

Promise and peril: In changing media landscape, Africans are concerned about social media but opposed to restricting access

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 509¹ | Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Joseph Koné

Summary

Africa's media landscape is changing rapidly. Regular reliance on digital sources for news has nearly doubled in just five years, with more than four in 10 adults across 34 surveyed countries reporting that they turn to the Internet or social media at least a few times a week for news. While radio remains the most popular mass medium on the continent due to its accessibility and reach, digital media are reshaping information landscapes, and consequently politics, in remarkable ways.

At the same time, governments' interactions with media are changing, often in ways that are troubling for advocates of democratic development. Attacks on journalists and media houses are becoming more frequent, and governments are passing new restrictions on who can



produce and share content (Alfandika & Akpojivi, 2020; Conroy-Krutz, 2020; RSF, 2020). "Social media taxes" and full or partial Internet shutdowns are increasingly in governments' toolkits as well (Guardian, 2019; CIPESA, 2019). Leaders often cite real problems, including the spread of false information and hate speech, as justifications for these new regulations, but many people fear that governments are using these threats to stifle press and speech freedoms more broadly.

What do Africans think of these changes? In nationally representative surveys across 34 countries, Afrobarometer finds that people are generally supportive of press freedoms, media's role as watchdogs over governments, and broad access to digital media for citizenries. They generally see promise in the ability of new technologies to inform and empower. As digital media access continues to rise across demographic groups and in most countries, the possibilities of creating better-educated, more-active populations are exciting.

However, there is also a distinct wariness about these new media. Majorities see them as facilitating the spread of false information and hate speech. And government moves to limit the dissemination of messages deemed undesirable are generally popular. In this way, many Africans seem genuinely ambivalent about these new media landscapes: Most say they want unrestricted digital media while also supporting limits on messages they see as potentially dangerous.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan 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

¹ An earlier version of this dispatch, based on data from 18 countries surveyed before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause in Round 8 fieldwork, was published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 410.

(2019/2021) cover 34 countries – 18 countries surveyed between July 2019 and April 2020 and 16 countries surveyed (after a hiatus due to COVID-19) between October 2020 and July 2021.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples.¹ When reporting multi-country findings such as regional or Africa-wide averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

Key findings

- Radio remains overwhelmingly the most common source for news in Africa. On average across 34 surveyed countries, two-thirds (68%) of respondents tune in at least a few times a week.
- Digital media use for news is growing quickly. Between 2014/2015 and 2019/2021, the share of Africans who get news from social media or the Internet at least a few times a week almost doubled, from 24% to 43% across 31 countries included in both survey rounds.
- Urban residents, better-educated citizens, men, and youth are most likely to use digital media in Africa. While use has increased among other groups as well, demographic gaps in digital media use have remained roughly the same since 2014/2015, and even increased with regard to urban/rural residence and education.
- Africans express broad support for the media's role in fostering government accountability, and majorities support media freedoms in every country except Mozambique, Tunisia, Cameroon, Morocco, and Tanzania. But most Africans support their government's right to place limits on the dissemination of hate speech, false information, and messages that are insulting to their president.
- A majority (57%) of Africans see social media as having mostly positive effects on society, while just one-fourth (24%) see its impact as mostly negative. However, while Africans value social media's ability to inform and empower citizens, they also see distinct threats in its ability to spread false information and hate speech.
- Despite these reservations, only about one-third (35%) of Africans endorse government restrictions on access to digital media. Support for unrestricted digital media is highest in Liberia and Benin, while populations are most skeptical about digital media in Tunisia, Ethiopia, and Mali.

Changes in how Africans get their news

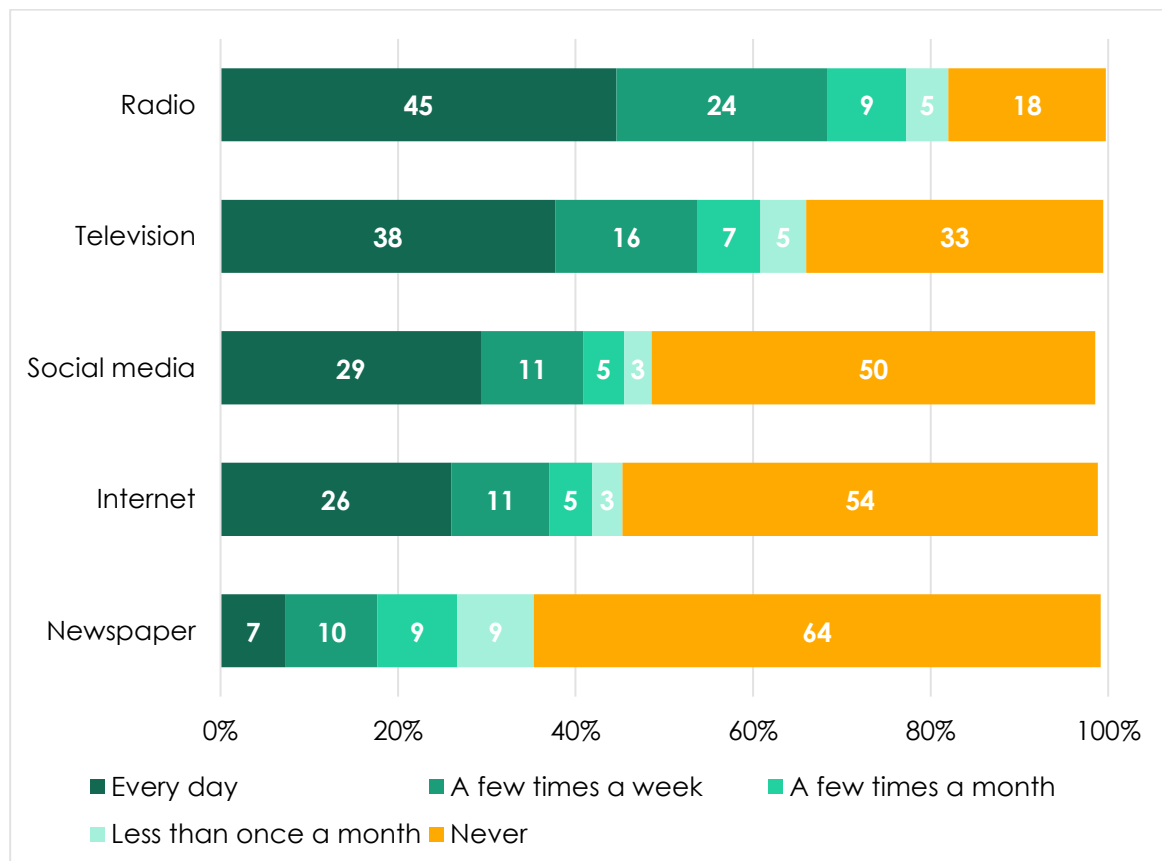
Radio has long been the most commonly accessed mass medium in Africa, and that remains the case, with minimal change over time. However, the use of digital media is increasing rapidly, suggesting new opportunities and new challenges.

¹ The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

Radio remains king

Across the 34 countries surveyed, radio remains, by a substantial margin, the mass medium most commonly used by people looking for news (Figure 1). Two-thirds (68%) of respondents say they use it at least a few times a week, including 45% who tune in every day. Television comes second, with more than half (54%) of adults watching the news at least a few times a week, followed by social media (41%) and the Internet (37%). Only about one in six (18%) report regularly reading a newspaper.

Figure 1: News media consumption | 34 countries | 2019/2021



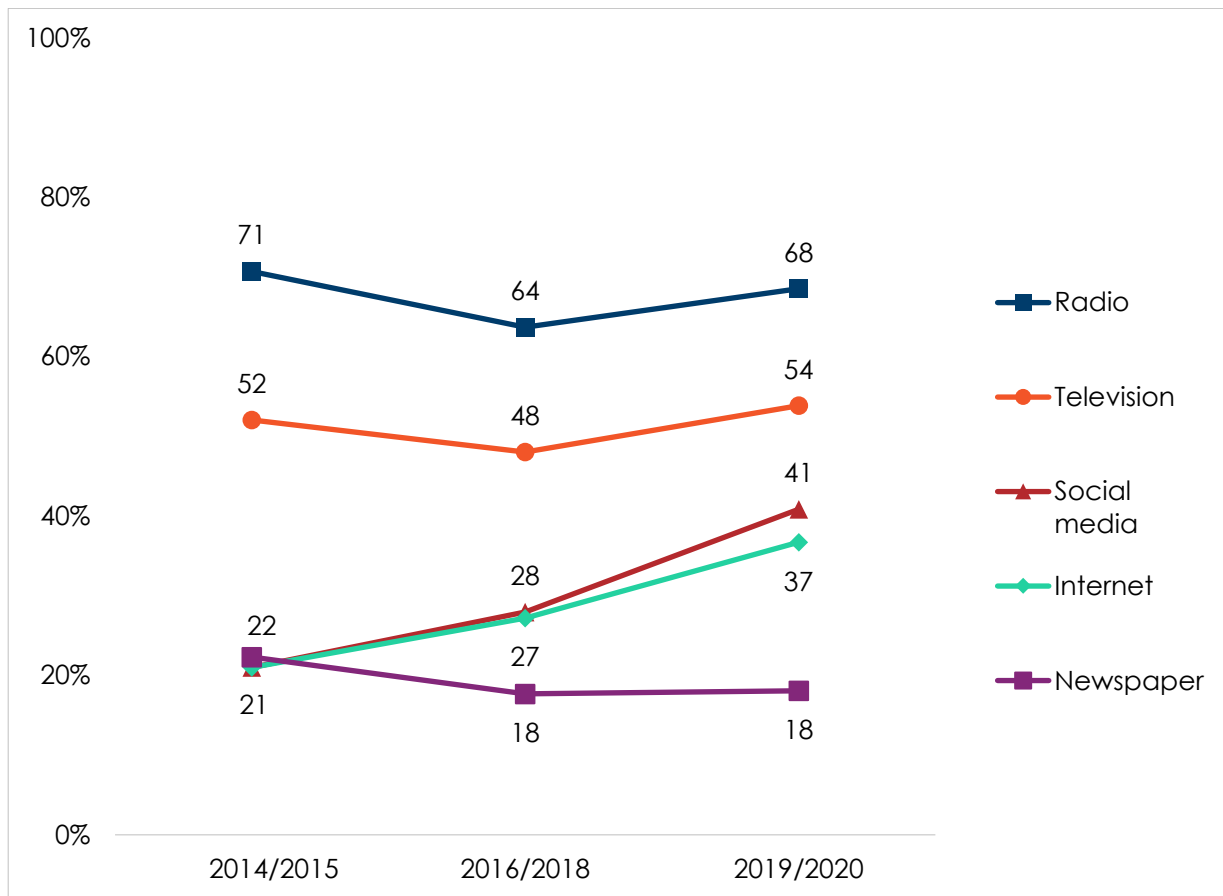
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources?

