

Ghanaians support media's watchdog role but are sceptical of news sources

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 661 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum and Albert Adjei Mensah

Summary

Ghana's media landscape is vibrant and dynamic, with 121 television stations, more than 500 radio stations, and a handful of daily newspapers (National Communications Authority, 2023a). With the proliferation of smartphones and digital platforms, 23 million Internet users and 6.6 million social media users have access to avenues for activism, public dialogue, and citizen journalism (Data Reportal, 2023).

Once considered repressive, the country's media environment opened up in the early 2000s with the scrapping of laws that had criminalised libel and granted the president discretionary power to ban news outlets (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2023), as well as the expansion of privately owned media outlets. The National Communications Authority (2023b) was commissioned to regulate broadcasting and telecommunications and to ensure freedom and fairness in the media space.

But while such steps helped earn Ghana honours as the top-ranked country in Africa – 23rd in the world – on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index in 2018, concerns about political interference, restricted access to information, and journalist safety have dropped the country back to ninth place – 67th in the world – in 2023 (Reporters Without Border, 2023; The Fourth Estate, 2023; United Nations Ghana, 2021).

The Media Foundation for West Africa (2023) reported 30 press freedom violations in Ghana in 2021 and 2022, two-thirds attributed to security agents, ranging from threats and arrests to physical attacks and killing. The high-profile slaying of investigative journalist Ahmed Suale in 2019 remains unsolved (Ghana Business News, 2023).

