

Most Mauritians want free news media, private communications free of monitoring

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 277 | Sadhiska Bhoojedhur

Summary

Mauritius' image as a model of media freedom in Africa has acquired a few blemishes, most recently in November when the National Assembly amended the country's Information and Communication Technologies Act (ICTA) to punish online communications that are deemed likely to cause "annoyance, humiliation, inconvenience, distress, or anxiety" with up to 10 years in prison (Reporters Without Borders, 2018a),

Although the Constitution of Mauritius provides for freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, the U.S. Department of State (2017) notes in its Human Rights Report that the government does "not always respect these rights." A high-profile example was the arrest in September 2017 of three journalists after the publication of a series of articles about money laundering that allegedly involved the then-attorney general.

The 2018 World Press Freedom Index ranks Mauritius 56th out of 180 countries (10th in Africa), a far cry from its 25th-place ranking – tops in Africa – a decade ago (Reporters Without Borders, 2018b; 2007).

Afrobarometer's recent survey in Mauritius sheds some light on citizens' perceptions, attitudes, and habits when it comes to information and communications. Solid majorities of Mauritians want no government interference with the news media and no government monitoring of private communications. Many doubt they could obtain public information directly from government sources.

When it comes to information sources, the overwhelming majority of Mauritians say they tune in daily to radio and television, but daily use of the Internet and social media for news has grown to almost half the population – and considerably larger proportions of young people.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys were completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Mauritians in October 2017. 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 Mauritius in 2012 and 2014.

Key findings

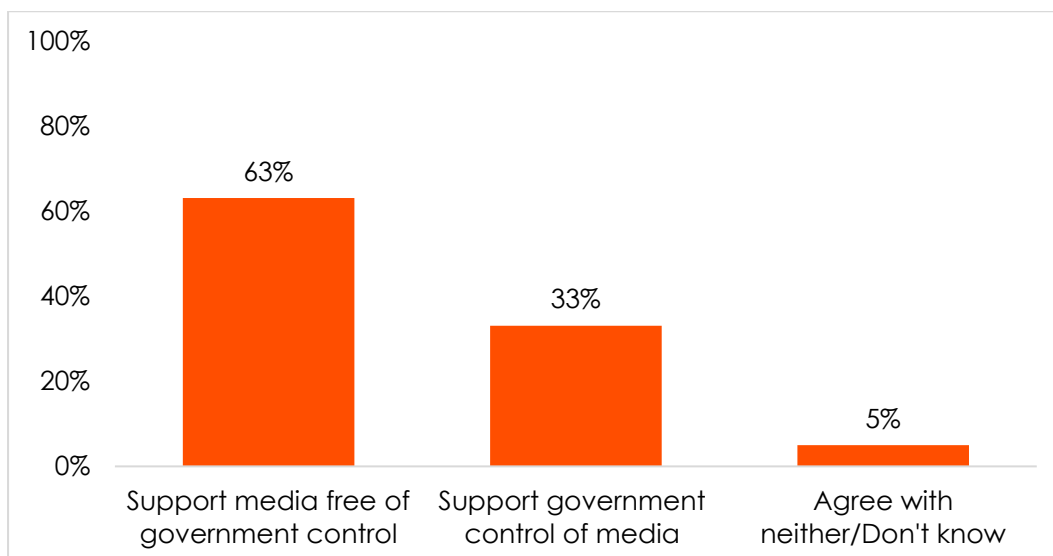
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Mauritians say the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control, a decline of 5 percentage points from 2014.
- The same majority (63%) believe that people should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they say.
- About half of respondents say it's "not at all likely" or "not very likely" that they could obtain information from government or other public sources about local government development plans and budgets (51%), school budgets (49%), or land ownership (41%).
- Nine out of 10 Mauritians say they get news "every day" from radio (89%) and television (88%). Newspaper readership continues to decline, while daily use of social media and the Internet as sources of news saw increases of 10 and 6 percentage points, respectively, since 2014.

Media freedom vs. government control

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Mauritians "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while one-third (33%) believe the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society (Figure 1). Support for media freedom declined by 5 percentage points from 2014 (Figure 2) but still remains near the top (fifth out of 34) among African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2016/2018.

