



Dispatch No. 483 | 20 October 2021

## Liberians want a free media – within limits – and unrestricted access to social media

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 483 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum**

### Summary

For media advocates, Liberia has been the source of both good news and bad news. In March 2019, President George Weah fulfilled his promise to pass a freedom of press act, which frees journalists and media houses from a major threat by decriminalizing defamation and insults (DW, 2019). But critics also accuse the government of a spate of attacks on media freedom, propelling the Press Union of Liberia (2018) to write an open letter to the United Nations to complain about the “pace at which official intolerance for independent journalism and dissent is escalating in Liberia.”

Social media users were outraged when the government ordered a shutdown of all social media platforms in 2019 in an attempt to quell anti-corruption protests (African Freedom of Expression Exchange, 2019).

More recently, the government has been criticized for limiting access to its media briefings on the COVID-19 pandemic to a select list of media houses (African Freedom of Expression Exchange, 2020).

The [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#) ranks Liberia 98<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in media freedom, down three spots from the previous year.

The latest Afrobarometer survey offers a citizen-level view of Liberia's media landscape, and it's mixed as well. While radio remains king among news sources, almost four in 10 Liberians regularly get news from social media and the Internet. Most citizens say they want a free media that functions as a watchdog over the government, but large majorities also endorse the government's right to limit the sharing of fake news, hate speech, and information that criticizes the president or that the government doesn't approve of.

With regard to social media, most Liberians see it as a good thing even if it makes users more susceptible to fake news and intolerance, and they don't want the government involved in regulating access.

### 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 Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians in October-December 2020. 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2018.

## Key findings

- Radio is the dominant news source in Liberia, tuned in “every day” or “a few times a week” by 87% of adults. Almost four in 10 citizens (38%) say they regularly get news from the Internet and social media, while only about one in five are regular consumers of news via television (21%) and newspapers (16%).
- Three-fourths (76%) of Liberians say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- Six in 10 citizens (61%) say the media should be free to publish without government interference. But only one in five (19%) see Liberia’s media as “somewhat” or “completely” free.
- Despite support for media freedom, majorities say the government should be able to restrict the sharing of false information (74%), information that criticizes or insults the president (69%), hate speech (68%), and information or opinions that the government disapproves of (59%).
- Politicians (76%) and government officials (74%) are most widely seen as knowingly spreading false information.
- Among Liberians who have heard of social media, most (80%) see its impact on society as positive, although majorities also think it makes people more susceptible to fake news (73%) and more intolerant of other viewpoints (66%).
- More than seven in 10 Liberians (72%) say access to social media and the Internet should not be regulated by the government.

## How Liberians get their news

In Liberia, radio is the most widely used mass media channel for getting news. Almost nine in 10 citizens (87%) say they get news via radio “every day” or “a few times a week.” Only one in 20 (5%) say they “never” use the radio as a news source (Figure 1).

Digital media channels follow radio in popularity: Almost four in 10 citizens (38%) say they regularly get news from the Internet and social media.

Far fewer regularly use television (21%) and newspapers (16%) as sources of news.

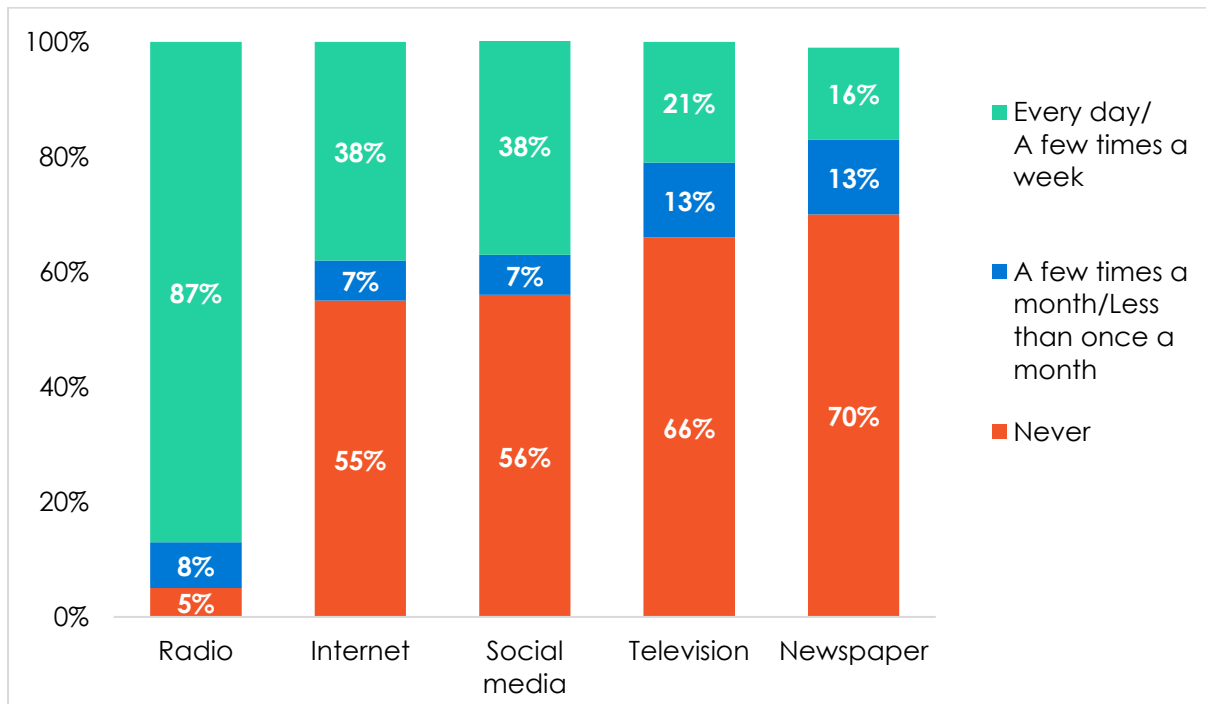
Radio is equally popular as a news source across all age groups (Figure 2). Older citizens (56 years and above) rely less than their younger counterparts on the Internet and social media for news. And middle-aged citizens (36-55 years) are more likely to get their news from television (26%) and newspapers (19%) than are youth and the elderly.