Efforts to ensure the free flow of information in Ghana continue, including the 2019 Right to Information Law giving citizens access to information from public institutions and private entities receiving public funds and the 2021 establishment of the Office of the Coordinated Mechanism for the Safety of Journalists by the Ministry of Information and the National Media Commission (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2023; allAfrica, 2021).

The latest Afrobarometer survey offers a citizen-level view of Ghana's media landscape. While radio remains king among news sources, more than four in 10 Ghanaians regularly get news from social media and the Internet. Most citizens say they want a media that is free and serves as a watchdog over the government. And a large majority think Ghana's media qualifies as "somewhat" or "completely" free.

But majorities are sceptical of information from privately owned as well as state-owned media outlets, government sources, and social media.

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 survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

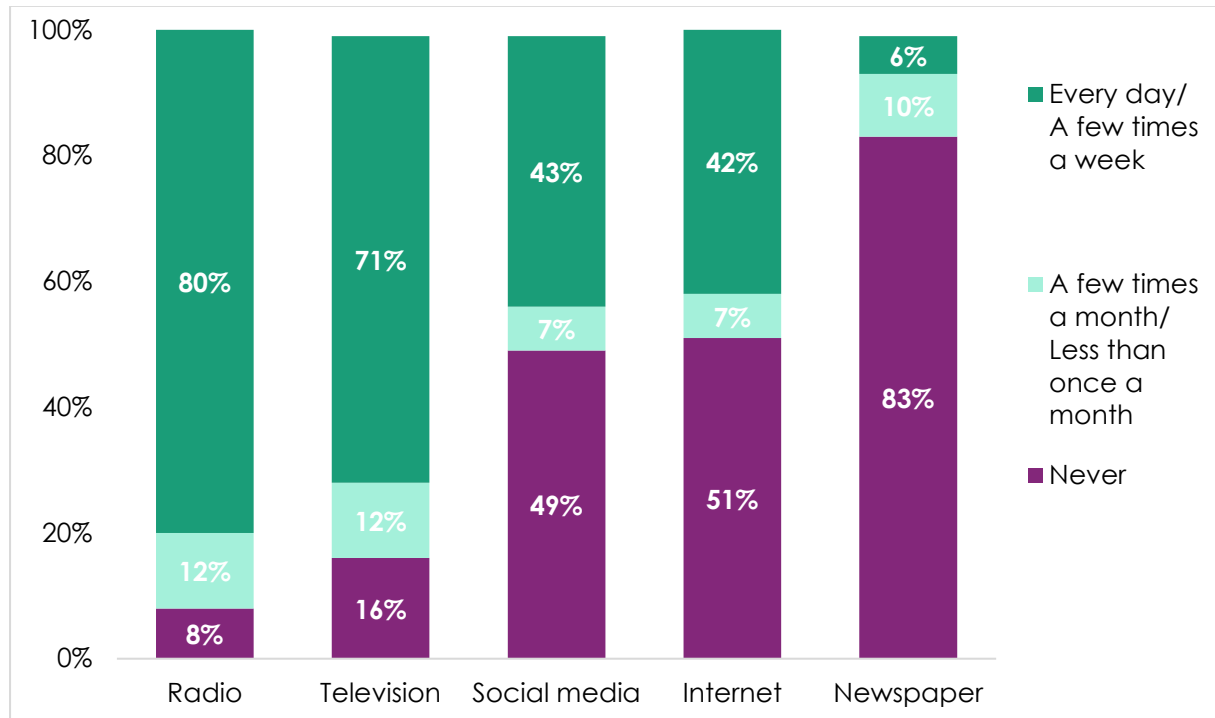
- In Ghana, radio is the most popular news source: 80% of adults say they tune in "every day" or "a few times a week." Seven in 10 citizens (71%) say they regularly get news from television, and more than four in 10 are regular consumers of news from social media (43%) and the Internet (42%). Newspapers bring up the rear with 6%.
- Almost nine out of 10 Ghanaians (85%) say the media should "constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption."
- Three-quarters (74%) say the media should be free to publish without government interference.
- A large majority (71%) see Ghana's media as "somewhat" or "completely" free, while 28% say it is "not very free" or "not at all" free, up from 19% in 2019.
- Fewer than half of respondents say they trust information from privately owned media outlets (48%), state-owned media outlets (44%), government sources (40%), and social media (38%).
- More than a quarter (27%) of Ghanaians believe that "most" or "all" media persons from private and public institutions are corrupt.