Men are more likely than women to support media freedom (66% vs. 58%), but differences by urban-rural location, age, and education level don't show a consistent pattern (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Media freedom vs. government control | Mauritius | 2017



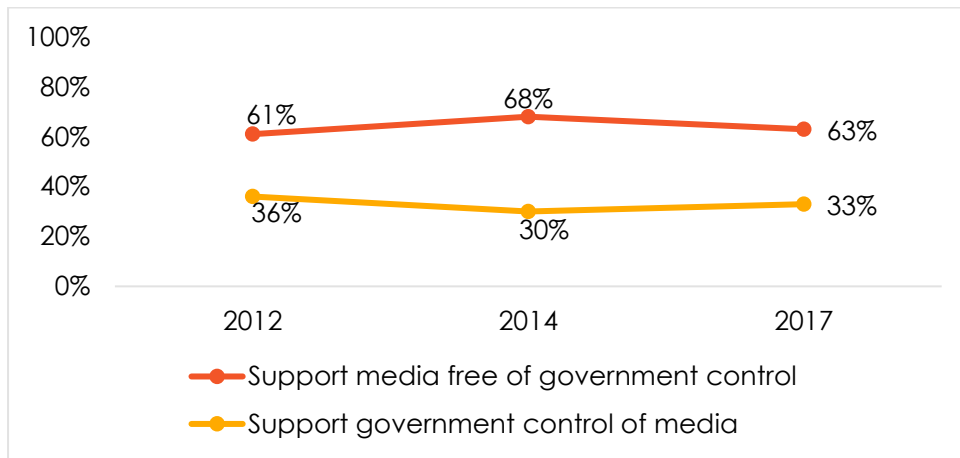
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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 considers harmful to society.

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

Figure 2: Media freedom vs. government control | Mauritius | 2012-2017



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 considers harmful to society.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Figure 3: Support for media freedom | by gender, residency location, age, and education | Mauritius | 2017

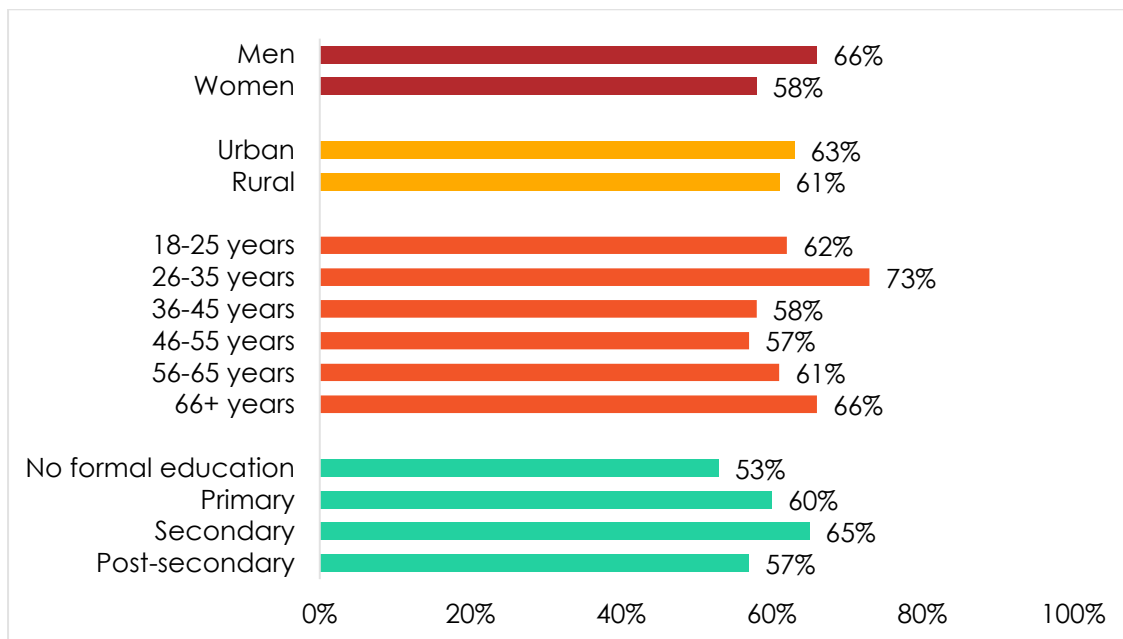


Figure shows % who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the media should be free of government control.

