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## Basotho reject government restrictions on information, support media's watchdog role

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 798 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma**

### Summary

In May 2023, radio journalist Ralikonelo "Leqhashasha" Joki died in a hail of 14 gunshots after knocking off from his broadcasting job at Ts'enolo FM in Maseru, Lesotho (O'Hagan, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023). Joki was famous for exposing five politicians who were illegally trading in alcohol, and his programme *Hlokoana la Tsela* ("I heard it through the grapevine") regularly offered commentary on government, corruption, and land-related matters (Civicus Monitor, 2023).

Although media freedom is safeguarded under Lesotho's constitutional provisions of freedom of expression, critics argue this has done little to protect journalists and media outlets (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2022; Southern Defenders, 2023).

While investigations are still ongoing (Lesotho Times, 2023b; Reporter, 2023; United Nations, 2023; Newsday, 2023), many observers believe that Joki, like others in his field who have been harassed and tortured for unmasking shady government dealings (Ntsukunyane, 2021; Lesotho Times, 2023a; Harvest FM, 2023), was a victim of a growing number of violent attacks against journalists. Joki reportedly received multiple death threats on social media before his murder (Cheeseman, 2023; National Press Club, 2023; VOA News, 2023).

For years, media activists in Lesotho have been calling for legislative reforms to establish professional media practices and to promote a more diverse and open media market, steering away from a tendency toward centralised state control (Reporter, 2021). Lesotho has about 30 radio stations, including the national station, Radio Lesotho, and one national television station (Africa Press, 2022; Matšasa, Sithetho, & Wekesa, 2019; BBC, 2023).

In 2021, the government adopted a national media policy that protects the right to access and impart information to all citizens (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2021; Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa, 2022). This progress opens pathways to give higher priority to the development of complementary legal and constitutional safeguards for media governance in Lesotho (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2023). In 2023, Lesotho's media ranked 67th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, up 21 places compared to 2022 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

What are Basotho's perceptions and evaluations of their media scene?

According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey, Basotho broadly agree that the media should act as a watchdog over the government, constantly investigating and reporting on government mistakes and corruption.

Citizens value media freedom and reject the notion that public information should be the exclusive preserve of government officials. However, views are mixed on whether media freedom exists in practice.

Radio remains the most popular source of news in Lesotho, with television and social media tied for second place.

## 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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 citizens in February-March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

## Key findings

- More than two-thirds (68%) of Basotho say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- About seven in 10 citizens (71%) insist on media freedom, while 27% endorse a government right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- More than six in 10 (64%) agree with the proposition that information held by public authorities should have to be shared with the public.
  - In particular, majorities support public access to information regarding budgets and expenditures of local government councils (84%), bids and contracts for government-funded projects or purchases (81%), and the salaries of teachers and local government officials (52%).
- A slim majority (53%) of Basotho say the country's media is “somewhat free” or “completely free” to report and comment on the news without government interference.
- Radio is the most popular source of news in Lesotho, used at least “a few times a week” by 72% of citizens, followed by television (42%), social media (42%), the Internet (31%), and newspapers (10%).

## Role and freedom of the media

Most Basotho want a media that aids in holding the government to account. More than two-thirds (68%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 30% instead emphasise that “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country” (Figure 1).

About seven in 10 citizens (71%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while fewer than three in 10 (27%) believe the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 2).