Sources of news in Ghana

Radio is the most popular source of news in Ghana. Eight in 10 citizens (80%) say they get news via radio "every day" or "a few times a week." Only 8% say they "never" use the radio as a news source (Figure 1).

Television news comes second, with 71% of adults as regular consumers. More than four in 10 citizens say they rely on digital media channels for news: 43% for social media 43% for the Internet. Only 6% use newspaper as a regular source of news.

Figure 1: Media consumption | Ghana | 2022



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

Reliance on radio news increases somewhat with respondents' age, reaching 84% among those over age 55, while regular consumption of TV news declines among the elders (64%) (Figure 2). Social media and the Internet are far more common news sources among 18- to 35-year-olds than among their elders.

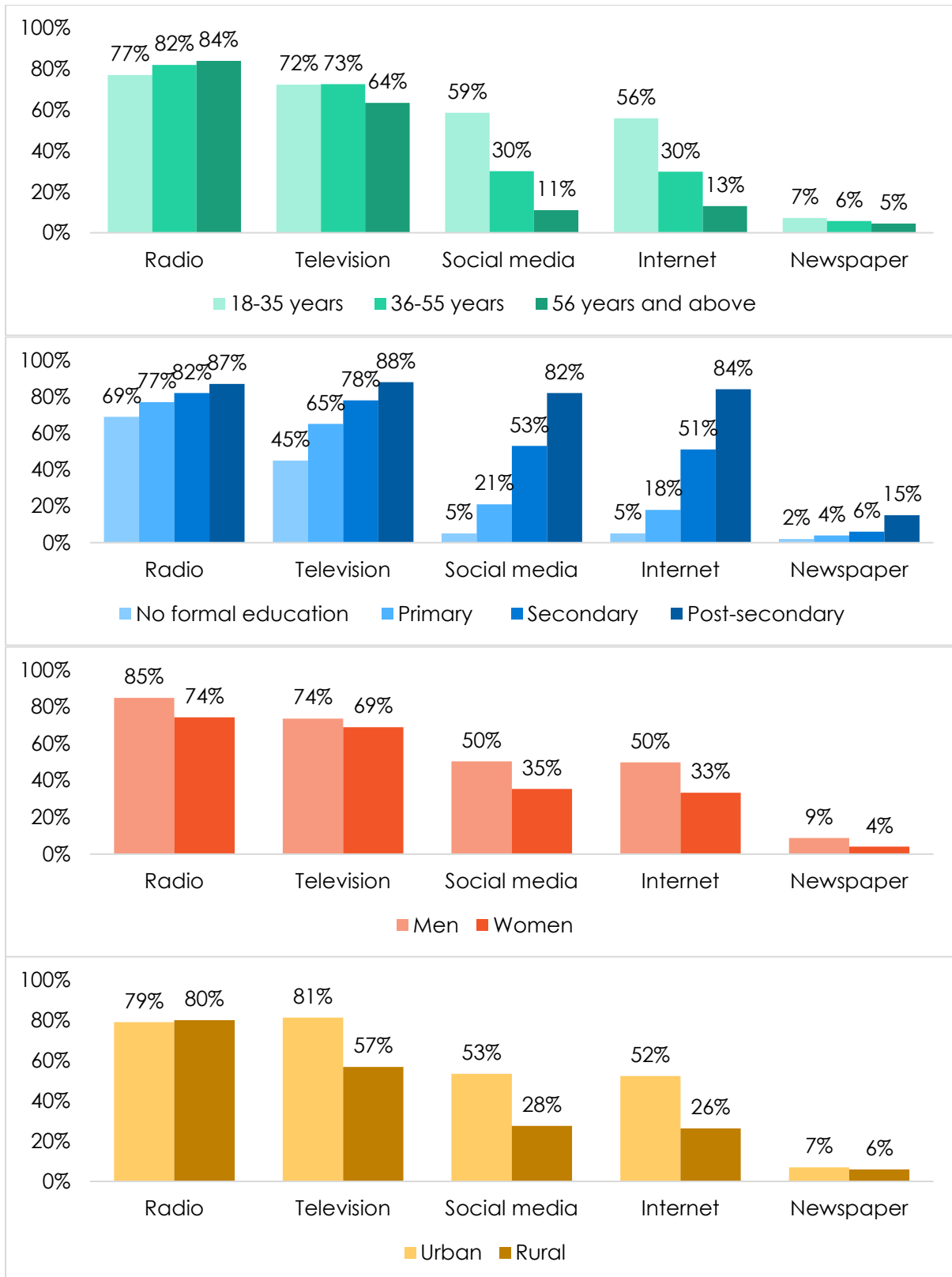
Consumption of news from all these media channels increases significantly with the educational level of respondents. Gaps are particularly pronounced with regard to social media and the Internet, where at least 77-percentage-point differences separate citizens with no formal education from those with post-secondary qualifications.

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Men are more likely than women to use each of these channels for news, especially the Internet (50% vs. 33%), social media (50% vs. 35%), and radio (85% vs. 74%).

Large gaps also separate urban and rural news consumption via the Internet (26 percentage points), social media (25 points), and television (24 points), reflecting limited electricity and Internet coverage in many rural areas. Urban-rural use is similar for radio, whose wide coverage reaches 79% of rural adults on a regular basis, and newspapers.

Figure 2: Regular media consumption | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