Consumption of news from the various media channels increases significantly with the educational level of respondents (Figure 3). Gaps are particularly pronounced with regard to regular Internet and social media usage, where 71-percentage-point differences separate citizens with no formal education and those with post-secondary qualifications.

Men and women show similar patterns in media usage, though men are somewhat more likely than women to consume news via radio (90% vs. 84%) and newspapers (20% vs. 13%) (Figure 4).

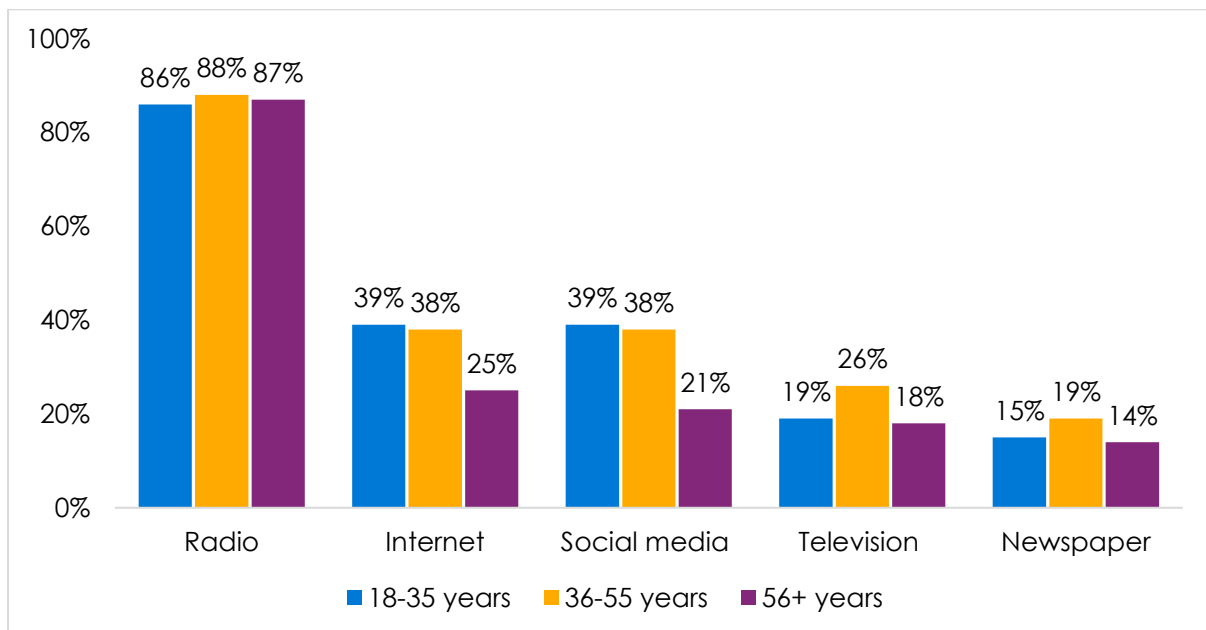
Enormous gaps separate urban and rural users of news sources except with regard to radio, where cities outpace rural areas by just 8 percentage points, reflecting radio's wide coverage (Figure 5). The largest urban-rural differences concern the Internet (56 percentage points) and social media (55 points), probably due in large part to a lack of electricity and Internet coverage in many rural areas.