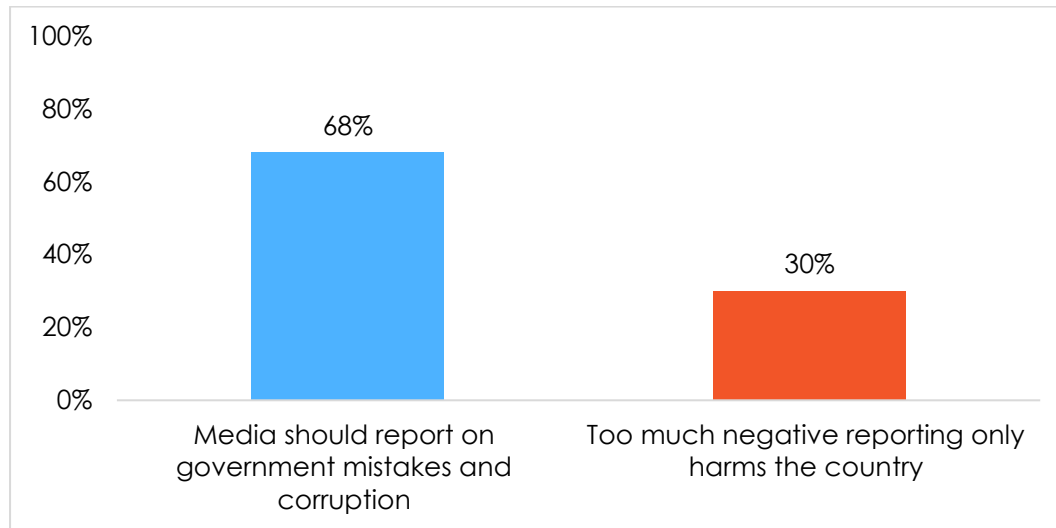
Support for media freedom is weaker among citizens with primary education or less (63%), rural residents (65%), and those experiencing no or low lived poverty (68%)<sup>1</sup> than among the

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<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

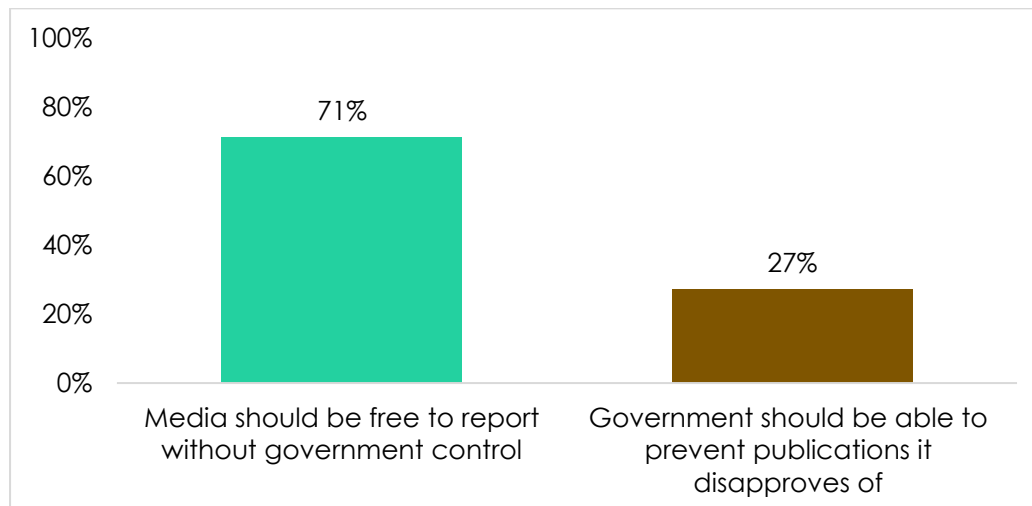
more educated (79%-80%), urbanites (78%), and citizens experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (71%-75%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 1: Media's watchdog role | Lesotho | 2022**