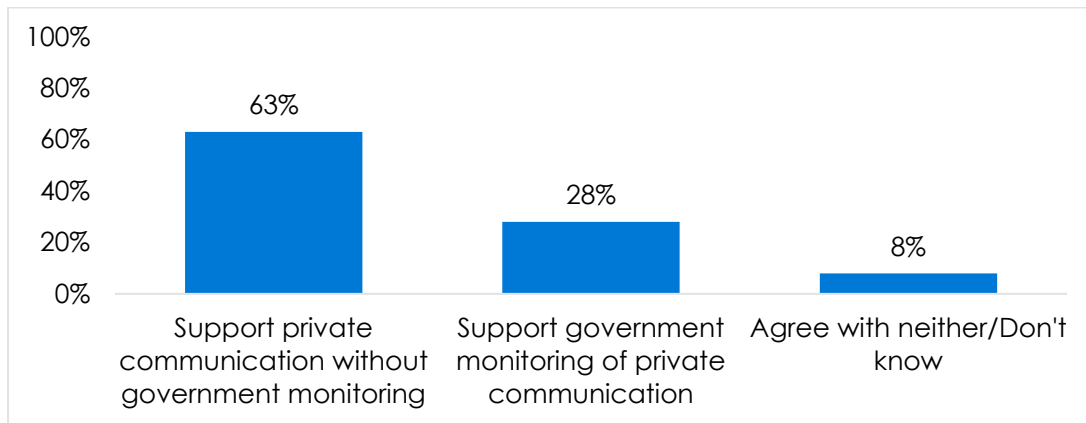
Monitoring of private communication

In addition to a free news media, a majority of Mauritians want their private communications to be free of government monitoring. Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents “agree” or “agree very strongly” that people should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they say. About three in 10 (28%) believe

that the government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence (Figure 4).

Urban residents are considerably more likely than their rural counterparts to favour private communications free of government monitoring (76% vs. 54%) (Figure 5). The privacy of their communications is a greater concern among young respondents (69%-71% of those aged 18-35 years) and increases with education level, ranging from 24% among those with no formal education to 74% among those with a post-secondary education.

Figure 4: Should government be able to monitor private communications?
 | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence.
 Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 5: Support for private communications | by gender, residency location, age, and education | Mauritius | 2017