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

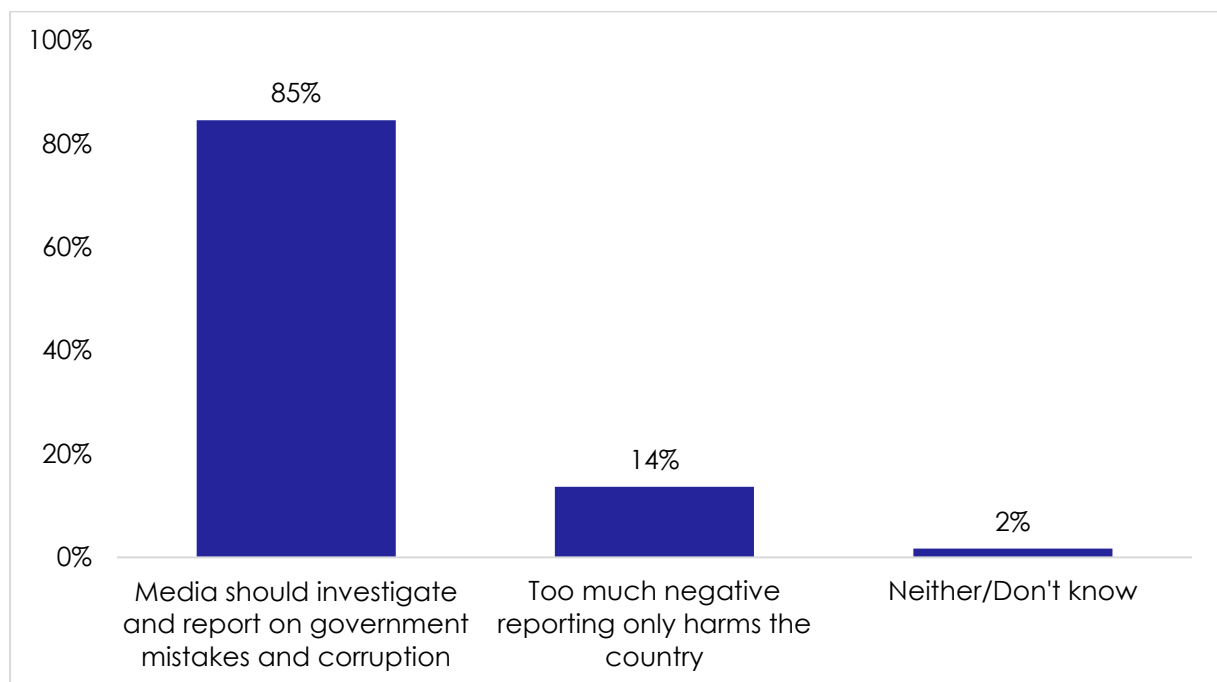
As frequent news consumers, what kind of a media do Ghanaians want?

Most are in favour of a media that acts as a watchdog over the government: More than eight in 10 (85%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 14% think that “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country” (Figure 3).

In doing so, the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, according to three out of four citizens (74%) (Figure 4). About one-quarter (24%) instead think the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of. Support for media freedom in Ghana has been on a steep rise since 2017.

This preference is slightly more common among men than women (76% vs. 72%) and in cities compared to rural areas (76% vs. 71%). It gathers strength as respondents' education level increases, ranging from 70% among those with no formal schooling to 80% among those with post-secondary education (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Media watchdog role | Ghana | 2022



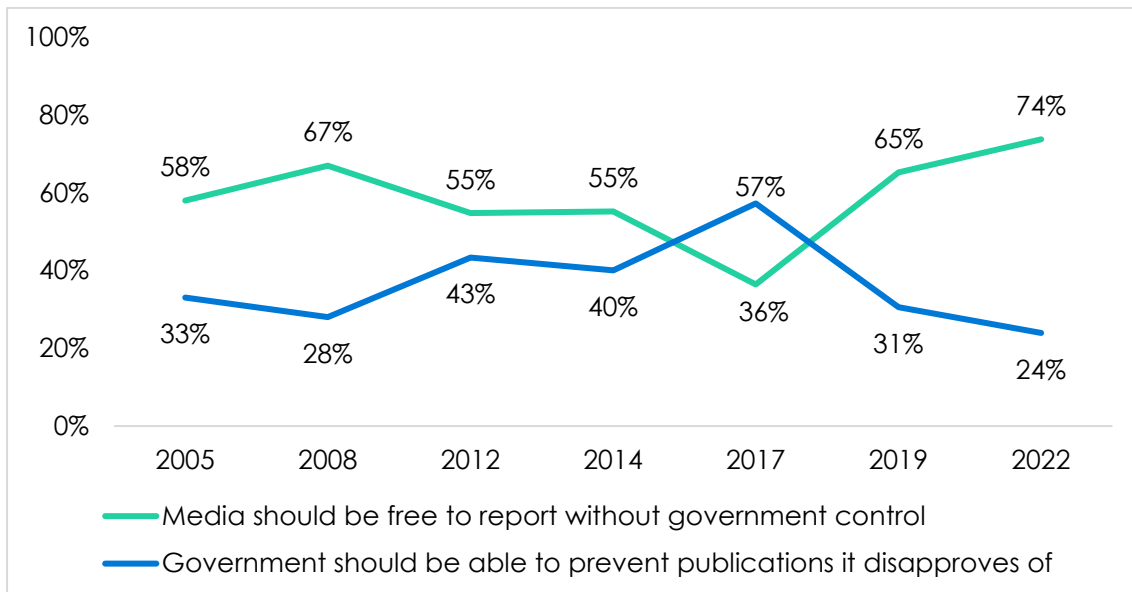
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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 4: Support for media freedom | Ghana | 2005-2022