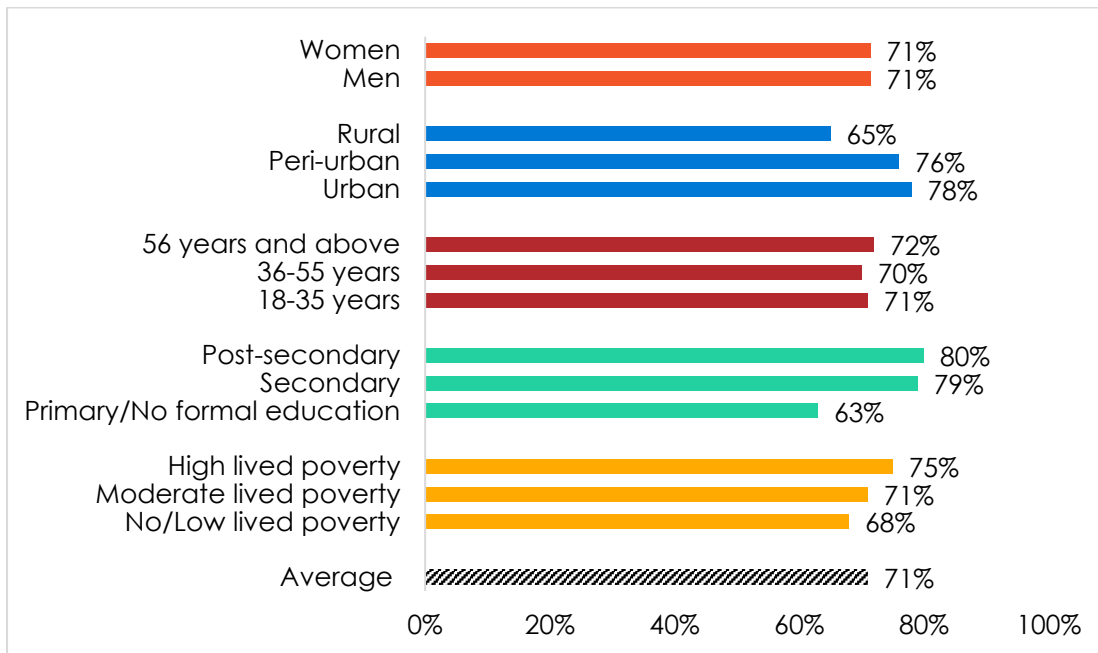
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.  
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms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

**Figure 2: Should the media be free? | Lesotho | 2022**



**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 "strongly agree" with each statement)

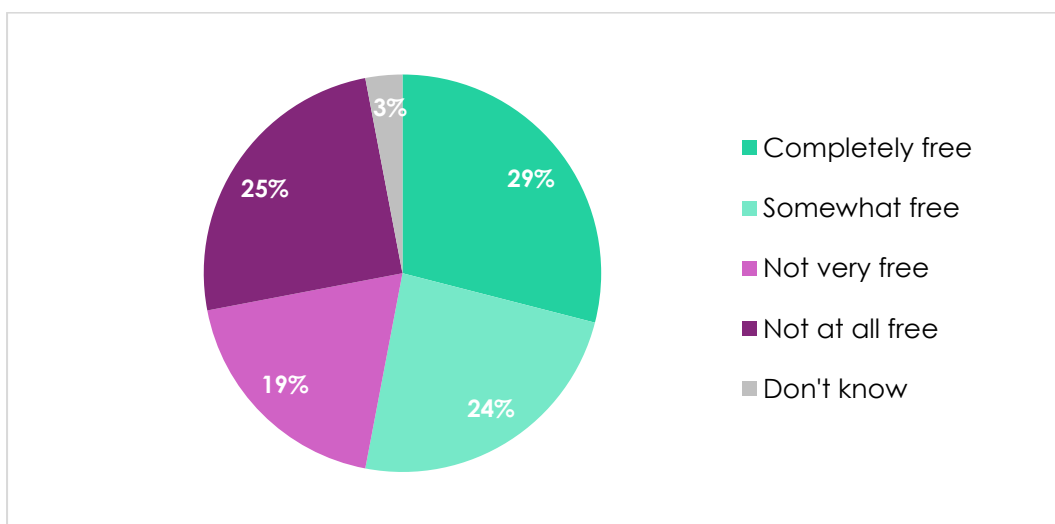
**Figure 3: Support for media freedom** | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2022



**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)

Views on whether media freedom exists in practice in Lesotho are quite mixed. A slim majority (53%) of citizens say the country’s media is “somewhat free” (24%) or “completely free” (29%) to report and comment on the news. But more than four in 10 (44%) consider the media “not very free” (19%) or “not at all free” (25%) (Figure 4).