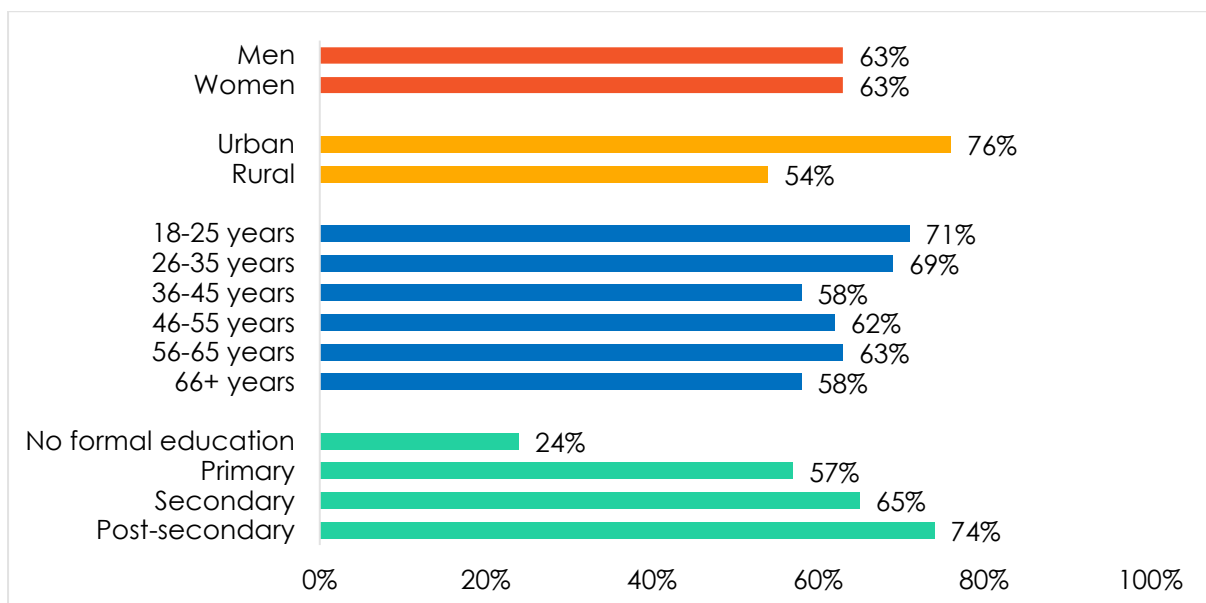
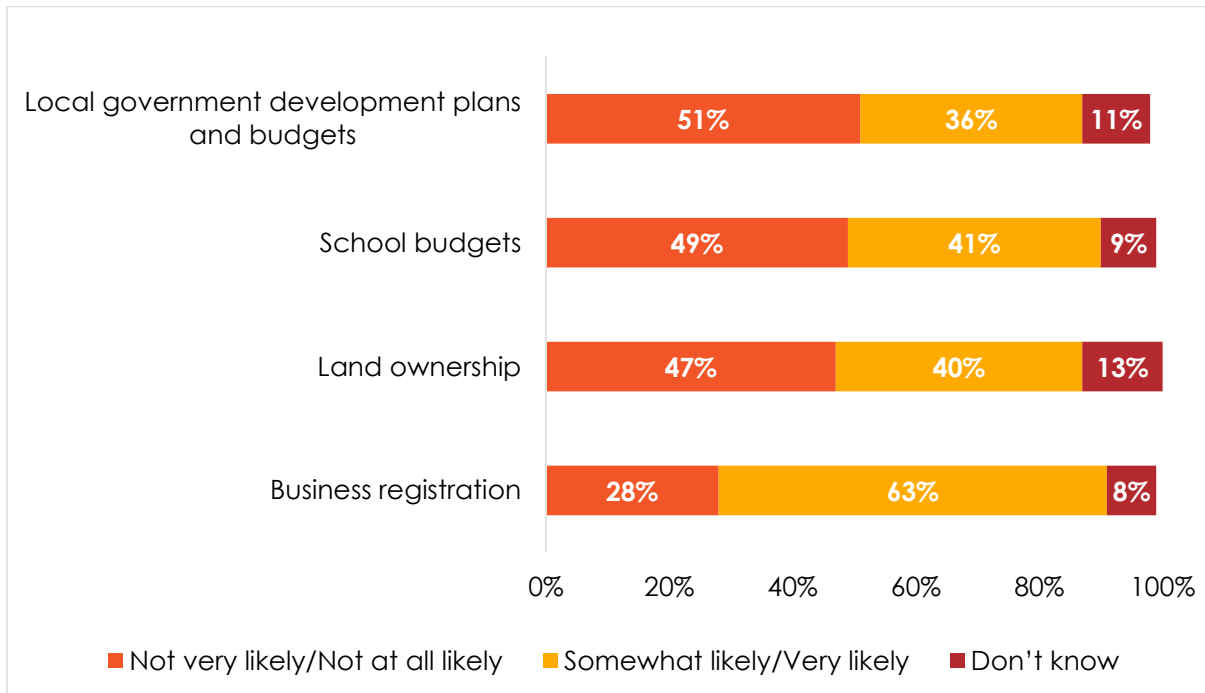


Figure shows % who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that people should have the right to communicate in private without government monitoring.