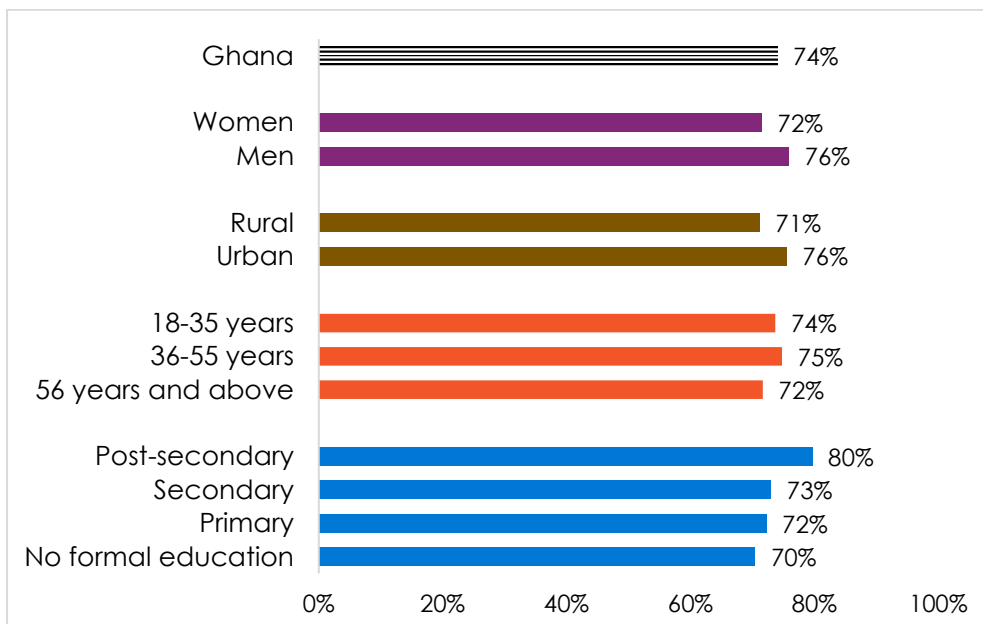
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your views?

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 5: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



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

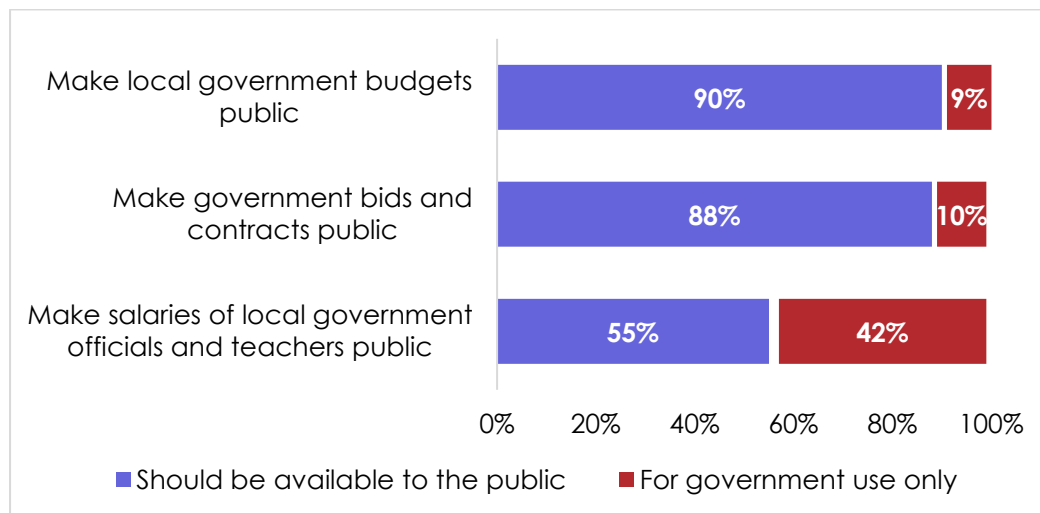
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