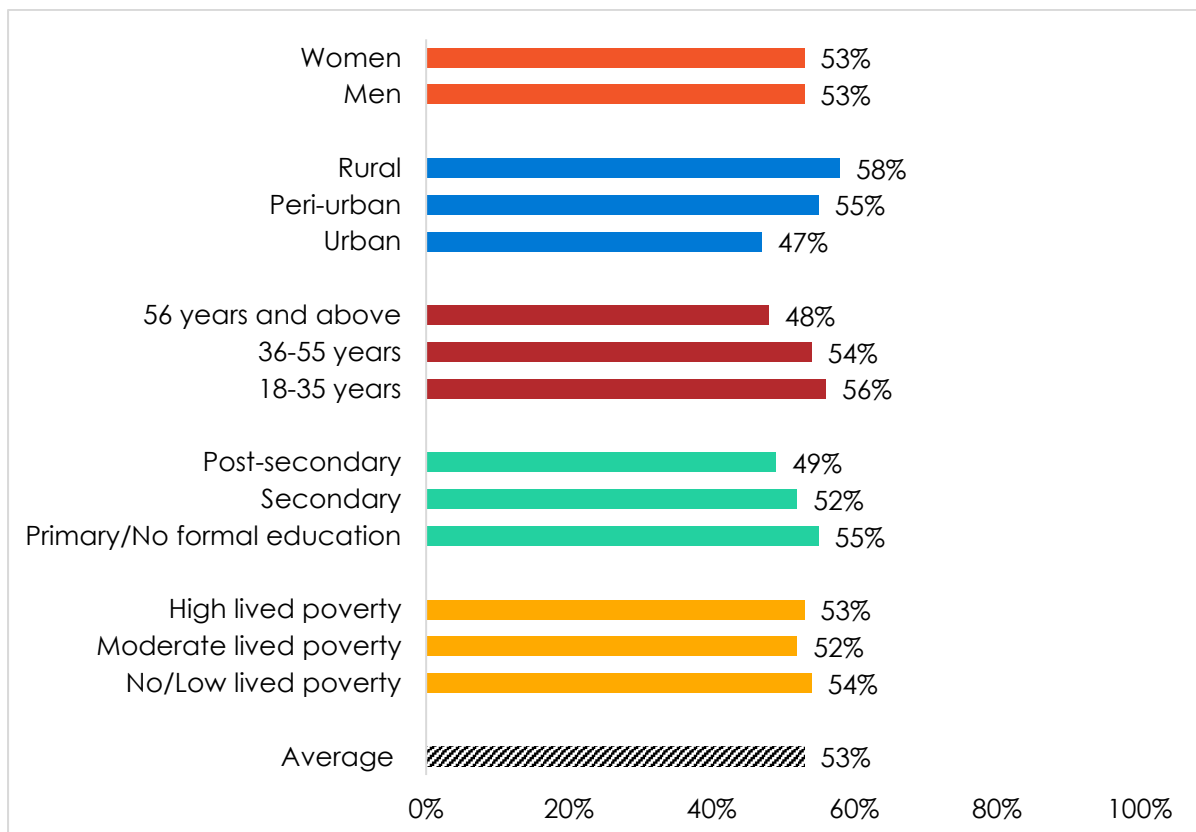
**Figure 4: How free is the media?** | Lesotho | 2022



**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?

Urbanites (47%), the elderly (48%), and citizens with post-secondary education (49%) are less likely than rural residents (58%), younger respondents (54%-56%), and citizens with secondary education or less (52%-55%) to say that the news media in Lesotho is free to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Media is somewhat/completely free** | by demographic group | Lesotho | 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?* (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

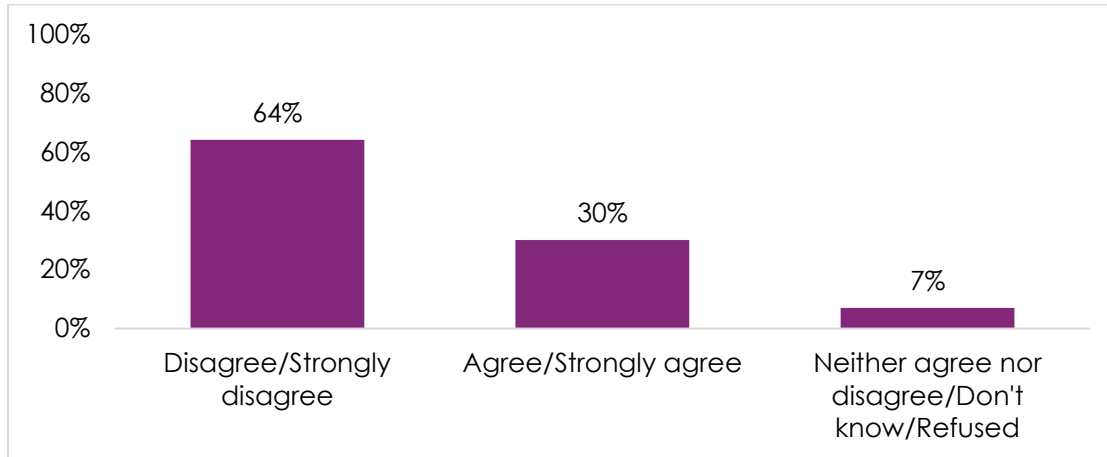
### Government regulation of information

