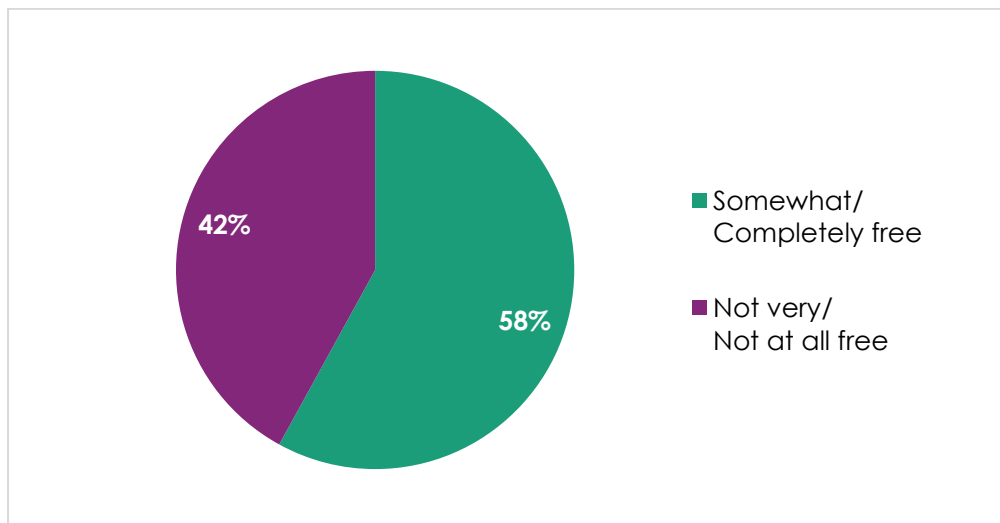
Figure 9: Should the government be able to limit the sharing of certain types of information? | Morocco | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit sharing of: News or information that is false? News, information, or opinion that the government disapproves of? News, information, or opinion that criticizes or insults the prime minister? Hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In practice, almost six in 10 Moroccans (58%) say the country's media is "somewhat free" or "completely free" to report and comment on the news. But more than four in 10 (42%) consider the media "not very" or "not free at all" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: How free is the media? | Morocco | 2021

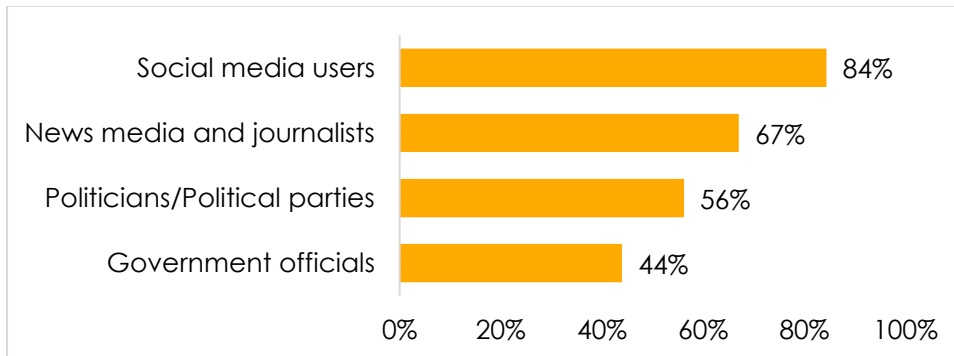


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?

Sources of false news

As the use of digital media outlets has increased around the world, so has the spread of fake or false news and information. When asked who they think knowingly disseminates false information in Morocco, respondents are most likely to blame social media users (84%), followed by the news media and journalists (67%), politicians or political parties (56%), and government officials (44%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Purveyors of fake news | Morocco | 2021