Social media on the rise

While the use of radio, TV, and newspapers has been remarkably steady over the past five years, the rise of digital media has wrought significant changes in Africa's media landscape (Figure 2). Between 2014/2015 and 2019/2021, across the 31 countries included in both survey rounds, the proportion of respondents who get news at least a few times a week from either social media (41%) or the Internet (37%) or both has nearly doubled, from 24% to 43%.¹ In fact, regular digital media users outnumber regular newspaper readers by more than 2 to 1, although some individuals who use digital media might be reading stories published by newspapers online.

¹ Throughout this dispatch, when referencing results from Round 8 only, we use data weighted to the household level, which Afrobarometer recently adopted. However, when comparing results over time, we use data weighted to the enumeration area level, which are available for past rounds and Round 8. Thus, Round 8 numbers might diverge slightly depending on the weighting used.

Figure 2: Regular news media consumption | 31 countries | 2014-2021



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

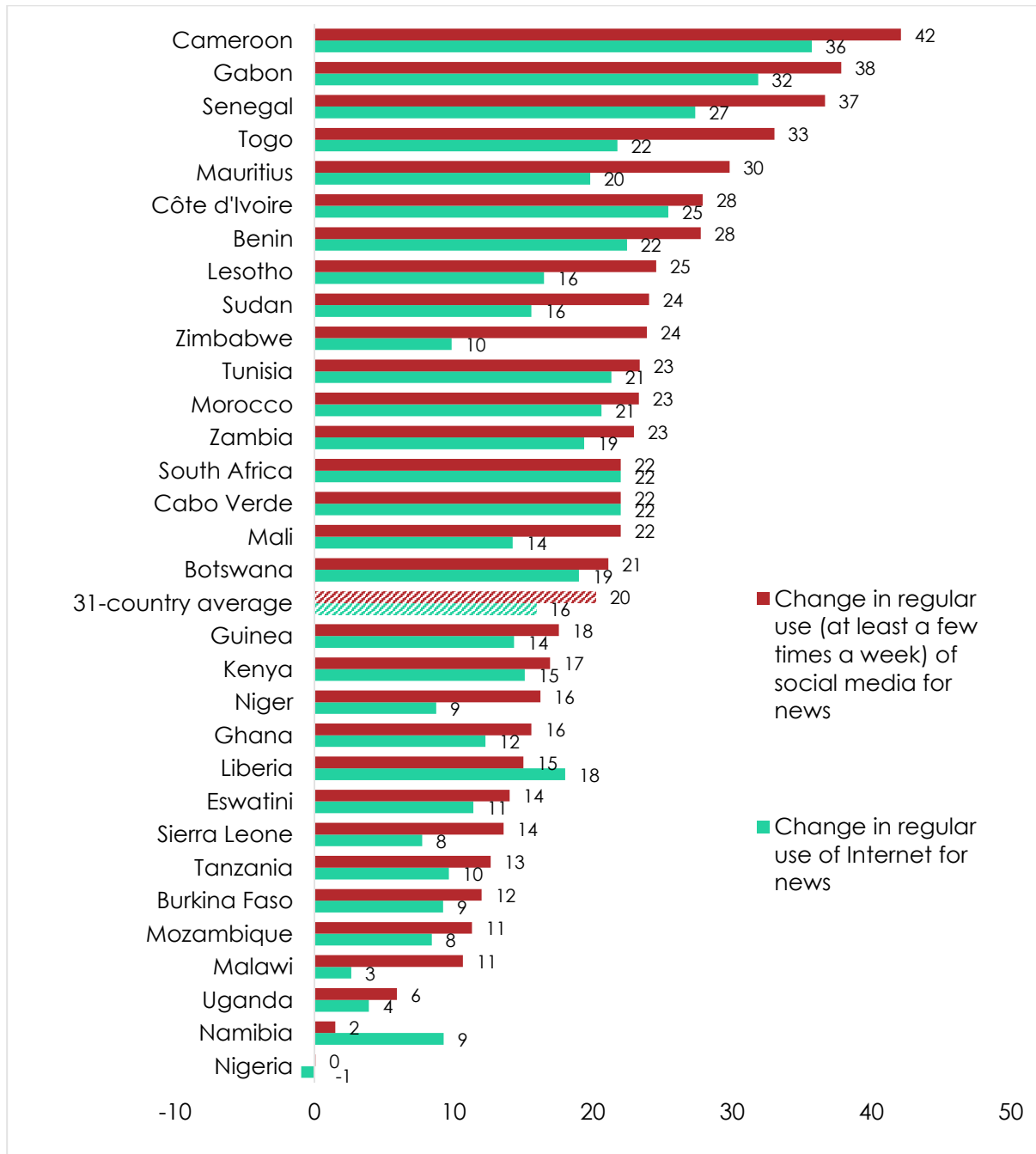
These changes vary widely across countries, however (Figure 3). Seventeen countries saw increases in regular consumption of news from social media of at least 20 percentage points between 2014/2015 and 2020/2021, with the largest increases in Cameroon (+42 points), Gabon (+38), Senegal (+37), Togo (+33), and Mauritius (+30). And 11 saw similar increases in Internet news consumption, with the largest increases in Cameroon (+36), Gabon (+32), and Senegal (+27).

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It is easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

But increases were much smaller elsewhere. In three countries, growth in social media news consumption was modest or non-existent: Uganda (+6 points), Namibia (+2, which is within the survey margin of error), and Nigeria (no change). And eight saw increases of less than 10 percentage points in Internet news consumption, with the

smallest increases in Malawi (+3 points), Uganda (+4), Mozambique (+8), and Sierra Leone (+8). The proportion of Nigerians using the Internet at least a few times a week for news showed no change (-1 percentage point), although daily use did increase in that country, from 17% in 2014/2015 to 22% in 2019/2020.

Figure 3: Change in regular digital news media consumption (percentage points)
 | 31 countries | 2014-2021



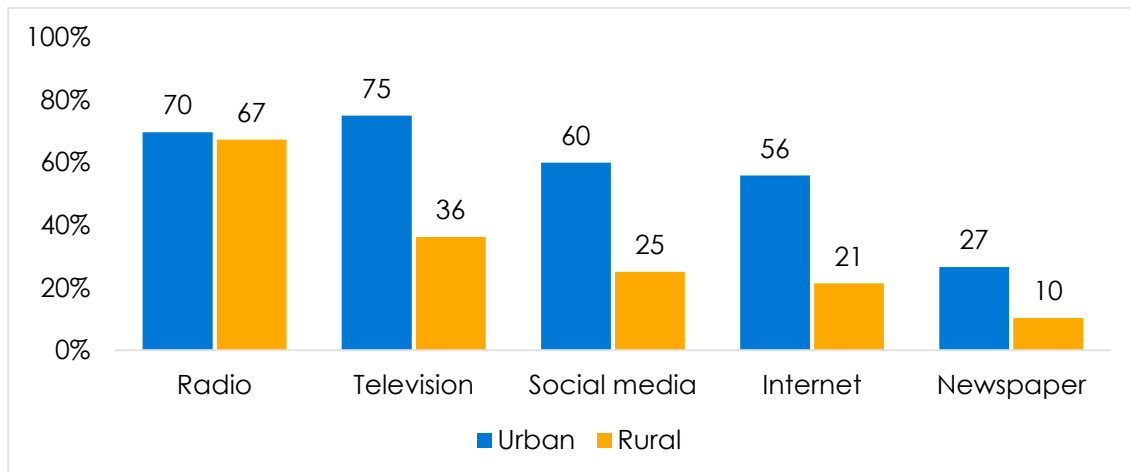
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (Figure shows the change, in percentage points, between 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 in the proportion of respondents saying “every day” or “a few times a week”)

Demographic divides

Not all Africans access these media for news at equal rates. Radio remains the most “democratic” of the media, in that gaps in access on the basis of residence, gender, education, and age are relatively small. Larger gaps exist for other media sources, for which access might require higher amounts of formal education, more disposable income, or residence in more populated areas.

Africa's cities usually offer greater access to media, with more broadcast outlets, easier access to print publications, and more reliable electricity and Internet. This is reflected in the data. While access to radio is nearly identical in rural and urban areas (Figure 4), there are significant urban-rural gaps in access to television (39 percentage points), social media (35 points), the Internet (35 points), and newspapers (17 points).