**Figure 1: Media consumption | Liberia | 2020**



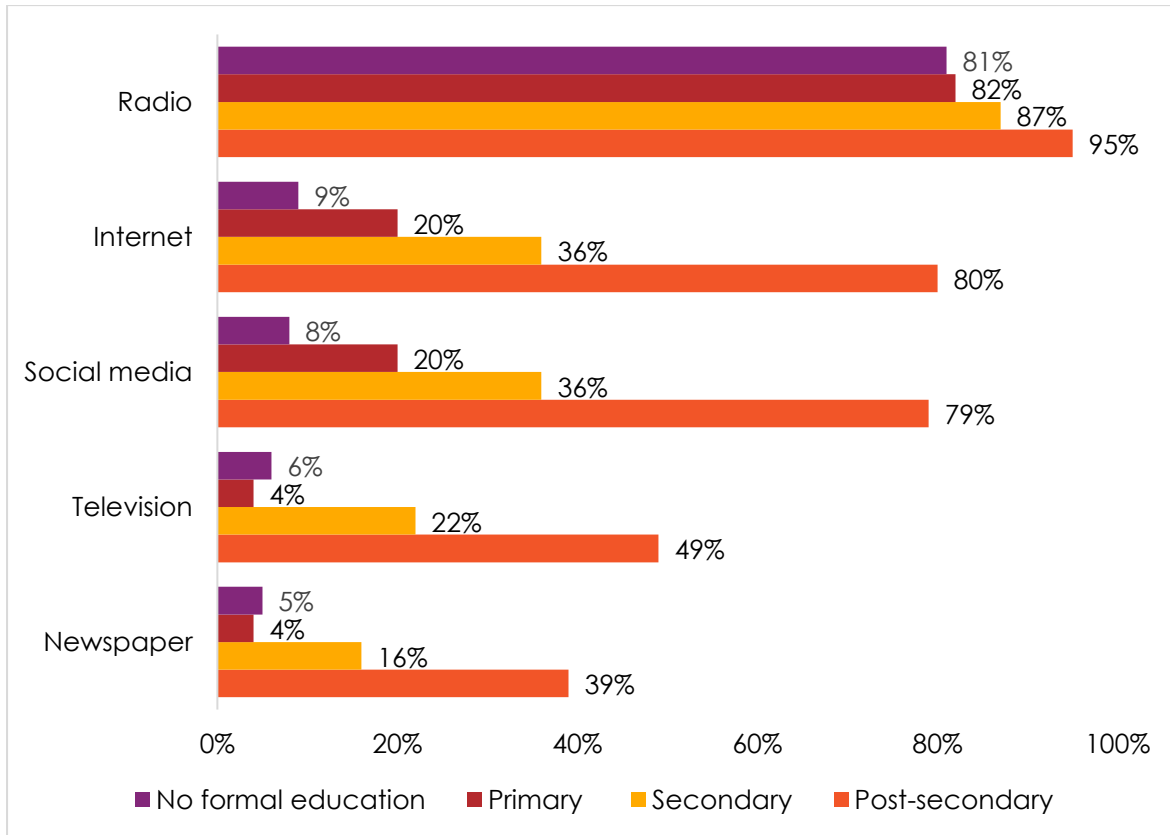
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources?

**Figure 2: Regular media consumption | by age group | Liberia | 2020**



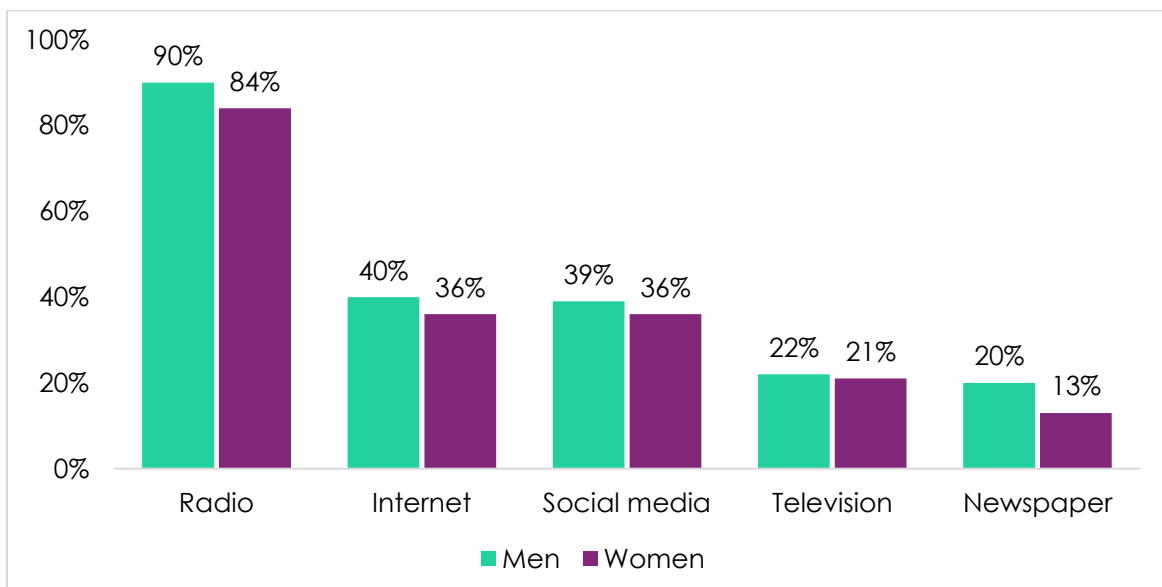
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say "every day" or "a few times a week")