Access to public information

When it comes to their ability to obtain information directly from public sources, many Mauritians have their doubts. Almost half of respondents say it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that they would be able to get information about local government development plans and budgets (51%), school budgets (49%), and land ownership (47%). However, six in 10 (63%) think they could obtain information about business registration (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Access to information | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

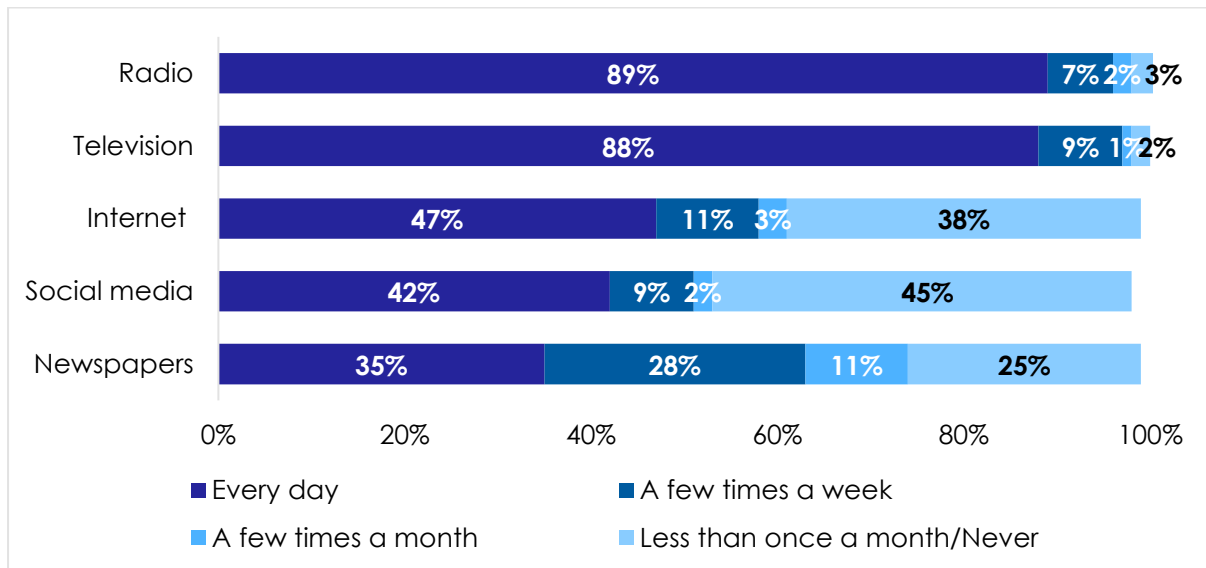
- A. If you went to the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- B. If you went to the registrar general's office to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- C. If you went to the municipal or district council to find out about the district development plan and budgets?
- D. If you went to the municipal or District council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

News sources

Mauritians are heavy consumers of news: Almost nine out of 10 say they tune in “every day” to their two main sources of news – radio (89%) and television (88%). Almost half of Mauritians use the Internet (47%) and social media such as Facebook and Twitter (42%) every day to get news, and about one-third (35%) turn to newspapers on a daily basis (Figure 7).

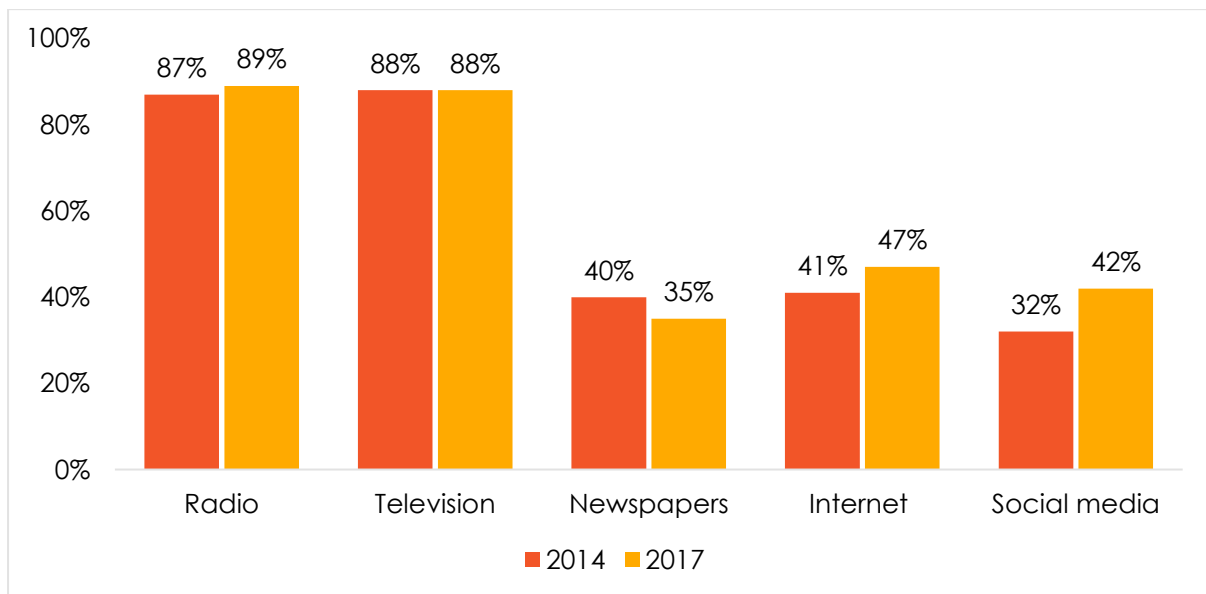
Between 2014 and 2017, daily use of radio and television held fairly steady, while daily newspaper readership declined by 5 percentage points and more Mauritians turned to the Internet (plus 6 percentage points) and social media (plus 10 points) (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Sources of news | Mauritius | 2017