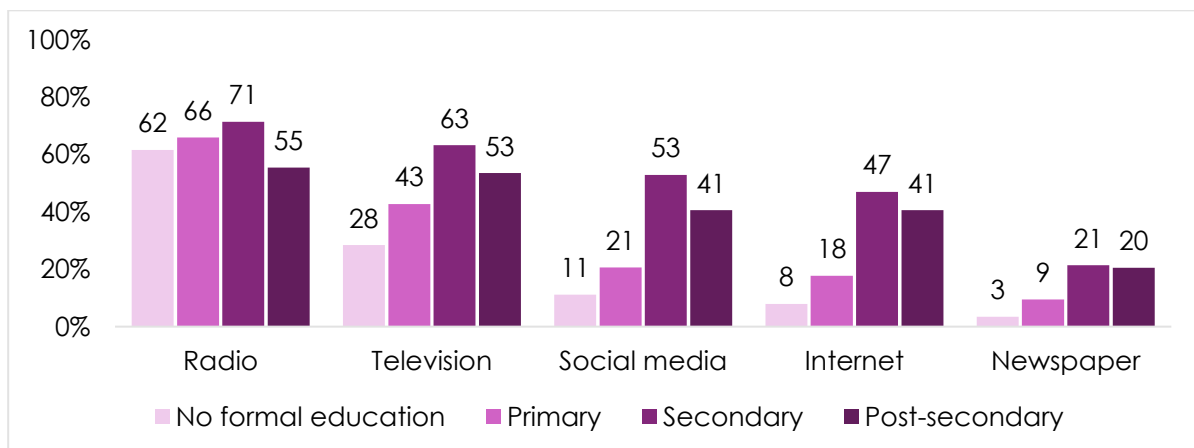
Figure 4: Regular news media consumption | by rural-urban residence | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

The frequency of news media consumption increases substantially with education for every type of source, but the differences are starkest for digital media (Figure 5). Respondents with a secondary education as their highest level are 42 percentage points more likely to use social media at least several times a week and 39 points more likely to use the Internet compared to those without formal education. The gap is almost as large for television (35 points), while newspapers show an 18-point difference between these groups. Differences are relatively small for radio, likely reflecting the fact that one does not need a certain level of literacy to be able to listen to radio news.

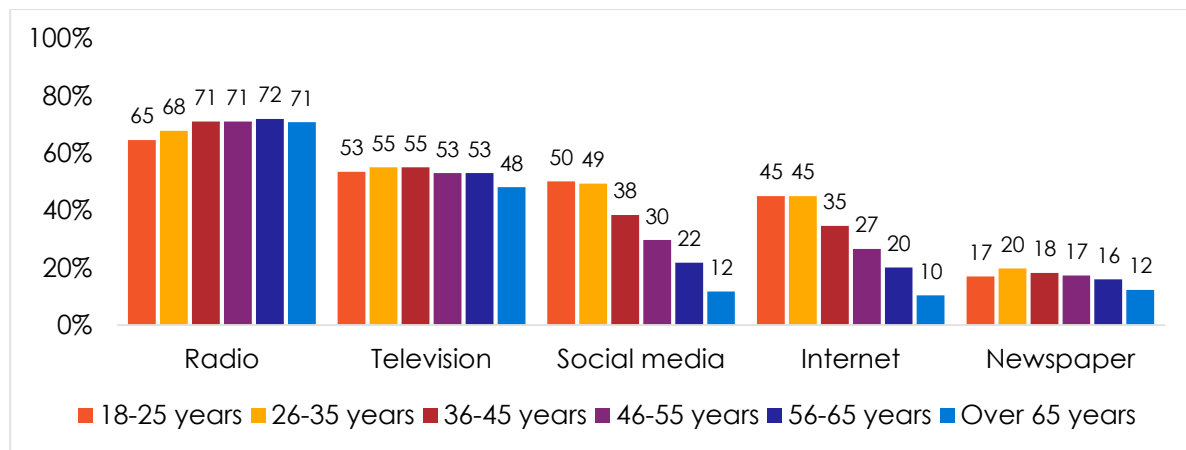
Figure 5: Regular news media consumption | by education level | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

Similar patterns exist across age groups (Figure 6). While younger respondents differ only modestly from their elders when it comes to obtaining radio, newspaper, and TV news, age-based differences across digital media are quite stark. Half of respondents aged 18-35 use social media at least a few times a week, compared to just 30% of those 46-55, 22% of those aged 56-65, and 12% of those over 65. Internet use shows similar differences. These numbers probably highlight generational rather than life-cycle effects, as it seems likely that, in the coming decades, those who used digital media in their youth will continue to use it, rather than declining in their use as they age.

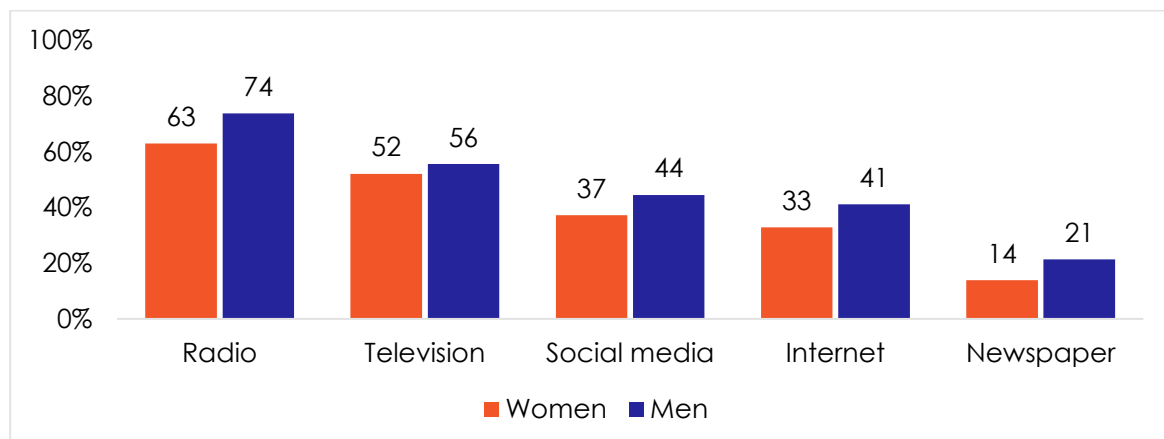
Figure 6: Regular news media consumption | by age | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

Finally, men are consistently more likely than women to use media to access news (Figure 7). Interestingly, the gap here is largest for radio, where men are 11 percentage points more likely than women to tune in regularly (74% vs 63%). Statistically significant gaps exist for other sources, but they are smaller. The size of the gap for radio might be a function of its relative popularity in rural settings and among populations with less formal education, where norms proscribing women's political involvement might be more prevalent. Among urban, better-educated populations that are more likely to access digital media, gender-inclusive norms might be more accepted.

Figure 7: Regular news media consumption | by gender | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

The persistent digital divide

In recent years, gaps between groups in access to digital media have received special attention due to concerns that opportunities for economic, political, and social empowerment that such technologies can bring may be concentrated among already-privileged groups. The Afrobarometer data indeed highlight these digital divides.

Encouragingly, the data do show that typically underrepresented groups have enjoyed increases in the use of digital media. The proportion of rural residents using digital media at least a few times a week doubled between 2014/2015 and 2020/2021, from 14% to 27% across 31 countries surveyed in both rounds. Women's digital media use also increased over that period, from 20% to 39%, as did use by people over 35 years old (14% to 33%) and those with primary education or less (5% to 18%).

However, groups that already had higher levels of access to digital media saw similar – and sometimes larger – increases over the same period (Figure 8). For example, regular use by urban residents jumped from 39% to 64%; that 25-point increase exceeded rural dwellers' 13-point gain. While women's use rose by 19 points, men's use increased by 20 points, from 28% to 48%. Regular digital media use by younger citizens (under age 36) moved 20 points (33% to 53%), matching older respondents' gains. And gains by better-educated respondents (with secondary or higher education) dwarfed those by less-educated respondents, 23 points (42% to 65%) vs. 13 points.

As a result, even if all groups' digital media use increased – and often quite significantly – over this short period, gains accrued equally or even more quickly to those in groups that were already privileged, in the technological sense. The digital divide is therefore not shrinking, and in some ways, it might even be growing.