**Figure 3: Regular media consumption | by education level | Liberia | 2020**



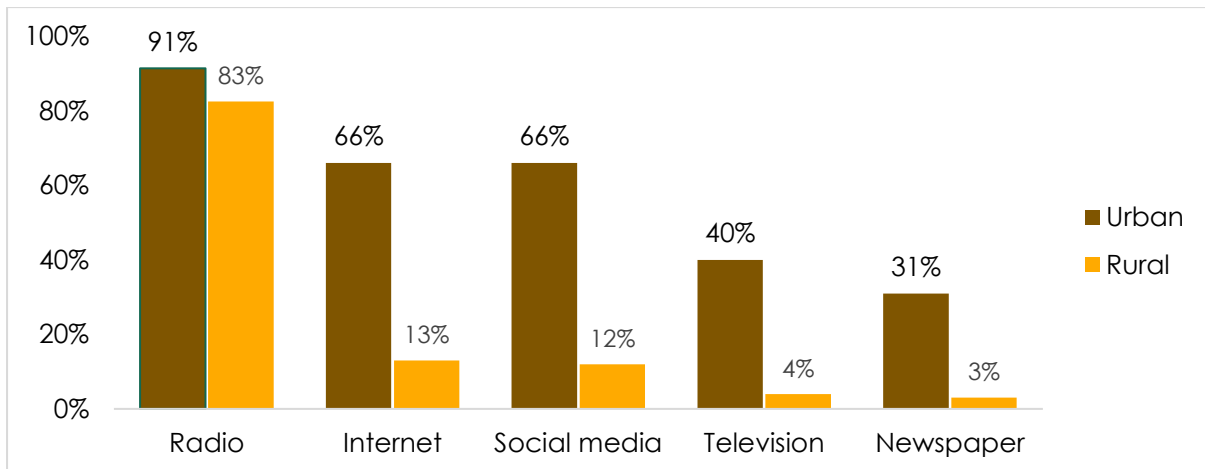
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

**Figure 4: Regular media consumption | by gender | Liberia | 2020**



**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: Media consumption** | by rural-urban residence | Liberia | 2020



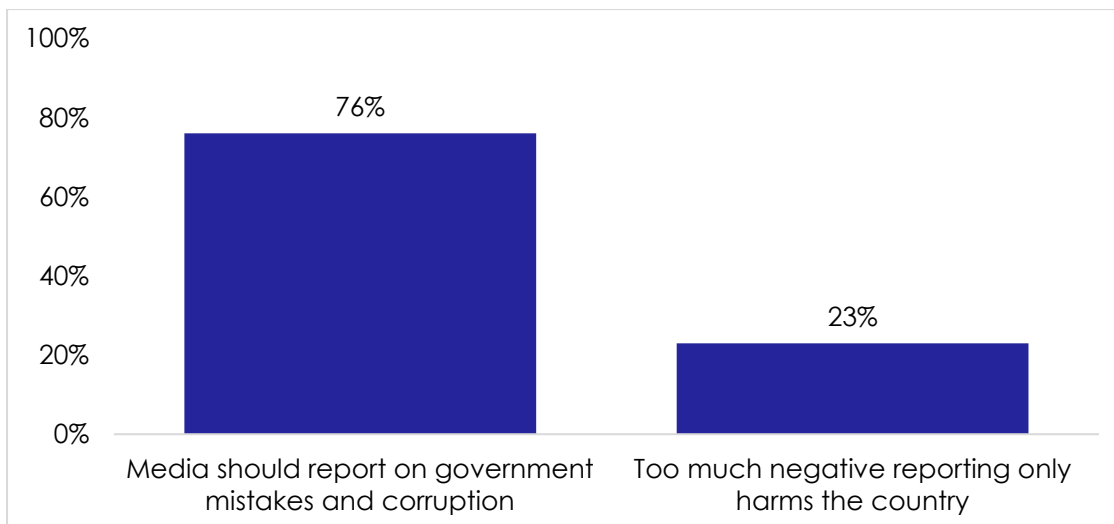
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

### Role and freedom of the media

Liberians support the media’s watchdog role vis-a-vis the government. Three-fourths (76%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 23% think that “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country” (Figure 6).

A majority of Liberians also support media freedom (Figure 7). Six in 10 citizens (61%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference. But almost four in 10 (38%) believe that the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.

**Figure 6: Media watchdog role** | Liberia | 2020



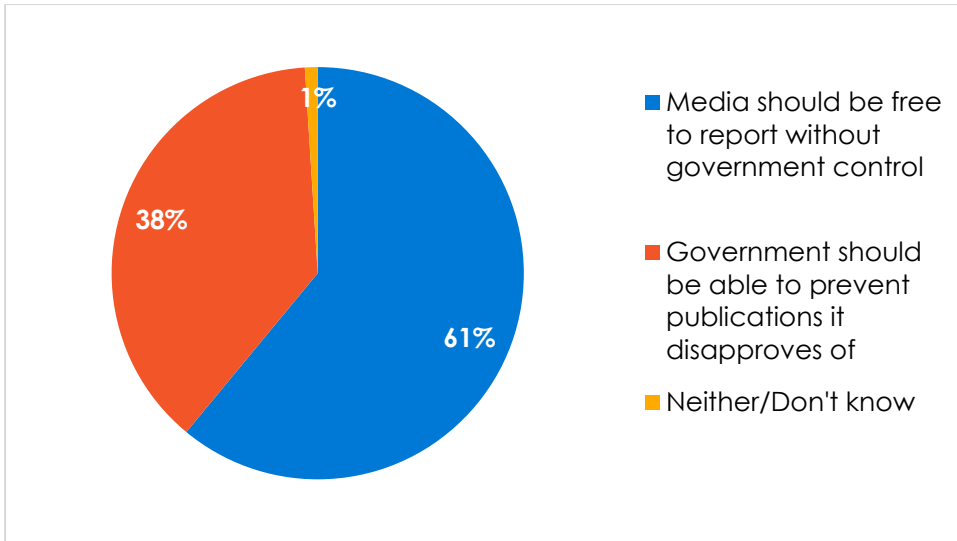
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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: Support for media freedom | Liberia | 2020**