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

Figure 8: Daily sources of news | Mauritius | 2014 | 2017

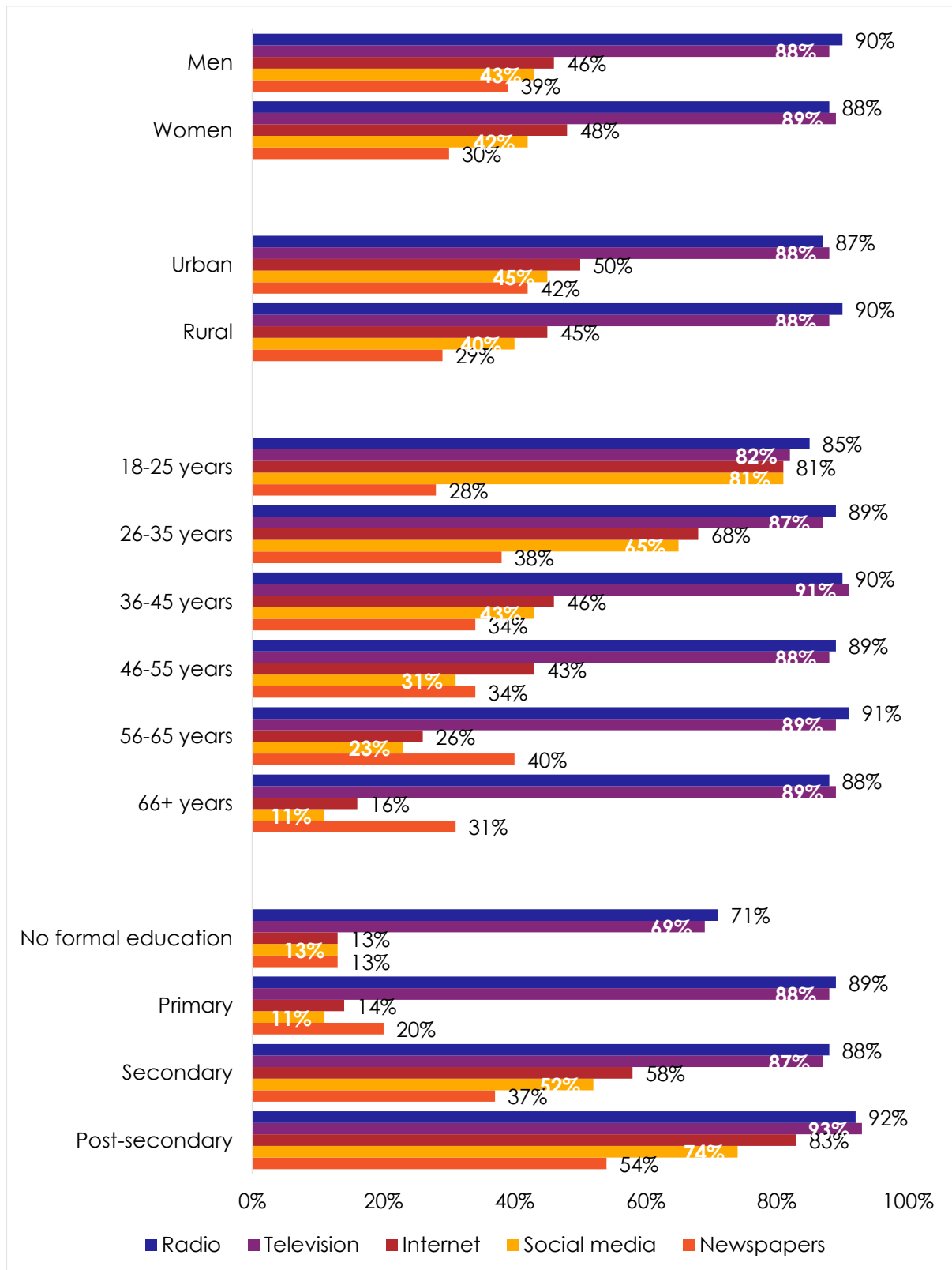


Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say "every day")

Men and women are very similar in their news habits, as are residents of urban and rural areas, except that men and urbanites are somewhat more likely to get daily news from newspapers (39% men vs. 30% of women, 42% urban vs. 29% rural) (Figure 9).

Young adults are more inclined than their elders to get their daily news from social media and the Internet. This is particularly true for the youngest age group (18-25 years old), who are about as likely to get news from their computers or mobile phones (81%) as