Figure 8: Gaps in regular digital news media use | by urban-rural residence, gender, age, and education | 31 countries | 2014/2015 vs. 2019/2021

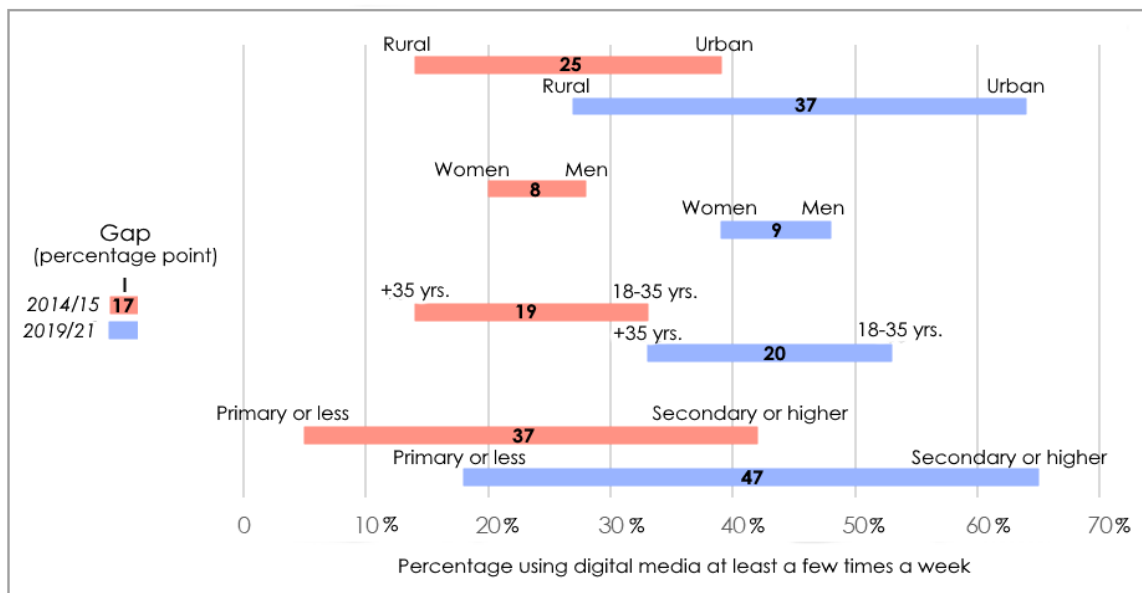


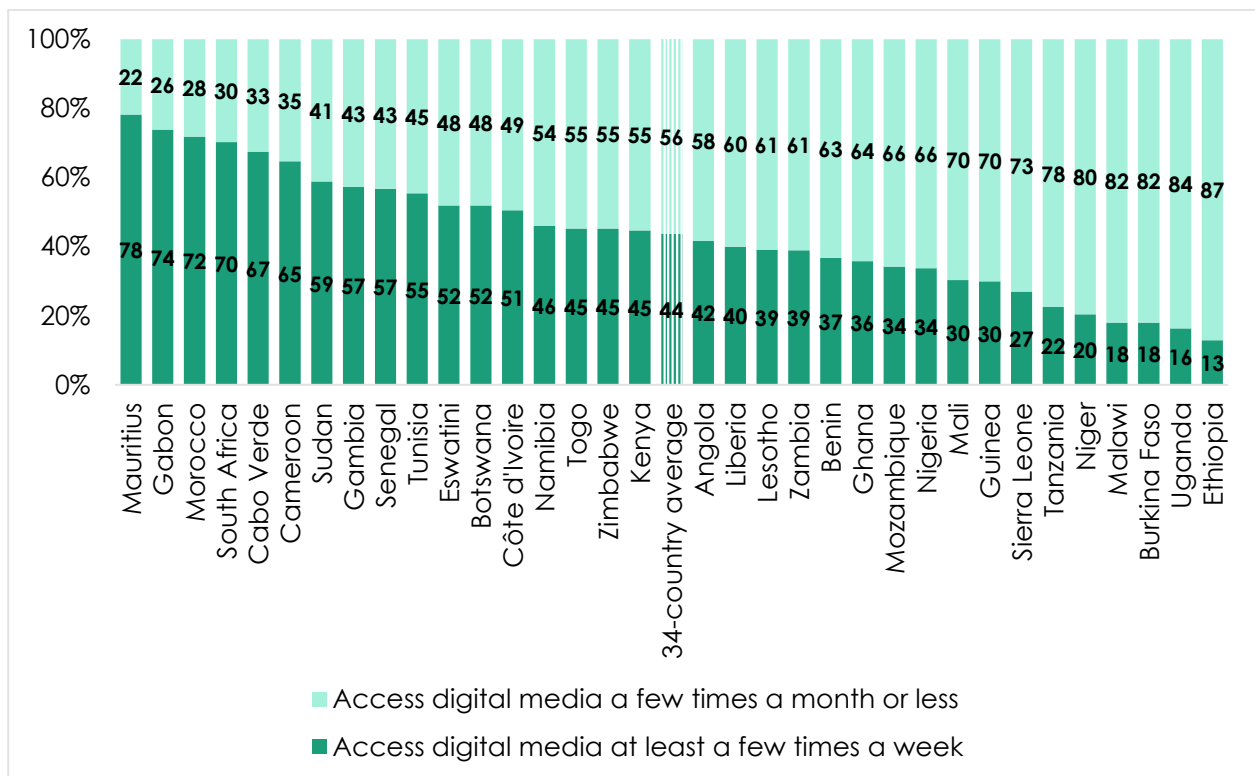
Figure shows differences, in percentage points, between demographic sub-groups in the proportion of respondents who say they get news from social media and/or the Internet “every day” or “a few times a week.”

Differences across countries

Access to digital media also varies substantially by country (Figure 9). Across the 34 surveyed countries, an average of 43% of respondents use some form of digital media for news at least

a few times a week. In nine of these countries, fewer than one-third of respondents say they regularly use digital media sources, with the lowest usage reported in Ethiopia (13%), Uganda (16%), Burkina Faso (18%), and Malawi (18%). But in 13 countries, more than half of all citizens report regularly using digital media sources, with the highest rates in Mauritius (78%), Gabon (74%), Morocco (72%), and South Africa (70%).

Figure 9: Digital news media use | by country | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources: Internet? Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

Attitudes about media and democracy

Free, independent media are a cornerstone of democracy. Individuals must be able to access sufficient, non-biased information about government and political candidates to be able to hold elected leaders accountable and make informed decisions at the ballot box. And media practitioners must have the resources and freedom to conduct investigative journalism to provide citizens and watchdog groups with adequate information to fight corruption and foster accountable governance.

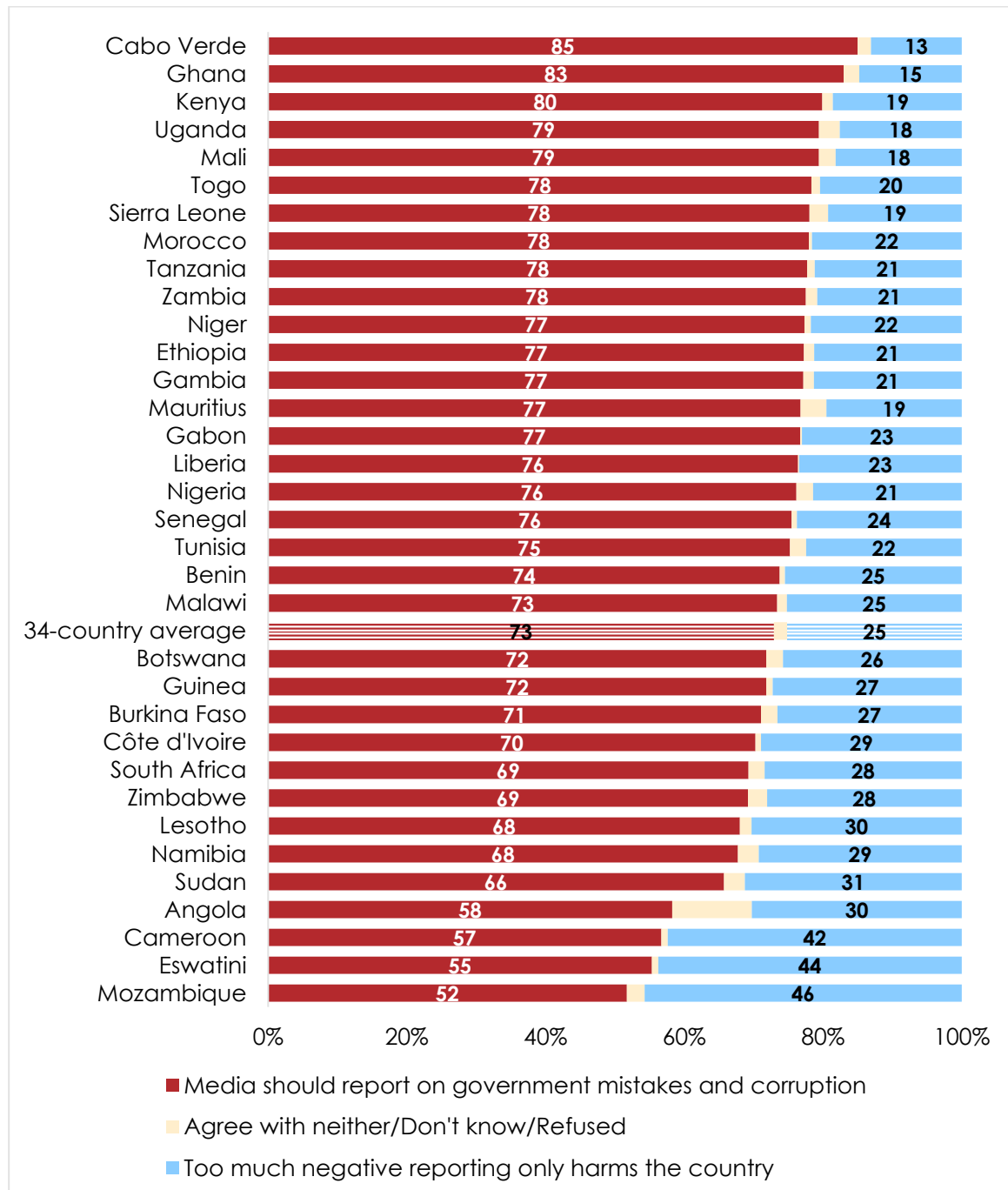
What should the role of media be?

The existence of free and independent media is a relatively new development in Africa. About 30 years ago, most countries’ media landscapes were still dominated by *de jure* government monopolies over broadcast and print media. Many leaders argued that the main purpose of media was to encourage “development” and to foster national unity. Conveniently, this allowed authoritarian leaders to limit any investigative role for the media, since any reporting that might embarrass those in power could be deemed “divisive.”