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

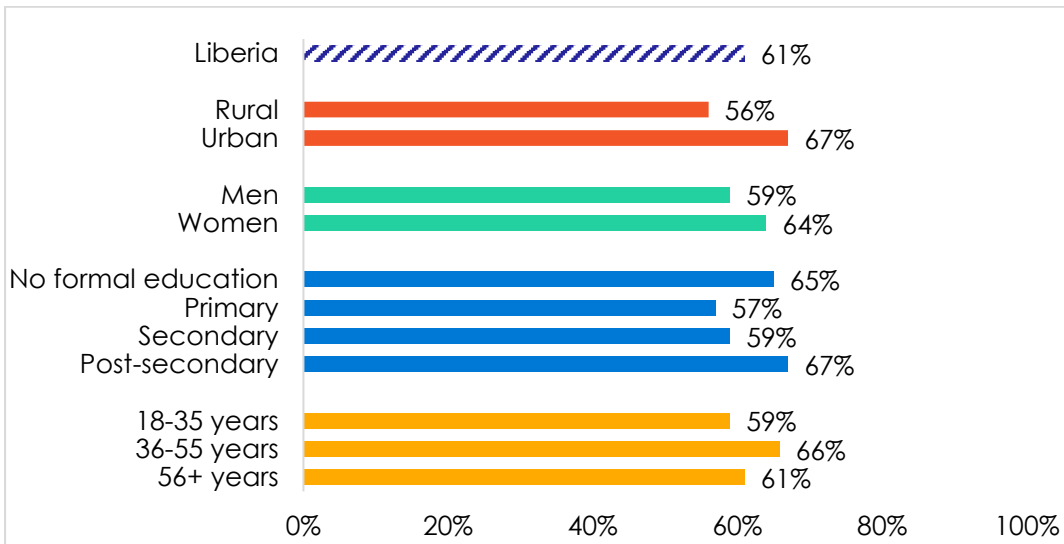
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

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)

Support for media freedom is the majority view across key socio-demographic groups and is particularly strong among urban residents (67%), highly educated citizens (67%), women (64%), and the middle-aged (66%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Liberia | 2020**



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

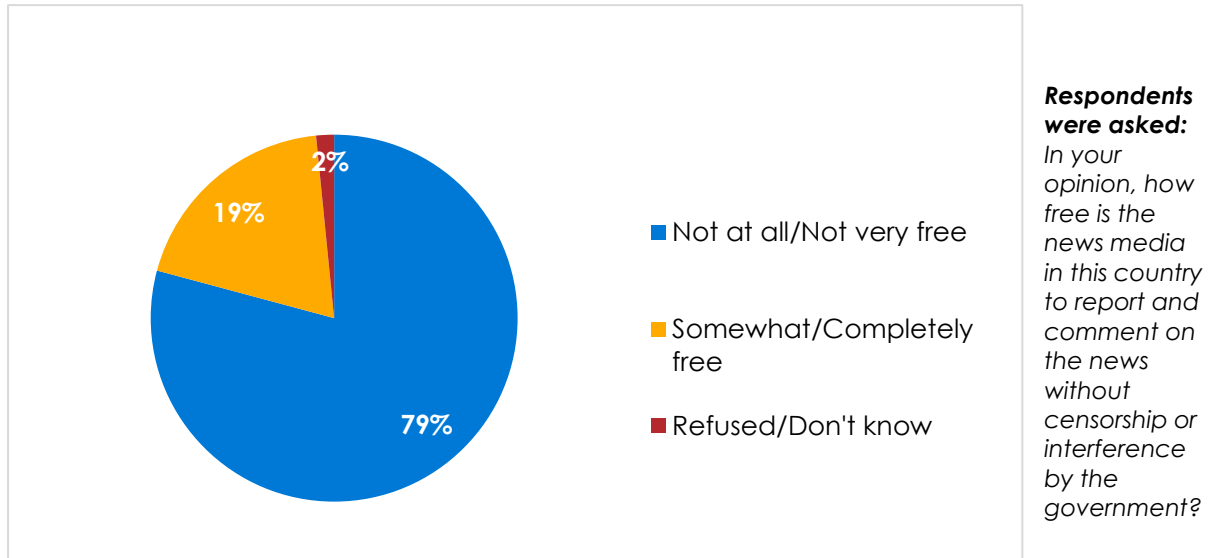
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

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)

But how free is Liberia's media to play its watchdog role? More than three-fourths (79%) of respondents say the media is "not at all free" (34%) or "not very free" (45%), while only two in 10 (19%) say it is "somewhat" or "completely free" (Figure 9).