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)

Providing further evidence of their firm belief in the free flow of information, strong majorities say the media and ordinary citizens should have the right to access government information about local government budgets (90%) and government bids and contracts (88%). A slimmer majority (55%) say information about salaries of local government officials and teachers should be available to the public, while 42% disagree (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Right to access government information | Ghana | 2022

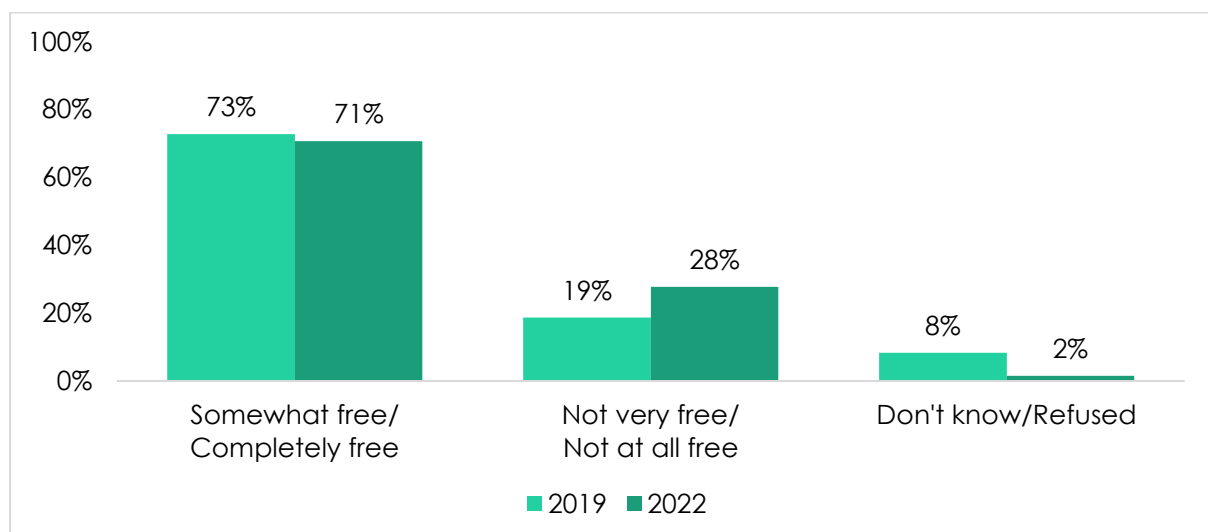


Respondents were asked: For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from government, or whether government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public.

In practice, how free is Ghana's media to play its watchdog role?

Almost three in 10 respondents (28%) say the media is “not at all free” (6%) or “not very free” (22%), up from 19% in 2019. But a solid majority (71%) say it is “somewhat free” (41%) or “completely free” (30%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: How free is the media? | Ghana | 2019-2022



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?