Three decades after the emergence of independent media in most countries, to what extent have Africans embraced media’s role in fostering government accountability? In all 34 countries surveyed in 2019/2021, a majority agree that the media “should constantly

investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption," rejecting the view that "too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Media should check government vs. avoid negative reporting
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 "agree very strongly" with each statement)

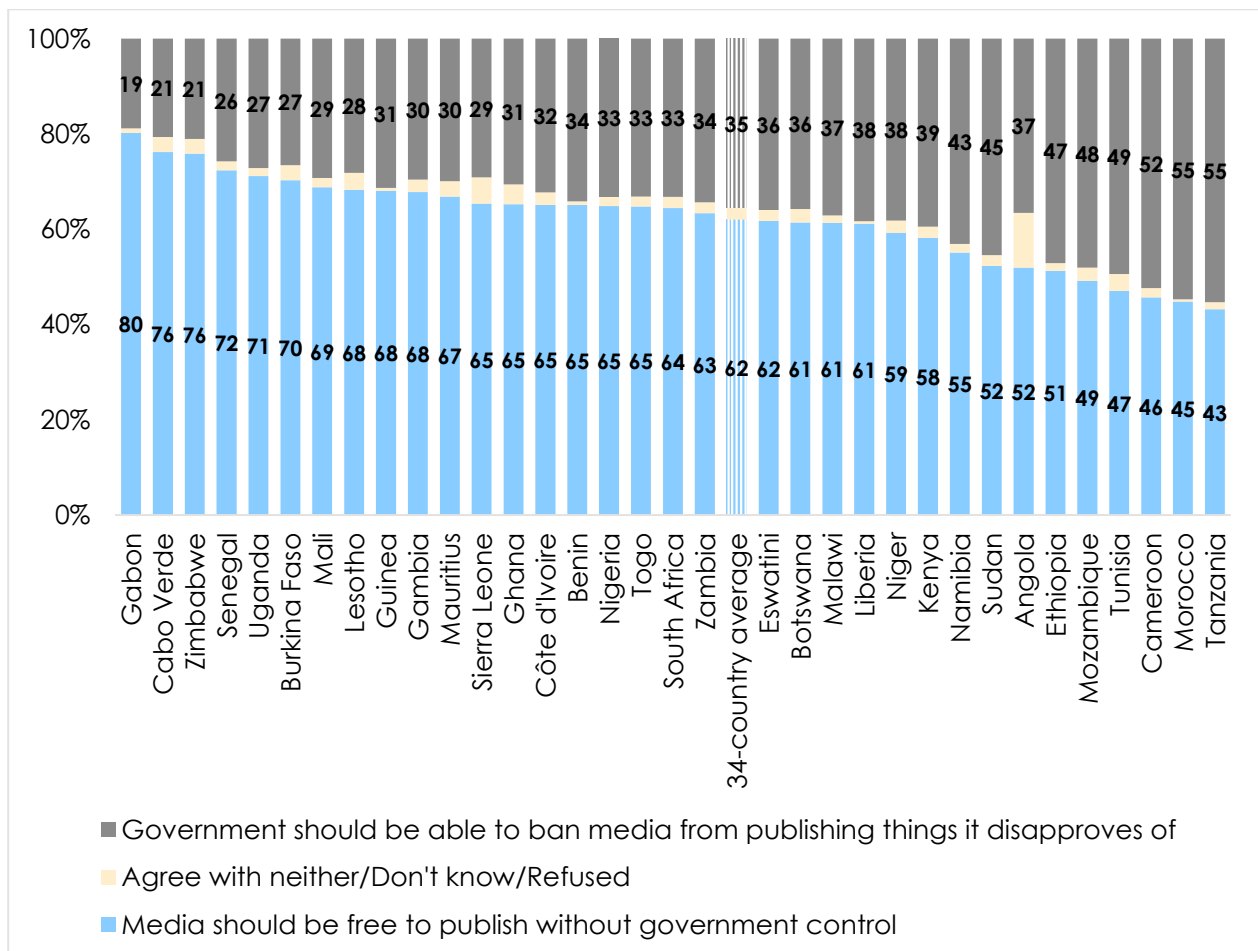
On average, about three-fourths (73%) of respondents support the media's watchdog role, including at least eight in 10 citizens in Kenya (80%), Ghana (83%), and Cabo Verde (85%). The only countries where fewer than two-thirds agree are Angola (58%), Cameroon (57%), Eswatini (55%), and Mozambique (52%). Support for the media's investigative role has grown stronger over the past five years, rising from 69% in 2014/2015 to 73% across 31 countries included in both rounds.

Media freedom and government restrictions

In general, Africans are supportive of media freedoms, but the extent of their support varies by country (Figure 11). Majorities in every country surveyed except five – Mozambique, Tunisia, Cameroon, Morocco, and Tanzania – support the media's "right to publish any views and ideas without government control," rejecting a government right to prevent the media from publishing "things that it disapproves of."

On average, almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents support media freedom, including large majorities in Gabon (80%), Cabo Verde (76%), Zimbabwe (76%), and Senegal (72%). Sudanese, Ethiopians, Sudanese, Mozambicans, and Tunisians are almost evenly divided on this issue.

Figure 11: Support for media freedom | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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.

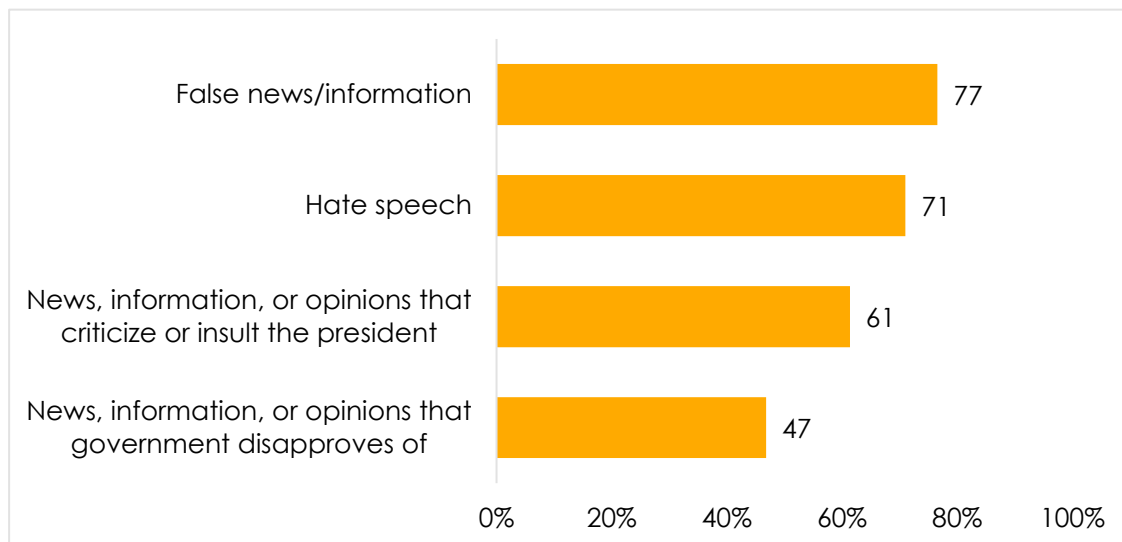
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Despite their widespread support for media freedom in principle, many Africans are willing to accept government restrictions on specific types of public communication (Figure 12). Three-fourths (77%) of respondents endorse their government's right to limit or prohibit the sharing of false news or information, while almost as many (71%) say "hate speech" should be limited by government restrictions.

A solid majority (61%) also favour governments' ability to block messages that "criticize or insult the president" – a power that could be used to limit the ability of opposition groups to hold leaders accountable. And respondents are nearly evenly split (47% in favour, 45% opposed) on whether leaders should be able to block any "news, information, or opinions that the government disapproves of."

While these findings may be troubling to media-freedom advocates, they also suggest that many Africans who support speech limitations in particularly sensitive areas, such as hate speech and false information, are not willing to give governments *carte blanche* to regulate other types of messages. Overall, while a vast majority (89%) of those interviewed are willing to limit sharing of at least one of these types of information, only about one-third (33%) support a government right to limit them all.

Figure 12: Should government be able to limit sharing of certain kinds of information?
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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?