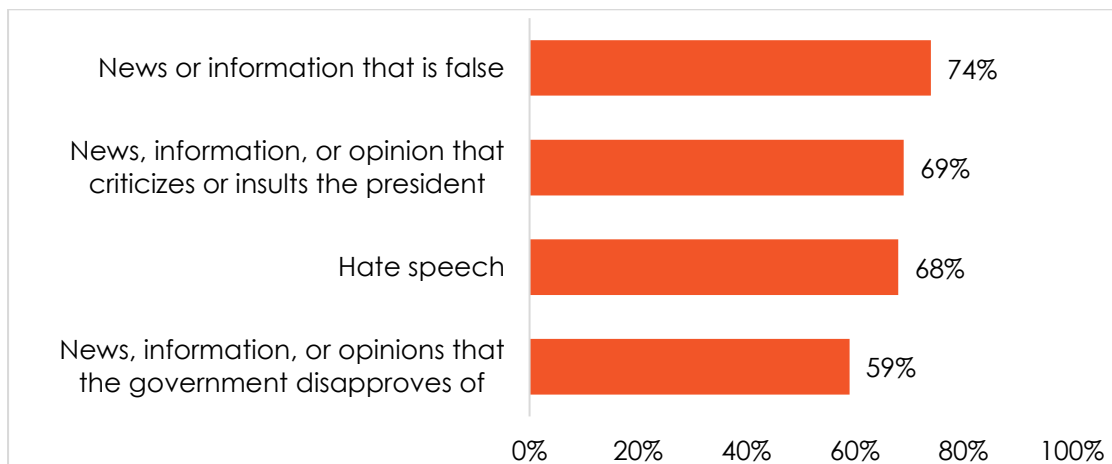
**Figure 9: How free is the media?** | Liberia | 2020



Notwithstanding majority support for media freedom in principle, most Liberians approve of government restrictions on certain types of public communication (Figure 10). Three-fourths (74%) of citizens support the government's right to limit the sharing of news or information that is false. Almost as many say the government should be able to restrict hate speech (68%) as well as information or opinion that criticizes or insults the president (69%).

A smaller majority (59%) would allow the government to block news or opinion that it disapproves of.

**Figure 10: Should the government be able to limit the sharing of certain information?** | Liberia | 2020

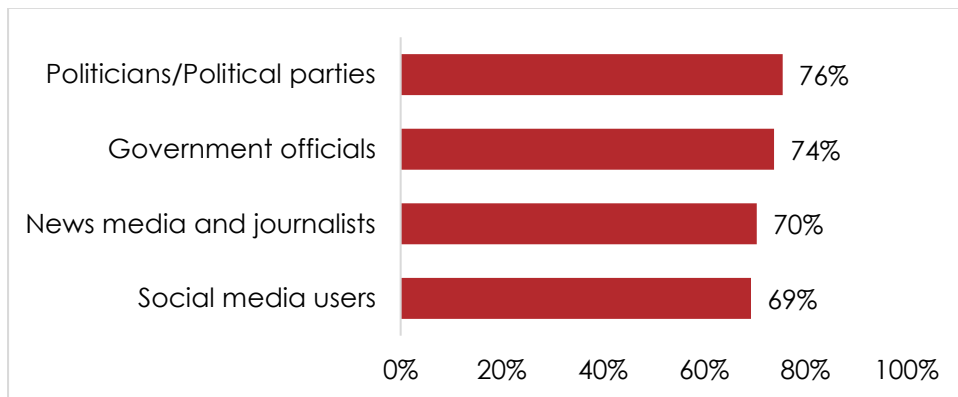


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit sharing of: News or information that is false? News, information, or opinion that the government disapproves of? News, information, or opinion that criticizes or insults the prime minister?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

### Proliferation of false information

The Internet and social media have made it easy for almost anyone anywhere to widely circulate almost any kind of information, including misleading and false information. Asked who they think knowingly spreads false information, Liberians most commonly blame politicians and political parties (76%) and government officials (74%). But journalists (70%) and social media users (69%) aren't far behind (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Purveyors of fake news | Liberia | 2020**



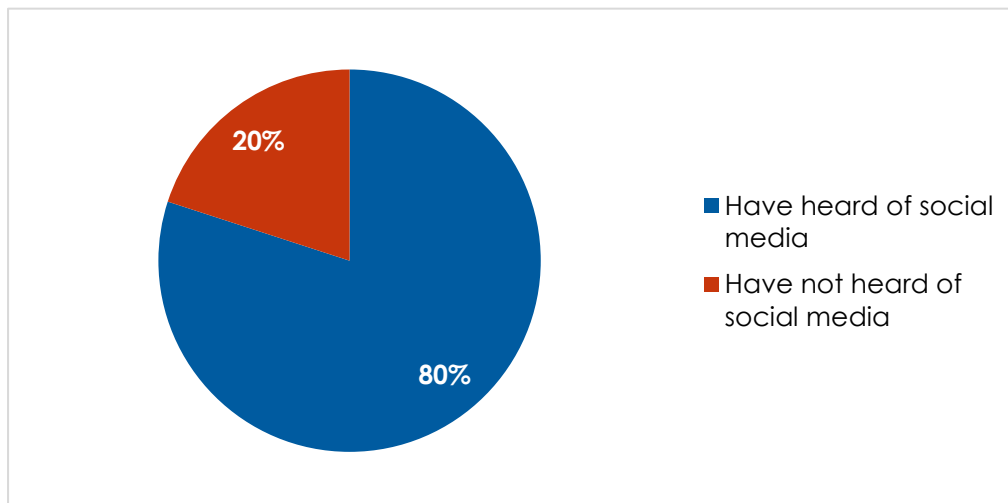
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false. (% who say "sometimes" or "often")

### Digital media

As in other countries, the Internet and social media have become hugely popular in Liberia, where DataReportal (2021) says the number of Internet and social media users increased by 22% and 26%, respectively, from 2020 to 2021. Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in the country (Global Stats, 2021).