What do Basotho think about restrictions on access to information? Do they believe their government should be required to share information with the public?

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Basotho favour citizens' right to public information, disagreeing with the assertion that information held by public authorities is for use only by government officials (Figure 6). Only three in 10 (30%) support limiting such information to government use.

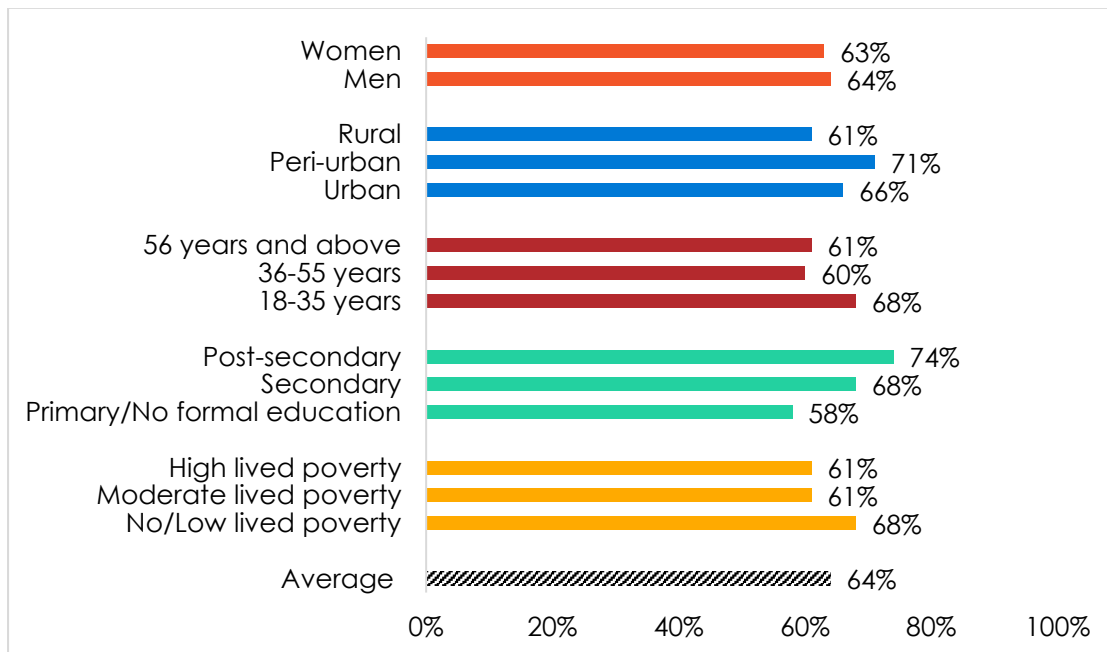
Support for public access to government information is stronger among more educated respondents, ranging from 58% of those with no formal education or primary education to 74% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 7). This view also gains more favour among urban and peri-urban residents (66%-71%), younger respondents (68%), and the economically better off (68%).

**Figure 6: Should information held by public authorities be hidden from the public?**  
 | Lesotho | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public?