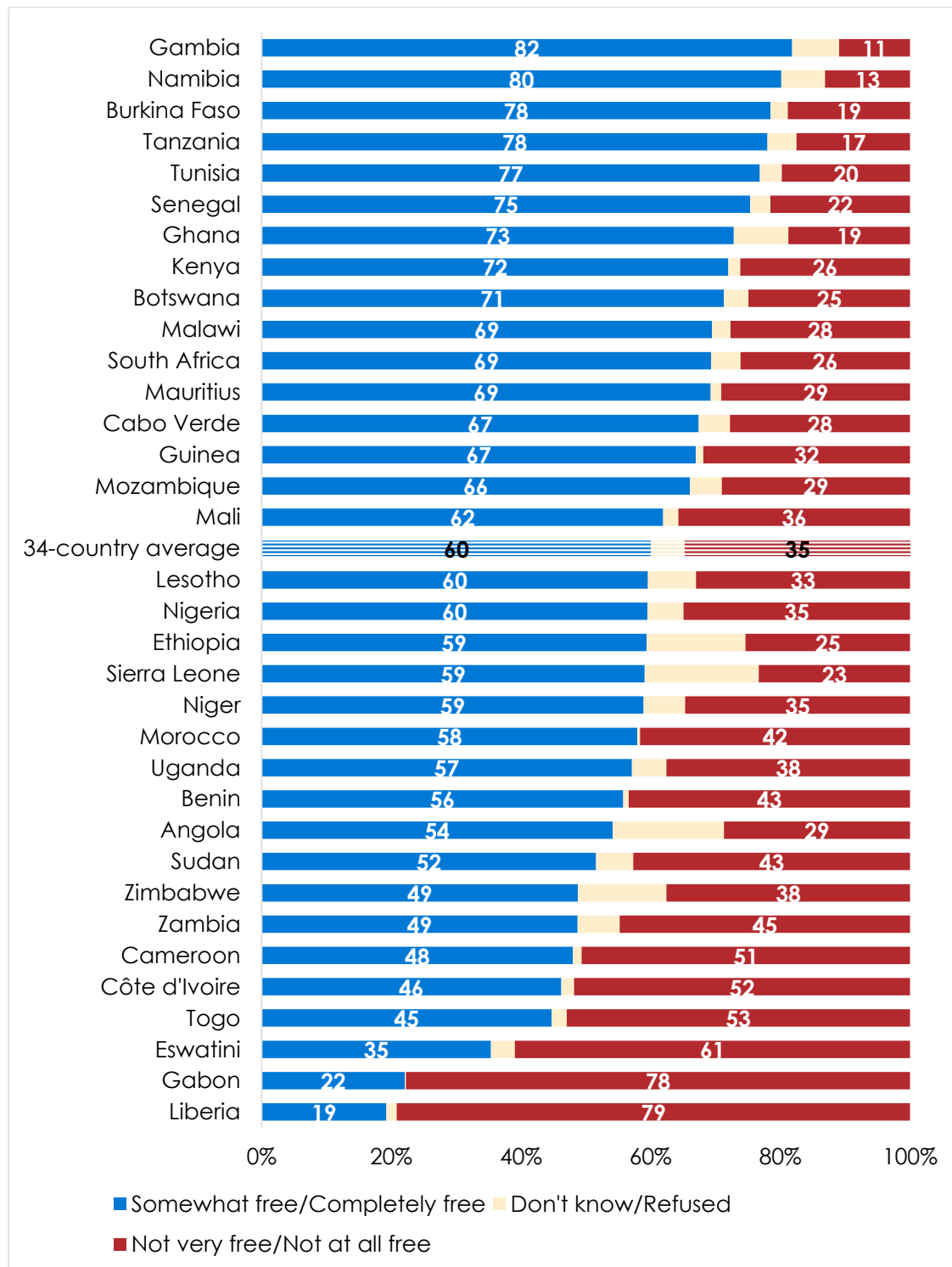
Hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society?

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

Is the media free and fair?

If a majority of Africans want media with the freedom to monitor governments, to what extent do they believe their media actually have essential freedoms? Across the 34 countries surveyed, a clear majority (60%) assess media as either "completely" or "somewhat" free (Figure 13). Assessments of freedom are highest in Gambia (82%), Namibia (80%), and Burkina Faso (78%). Liberia and Gabon stand out, with 79% and 78% of their citizens, respectively, seeing their media as "not very free" or "not at all free," and majorities hold the same view in four other countries: Eswatini (61%), Togo (53%), Côte d'Ivoire (52%), and Cameroon (51%).

Figure 13: How free is the media? | 34 countries | 2019/2021

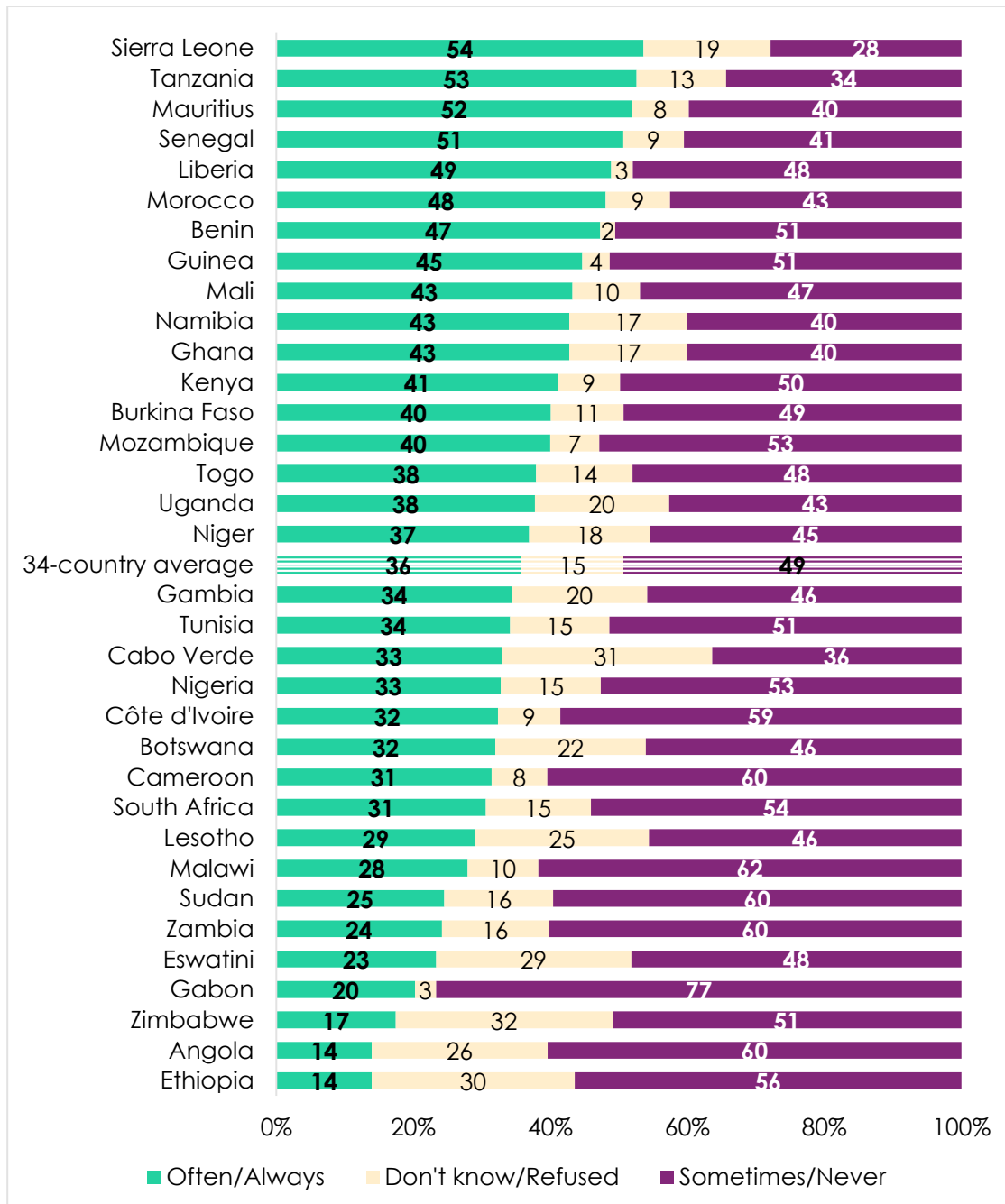


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?*

Respondents were also asked about the media's impartiality, another important condition for democratic political competition (Figure 14). Only about one-third (36%) of respondents say the media "often" or "always" provided fair coverage of all candidates in their most recent

national election, while half (49%) say it “never” or only “sometimes” met this standard. Although the data do not indicate whether respondents think the media were biased primarily against opposition or ruling-party candidates, the results suggest an overall perception of partiality. In only four countries – Sierra Leone (54%), Tanzania (53%), Mauritius (52%), and Senegal (51%) – does a majority perceive the media as largely unbiased, while majorities in 15 countries hold the opposite view. Assessments of the media on this metric are especially negative in Gabon, where 77% of citizens say the media “never” or only “sometimes” provided fair coverage.

Figure 14: Did the media provide fair coverage in the last national election?
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021

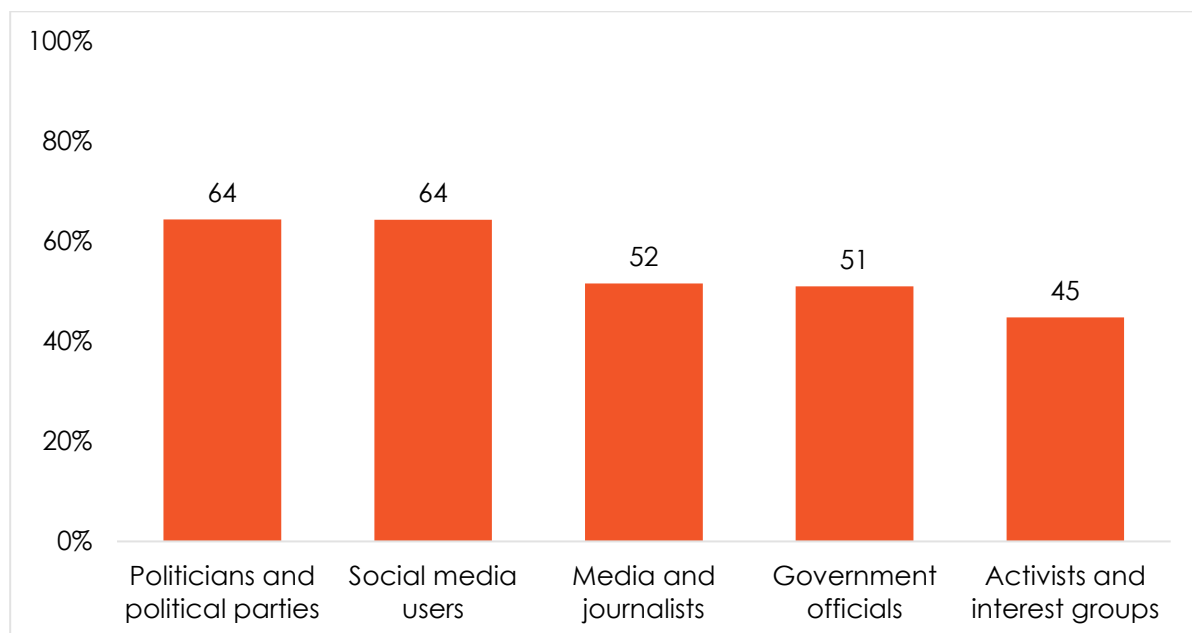


Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in [20XX], how often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates?