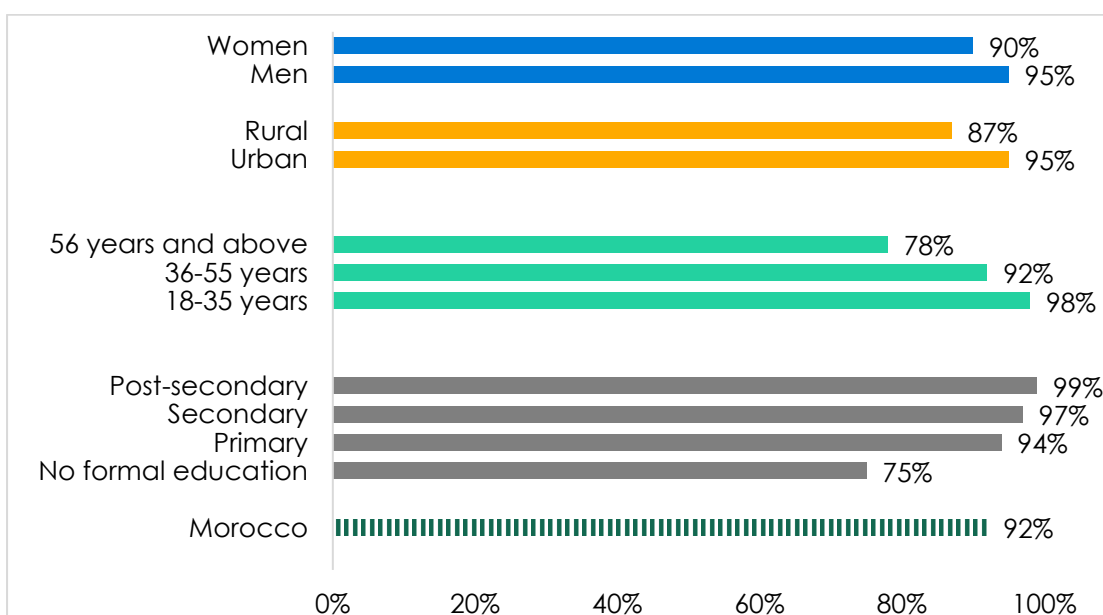
Respondents were asked: Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false. (% who say “sometimes” or “often”)

Views on digital media

More than nine out of 10 Moroccans (92%) say they have heard of social media. Awareness of social media is somewhat higher among men than women (95% vs. 90%) and in cities compared to rural areas (95% vs. 87%) (Figure 12).

Even among citizens with no formal education (75%) and those above age 56 (78%), at least three-fourths are familiar with social media.

Figure 12: Have heard of social media | by demographic group | Morocco | 2021



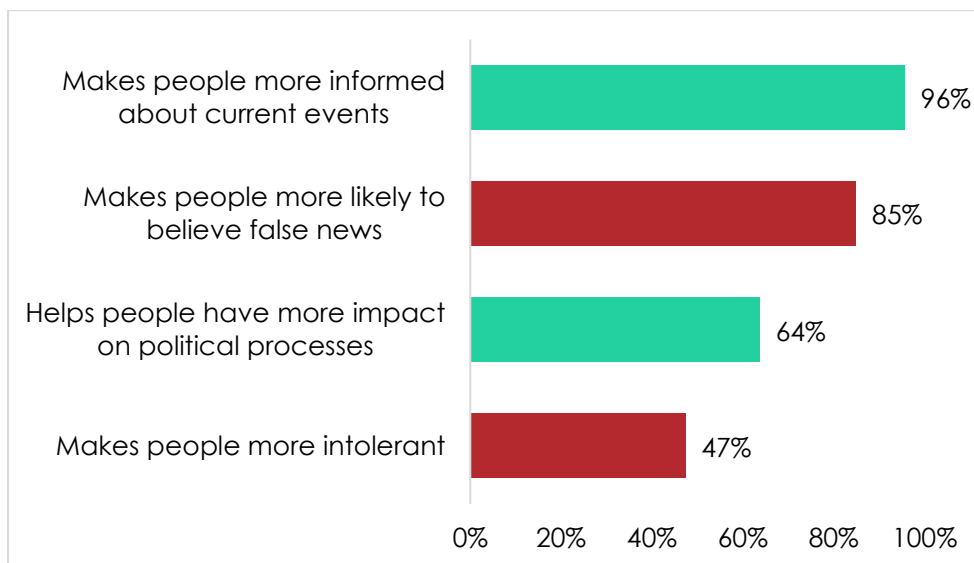
Respondents were asked: Have you heard about social media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp? (% “yes”)

Most Moroccans see social media as having both positive and negative effects on society (Figure 13). Among those who have heard about social media, almost all (96%) believe it makes people more informed about current events. But 85% also say it makes people more likely to believe false news.

While almost two-thirds (64%) believe that social media helps people have more impact on political processes, nearly half (47%) also think it makes users less tolerant of people with different opinions.

Despite its negative effects, a majority (60%) of Moroccans see the overall impact of social media on society as “somewhat” or “very” positive, while only 29% say its impact is “somewhat” or “very” negative (Figure 14).