they are from radio and television. Daily news consumption increases with respondents' education level across all types of outlets, especially when it comes to the Internet and social media.

Figure 9: Daily sources of news | by gender, residency location, age, and education
 | Mauritius | 2017



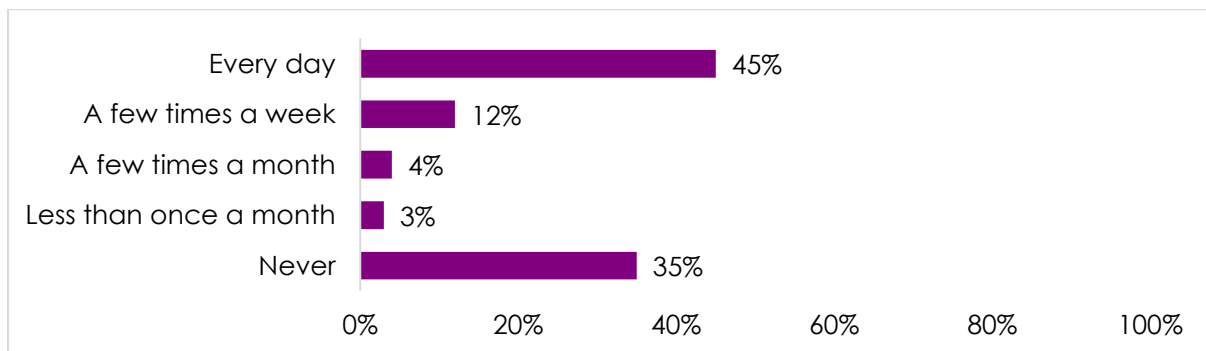
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

Internet use

In a separate question, Afrobarometer asked Mauritians about their use of the Internet in general (not just as a news source). Almost half (45%) say they use the Internet on a daily basis, while another 12% use it “a few times a week.” But more than one-third (35%) of Mauritians say they “never” use the Internet (Figure 10).