The particular problem of false information

False news, including mis- and disinformation, has emerged as a serious challenge to democratic practices, particularly given the ease and speed at which such information is disseminated across all media platforms in the digital era. Africans blame a wide range of actors for “sometimes” or “often” spreading information they know is false (Figure 15). The perpetrators cited most often are politicians and political parties (64%) and social media users (64%). About half blame the media (52%), government officials (51%), and activists and interest groups (45%).

Figure 15: Who spreads false news? | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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”)

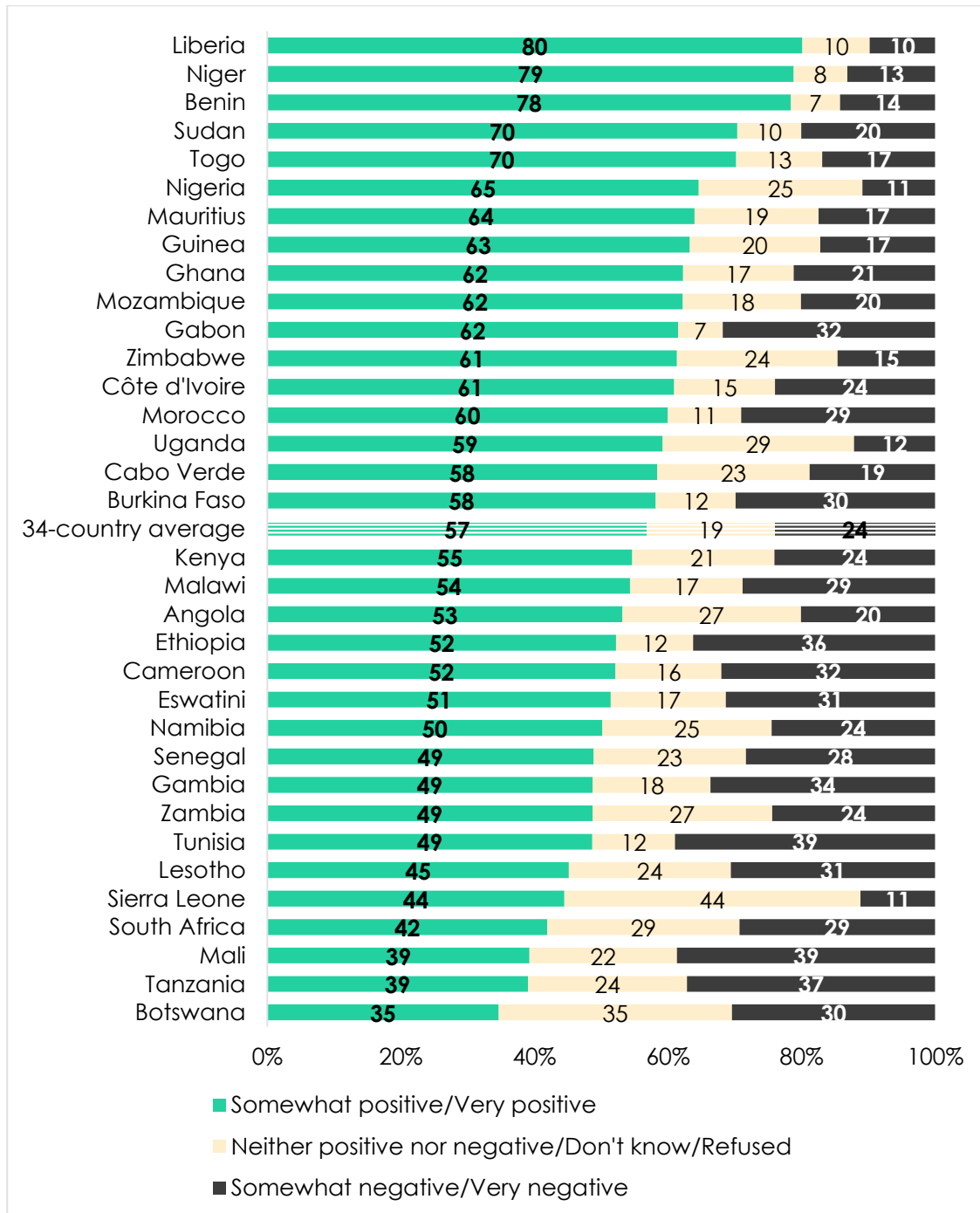
What do Africans think about digital media?

Concerns about false news and government restrictions on media freedoms are particularly pertinent in the digital space, where problematic information can spread at the speed of light and is hard to track and address with corrections.

The rise in digital media in Africa is having significant effects, not only on Africans' economic and social lives but also on their politics. On the one hand, digital media facilitate information-sharing and learning about public affairs, which could increase opportunities to mobilize and hold leaders accountable. On the other, digital media have been cited as vectors of false information and hate speech, which could increase polarization, misinform publics, and even lead to violence.

Generally, Africans have a positive view of social media (Figure 16). Among the 72% of respondents who say they have heard about social media, a majority (57%) say its effects on society are “somewhat positive” or “very positive,” vs. only 24% who see its overall impact as negative. Citizens are most likely to offer a positive assessment of social media's effects in Liberia (80%), followed by Niger (79%) and Benin (78%). Although no country records a majority of negative views on social media, large subsets in Mali (39%), Tunisia (39%), and Tanzania (37%) share such sentiments.

Figure 16: Overall effects of social media: Positive or negative? | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



Respondents 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? (Note: Responses exclude those who have not heard about social media.)

Demographic groups differ only modestly in their assessments of the overall impact of social media. In general, groups that are more likely to use social media regularly, such as people with more formal education and men, are not significantly more likely to view social media positively than those from counterpart groups that use them less. Younger respondents are

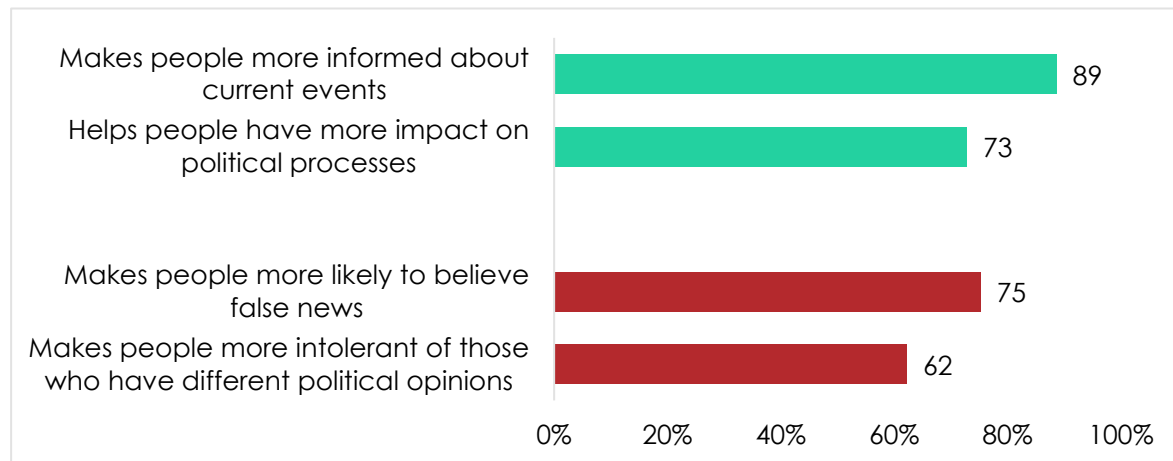
significantly more likely to see social media positively, however ($p=.00$). As a group, respondents who use digital media at least a few times a week are more likely to assess the effects of social media as positive (61% vs. 53%, $p=.00$).

The pluses and minuses of social media

Despite their generally favourable views of social media's impact, Africans clearly recognize both positive and negative aspects of these digital platforms (Figure 17). Respondents overwhelmingly say that social media inform users about politics (89%) and help empower people politically (73%). On the other hand, they see social media as making people more likely to believe false information (75%) and making users less tolerant of people whose political opinions differ from their own (62%).

Nearly all respondents (93%) who say they have heard about social media have at least one positive thing to say about it, and 85% have at least one negative thing to say. In other words, most Africans see social media as Janus-faced: providing potential benefits and presenting potential risks.

Figure 17: Effects of social media usage | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Questions: 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") (Note: Responses exclude those who have not heard about social media.)

But what is to be done?