Eight out of 10 respondents (80%) say they have heard of social media (Figure 12). Urban dwellers (93%) are more likely than rural residents (68%) to be conversant with social media, as are highly educated people (95%) compared to those with less schooling (60%-80%). Even among older citizens, 68% are aware of social media (Figure 13).

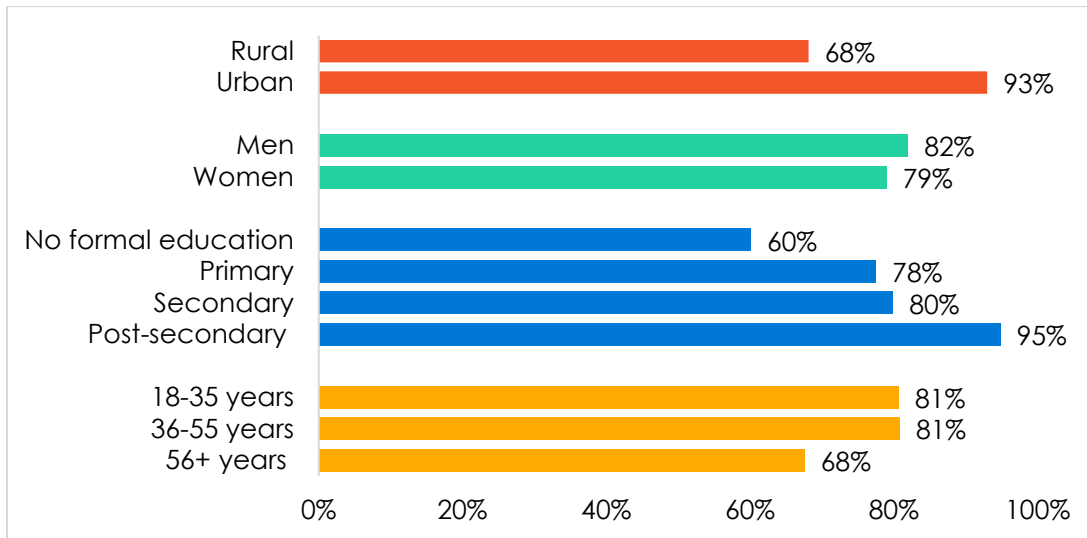
**Figure 12: Have you heard about social media? | Liberia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about social media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp?



**Figure 13: Have heard of social media** | by demographic group | Liberia | 2020



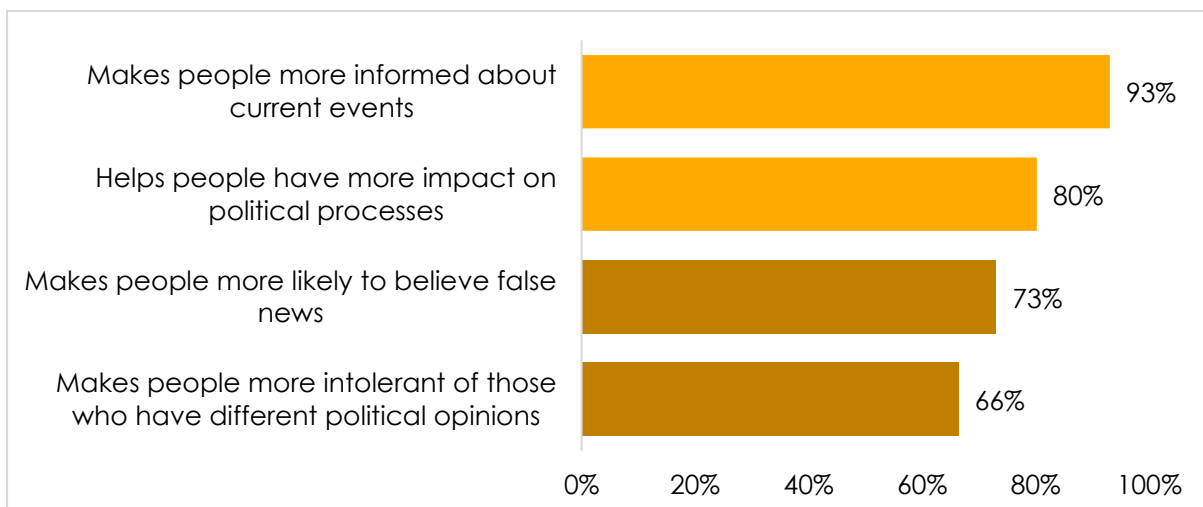
**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about social media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp? (% “yes”)

Most Liberians say social media usage has both positive and negative effects (Figure 14). Among those who have heard of social media, an overwhelming majority (93%) say it “makes people more informed about current events,” and 80% say it helps people have more impact on political processes.

On the other hand, almost three-fourths (73%) believe social media makes people more likely to believe false news, and two-thirds (66%) say it makes people less tolerant of those with different opinions.