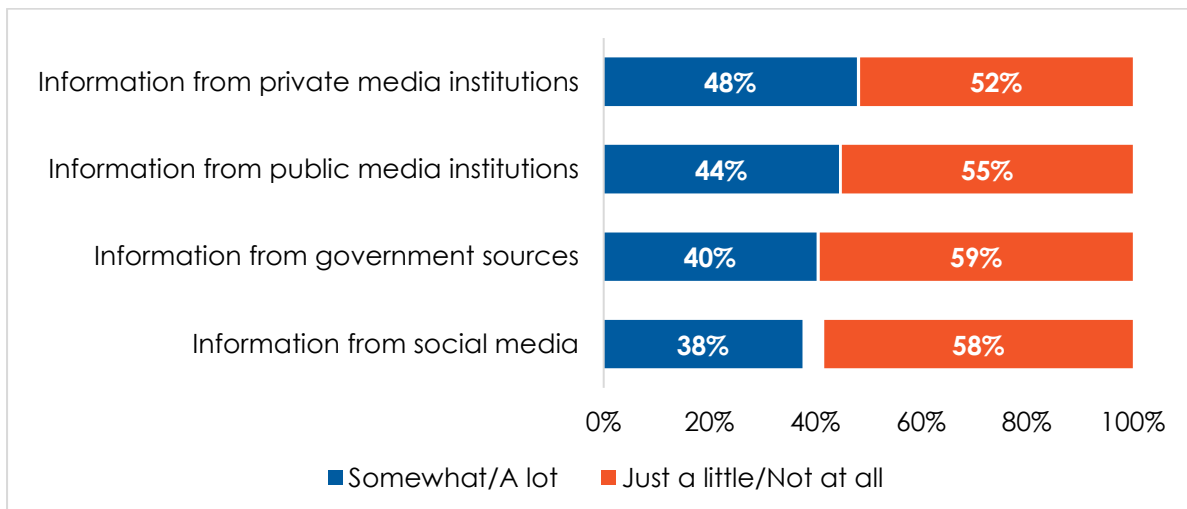
Trust and corruption in the media

Despite their support for media freedom, do Ghanaians trust media outlets and sources of information?

In fact, citizens show themselves to be quite sceptical. Fewer than half say they trust information “somewhat” or “a lot” when it comes from privately owned media outlets (48%), state-owned media outlets (44%), and government sources (40%). Only 38% trust information from social media (Figure 8).

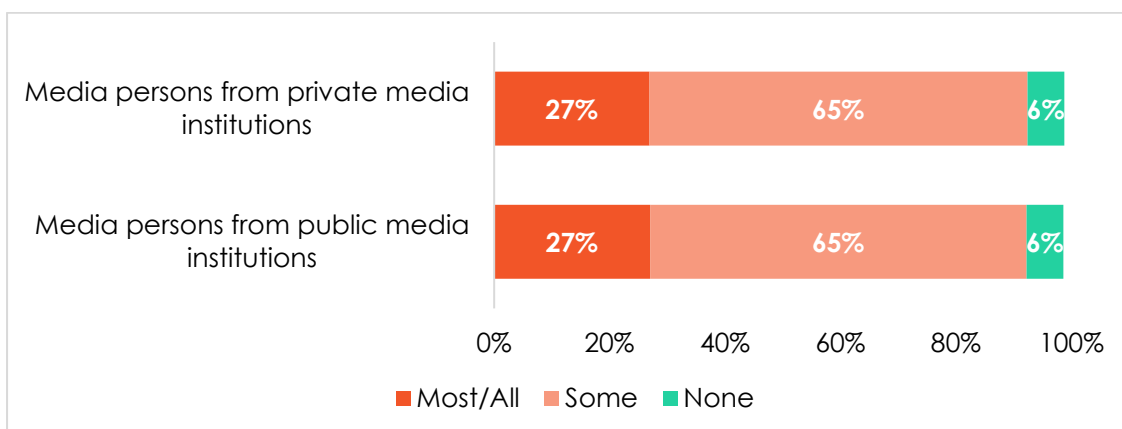
And more than a quarter (27%) of Ghanaians believe that “most” or “all” media persons from private and public institutions are corrupt, while two-thirds (65%) say “some” of them are corrupt – with no difference in ratings for privately owned and state-owned outlets (Figure 9). These ratings compare favourably with perceptions of corruption among the police (65% most/all), the Presidency (55%), and other key public institutions, matching ratings given to religious leaders.

Figure 8: Trust in sources of information | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 9: Corruption in the media | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Conclusion

Radio and television are the most popular news sources in Ghana, while social media and the Internet have gained strong traction. Ghanaians overwhelmingly support investigative reporting and value the media's role as a watchdog, and most express support for media freedom. But trust in various information sources is weak, highlighting the need for transparency and ethics among media professionals.

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