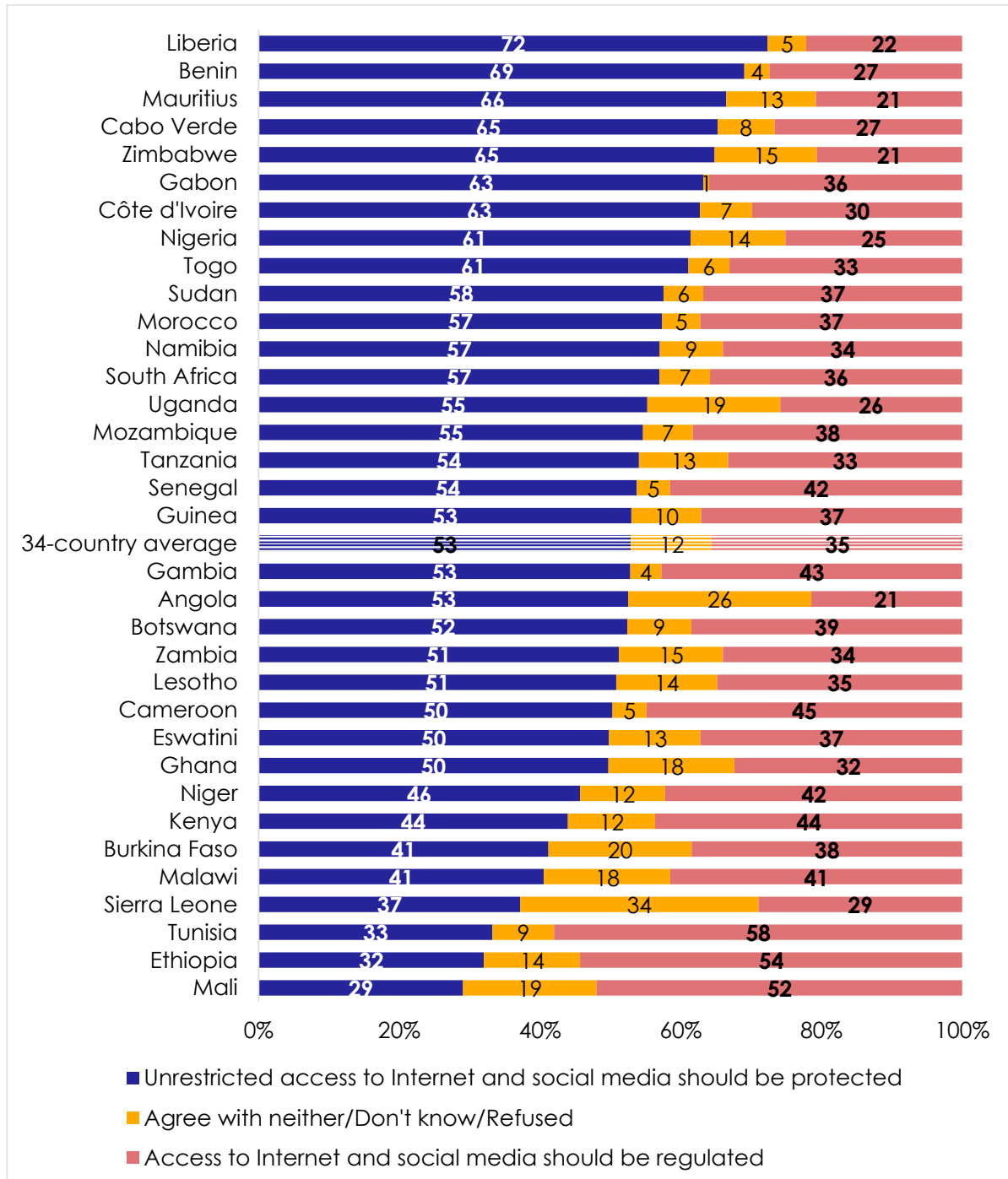
Even if most Africans recognize the potential threats of digital media, no easy – or widely accepted – solutions are evident. Governments in Africa and elsewhere have clamped down on digital media through laws and regulations, ostensibly to limit the spread of false information, but critics argue that these efforts open the door to broader limits on speech and press freedoms (CIPESA, 2019; Global Voices, 2019).

Among ordinary Africans, unregulated access to digital media is more popular than government control. Across 34 countries, a majority (53%) agree that unrestricted access to digital media should be protected, while 35% say that digital media should be regulated by government because of its capacity for divisiveness (Figure 18). Majorities in 23 countries support unrestricted access, including more than two-thirds in Liberia (72%) and Benin (69%).

Regulation wins majority support in three countries – Mali (52%), Ethiopia (54%), and Tunisia (58%).

Figure 18: Should access to the Internet and social media be regulated?

| 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Conclusion

The past decade has seen significant shifts in how Africans access news, and the next decade is likely to continue to bring profound changes. Radio remains king, likely because it is still the cheapest mass medium to access, does not require literacy, and is produced in a wide range of languages. However, more and more Africans are getting their news from digital sources, which has increased pluralism and, in some ways, democratized information production and sharing by increasing the number of ways ordinary citizens can make their voices heard.

However, there are a number of reasons for concern moving forward. First, the digital divide persists. Certain demographic groups – urban residents, men, the better-educated, and youth – are more likely to access digital media regularly than are those who live in rural areas, women, the less-educated, and older Africans. While access has increased significantly across the board, gaps have persisted, and in some cases grown, with potential negative consequences for democratic participation and representation.

Second, the same promise and peril that digital media hold for political systems around the world are relevant in Africa as well. On the positive side of the ledger, Africans see the Internet and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter as putting a wealth of information in their hands. In societies where, just over a generation ago, a small handful of state-owned entities tried to monopolize what populations heard and learned, this is a profound shift. Recent social movements such as #EndSARS in Nigeria (Ebiede, 2020) and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa (Bosch, 2017) highlight this potential.

But other incidents highlight ostensible dangers. After the 2020 murder of popular Ethiopian singer Hachalu Hundessa, social media was awash with speculation blaming various actors, including some in the government, for his death (Madebo, 2020). Hundreds died in rioting that followed (SBS News, 2020). Similarly, false information and hate speech spread rapidly on WhatsApp and other platforms, especially around elections. And the influence of such messages is not limited to those on digital media, as they are often picked up by traditional media or spread on “pavement radio” (i.e. through face-to-face exchanges). Most Africans seem to recognize that these media developments will have to be watched closely to limit the potential harms and leverage the potential gains.

References

- Alfandika, L. & Akpojivi, U. (2020). Contestation of ideas: Media activism and media democracy in Zimbabwe. *African Journalism Studies*, 41(2), 33-48.
- Bosch, T. (2017). Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: The case of #RhodesMustFall. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(2), 221-232.
- CIPESA (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa). (2019). Despots and disruptions: Five dimensions of internet shutdowns in Africa.
- Conroy-Krutz, J. (2020). The squeeze on African media freedom. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), 96-109.
- Ebiede, T. M. (2020). The massive protests in Nigeria, explained. Washington Post Monkey Cage. 26 October.
- Global Voices. (2019). Twitter was a minefield of false information during the 2019 Nigerian elections. 8 November.
- Guardian. (2019). Millions of Ugandans quit internet services as social media tax takes effect. 27 February.
- Madebo, A. (2020). Social media, the diaspora, and the politics of ethnicity in Ethiopia. Democracy in Africa. 29 September.
- RSF (Reporters Sans Frontières). (2020). 2020 RSF Index: Future of African journalism under threat from all sides.
- SBS News. (2020). More than 230 dead in Ethiopia after week of unrest sparked by singer's death. 8 July.

Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

| Country | Round 8 fieldwork | Previous survey rounds |
|----------------------|---------------------|--|
| Angola | Nov.-Dec. 2019 | N/A |
| Benin | Nov.-Dec. 2020 | 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017 |
| Botswana | July-August 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Burkina Faso | Dec. 2019 | 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017 |
| Cabo Verde | Dec. 2019 | 2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017 |
| Cameroon | Feb.-March 2021 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Nov. 2019 | 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Eswatini | March-April 2021 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Ethiopia | Dec. 2019-Jan. 2020 | 2013 |
| Gabon | Feb. 2020 | 2015, 2017 |
| Gambia | Feb. 2021 | 2018 |
| Ghana | Sept.-Oct. 2019 | 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Guinea | Nov.-Dec. 2019 | 2013, 2015, 2017 |
| Kenya | August-Sept. 2019 | 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016 |
| Lesotho | Feb.-March 2020 | 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Liberia | Oct.-Dec. 2020 | 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018 |
| Malawi | Nov.-Dec. 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Mali | March-April 2020 | 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Mauritius | Nov. 2020 | 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Morocco | Feb. 2021 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Mozambique | May-July 2021 | 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018 |
| Namibia | August 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Niger | Oct.-Nov. 2020 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Nigeria | Jan.-Feb. 2020 | 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017 |
| Senegal | Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021 | 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Sierra Leone | March 2020 | 2012, 2015, 2018 |
| Sudan | Feb.-April 2021 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| South Africa | May-June 2021 | 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018 |
| Tanzania | Feb.-March 2021 | 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Togo | Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021 | 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Tunisia | Feb.-March 2020 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Uganda | Sept.-Oct. 2019 | 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017 |
| Zambia | Nov.-Dec. 2020 | 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Zimbabwe | April-May 2021 | 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017 |

Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz is associate professor of political science at Michigan State University and editor of the Afrobarometer Working Papers series. Email: conroyk6@msu.edu.

Joseph Koné is a research associate and finance officer at Centre de Recherche et de Formation sur le Développement Intégré (CREFDI), the Afrobarometer national partner in Côte d'Ivoire. Email: spiderone0@gmail.com.

Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey 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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Bruno van Dyk (bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 509 | 18 February 2022