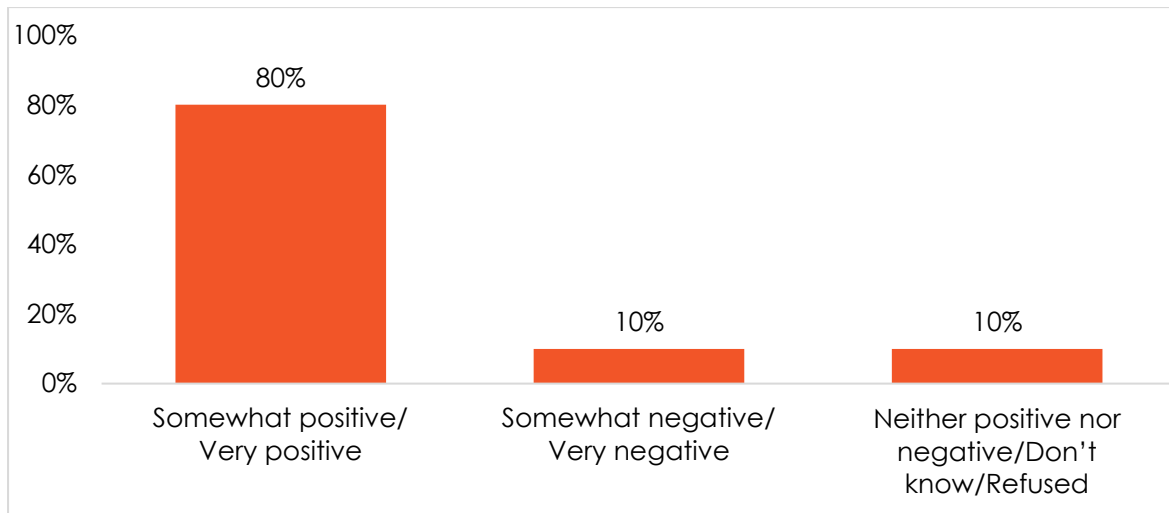
Overall, despite these negative effects, Liberians see the impact of social media on society in a favourable light. Eight in 10 respondents familiar with social media (80%) describe its impact as “somewhat positive” or “very positive” (Figure 15).

**Figure 14: Specific effects of social media usage** | Liberia | 2020



**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.)

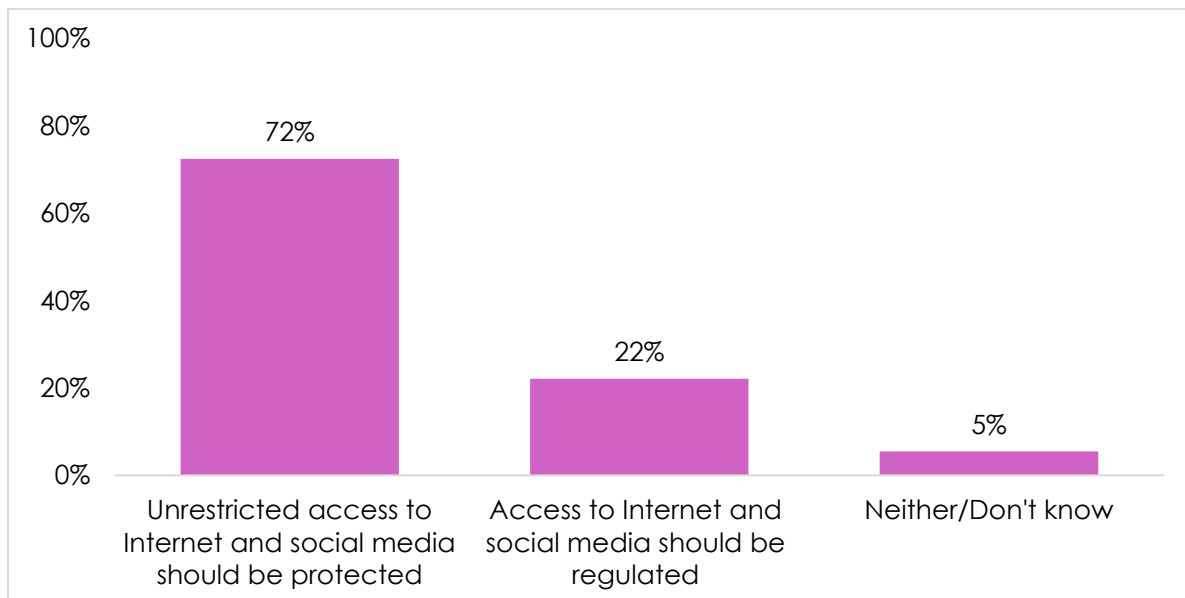
**Figure 15: Social media effect: positive or negative | Liberia | 2020**



**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 widespread perceptions of its positive impact, almost three-fourths (72%) of Liberians “agree” or “strongly agree” that unrestricted access to social media as well as to the Internet makes for better citizens, and should be protected (Figure 16). Only 22% think these digital platforms are so divisive that the government should regulate access to them.

**Figure 16: Should the government regulate access to social media and the Internet? | Liberia | 2020**



**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

In principle, most Liberians want a free media that plays the role of a watchdog over the government. But there is also a general consensus that supports the government's right to limit the sharing of false news, hate speech, and information it disapproves of.

Even though radio still dominates among news sources, digital platforms are playing an increasingly important role in Liberian society. While well aware of the dangers of social media as a channel for misinformation and intolerance, Liberians largely believe that its overall effect is positive. And they favour unrestricted access over government regulation when it comes to digital media.

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