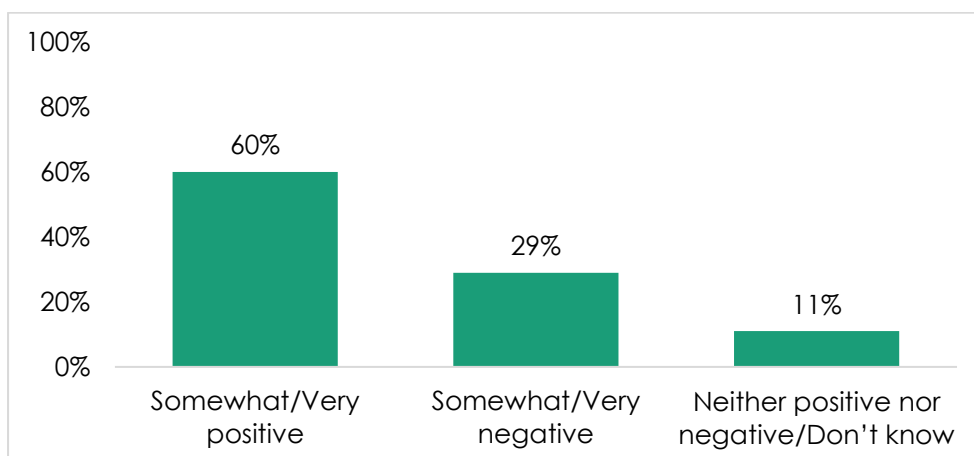
Figure 13: Effects of social media usage | Morocco | 2021



Respondents who said they had heard about social media were asked: Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media ... (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”) (Respondents who had not heard of social media are excluded.)

Figure 14: Overall impact of social media on society: positive or negative?

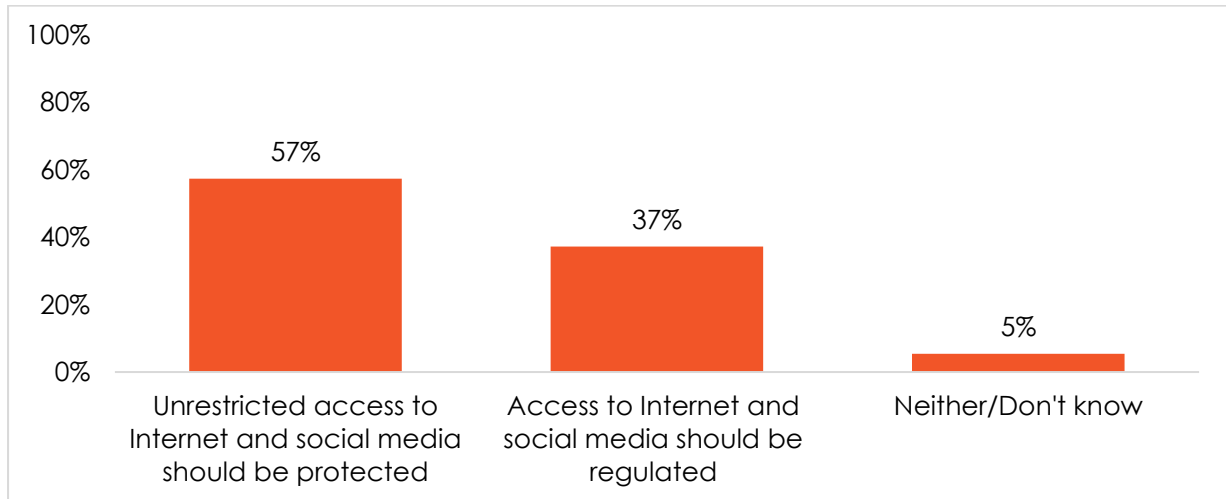
| Morocco | 2021



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

In line with popular perceptions about its positive impact, more than half (57%) of Moroccans “agree” or “strongly agree” unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected, since it helps people to be more informed and active citizens. Still, almost four in 10 (37%) think these digital platforms are so divisive that the government should regulate access to them (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Should the government regulate access to social media and the Internet?
 | Morocco | 2021



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 our country, so access should be regulated by government.

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

Conclusion

Television is king among news sources in Morocco, but the Internet and social media play a vital role as well, providing news to seven in 10 citizens on a regular basis.

While Moroccans value the media’s role as a watchdog on government, they hold mixed views on media freedom: Fewer than half say the media should be free of government interference, and majorities endorse the government’s right to restrict the sharing of false information, hate speech, and information that criticizes or insults the prime minister.

While clearly aware of the potential negative effects of social media, a majority of Moroccans see its overall impact on society as positive and think that unrestricted access to social media and the Internet should be protected.

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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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