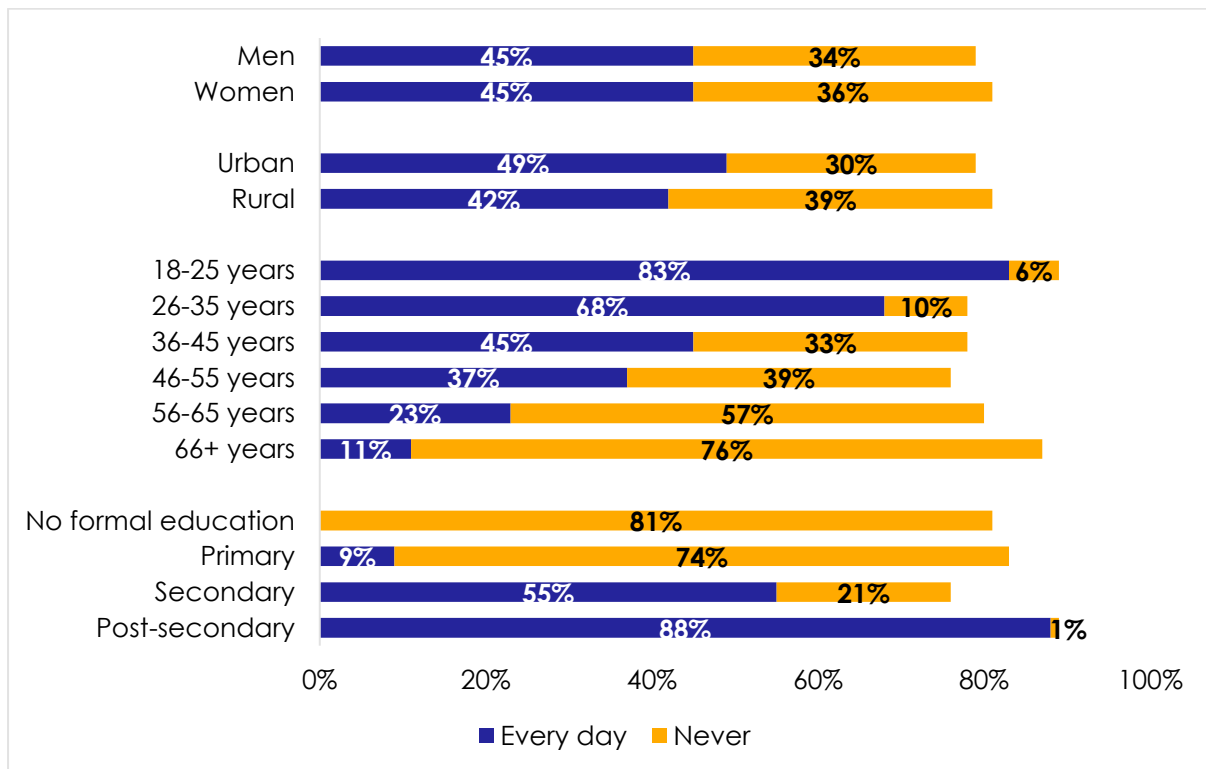
Among the youngest (83%) and the most educated (88%) respondents, overwhelming majorities are daily Internet users. Among Mauritians above age 55 and those with no formal education or only primary schooling, majorities never use the Internet. Urban residents are somewhat more likely to use the Internet than their rural counterparts (49% vs. 42%), but men and women show no difference in their Internet use (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Frequency of Internet use | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet?

Figure 11: Frequency of Internet use | by gender, residency location, age, and education | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet?)

Conclusion

A majority of Mauritians value both freedom of the media and the privacy of their personal communications. But only minorities are confident about their ability to obtain public information about local government development plans and budgets, school budgets, and land ownership.

The dominant sources of news for Mauritians continue to be radio and television, but almost half of the adult population – and large majorities of the youngest and most educated citizens – now also get daily news from the Internet and social media.

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

References

- Reporters Without Borders. (2018a). RSF condemns harsh penalties for online content in Mauritius. <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-condemns-harsh-penalties-online-content-mauritius>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2018b). Mauritius: Tension. <https://rsf.org/en/mauritius>.
- Reporters Without Borders. (2007). World Press Freedom Index 2007. <https://rsf.org/en/worldwide-press-freedom-index-2007>.
- U.S. Department of State. (2017). Mauritius 2017 human rights report. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277269.pdf>.

Sadhiska Bhoojedhur is a research analyst at StraConsult Ltd, the Afrobarometer national partner in Mauritius. Email: sadhiska.bhoojedhur@gmail.com.

Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

Donations help the Afrobarometer Project give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

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



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 277 | 8 February 2019