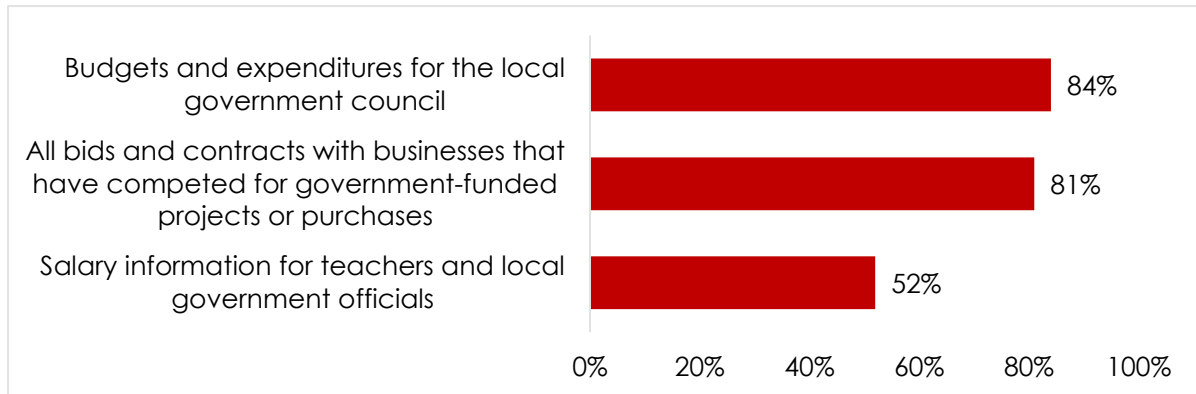
**Figure 7: Information held by public authorities should not be hidden from the public**  
 | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public? (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

More specifically, strong majorities endorse the proposition that information regarding budgets and expenditures for local government councils (84%) and bids and contracts for government-funded projects or purchases (81%) should be accessible to the public (Figure 8). A slim majority (52%) support the public's right to information about the salaries of teachers and local government officials.

**Figure 8: Public should have access to government budgets, contracts, and salaries**  
 | Lesotho | 2022



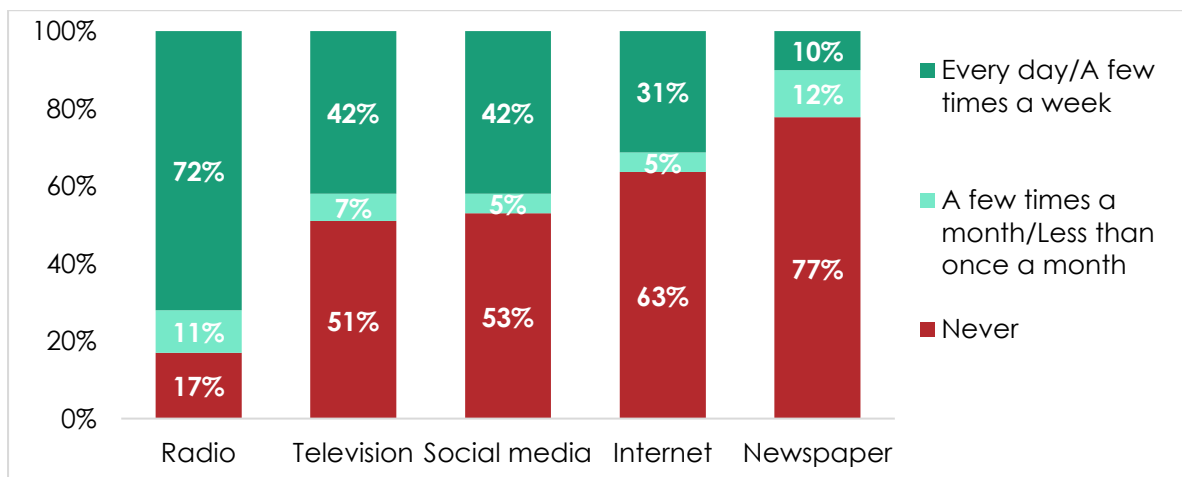
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from government, or whether government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public? (% who say "this information should be available to the public")

### Sources of news

Basotho are loyal to their radio, which is by far the most widely used mass media channel for getting news. More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say they get news via radio "every day" or "a few times a week." Only 17% say they "never" use the radio as a news source (Figure 9).

Survey findings show that after radio, television and social media are the most popular sources of news. More than four in 10 Basotho regularly obtain news from television (42%) and social media (42%), while about three in 10 (31%) turn to the Internet. Only 10% rely on newspapers as regular news sources.

**Figure 9: Source of news** | Lesotho | 2022

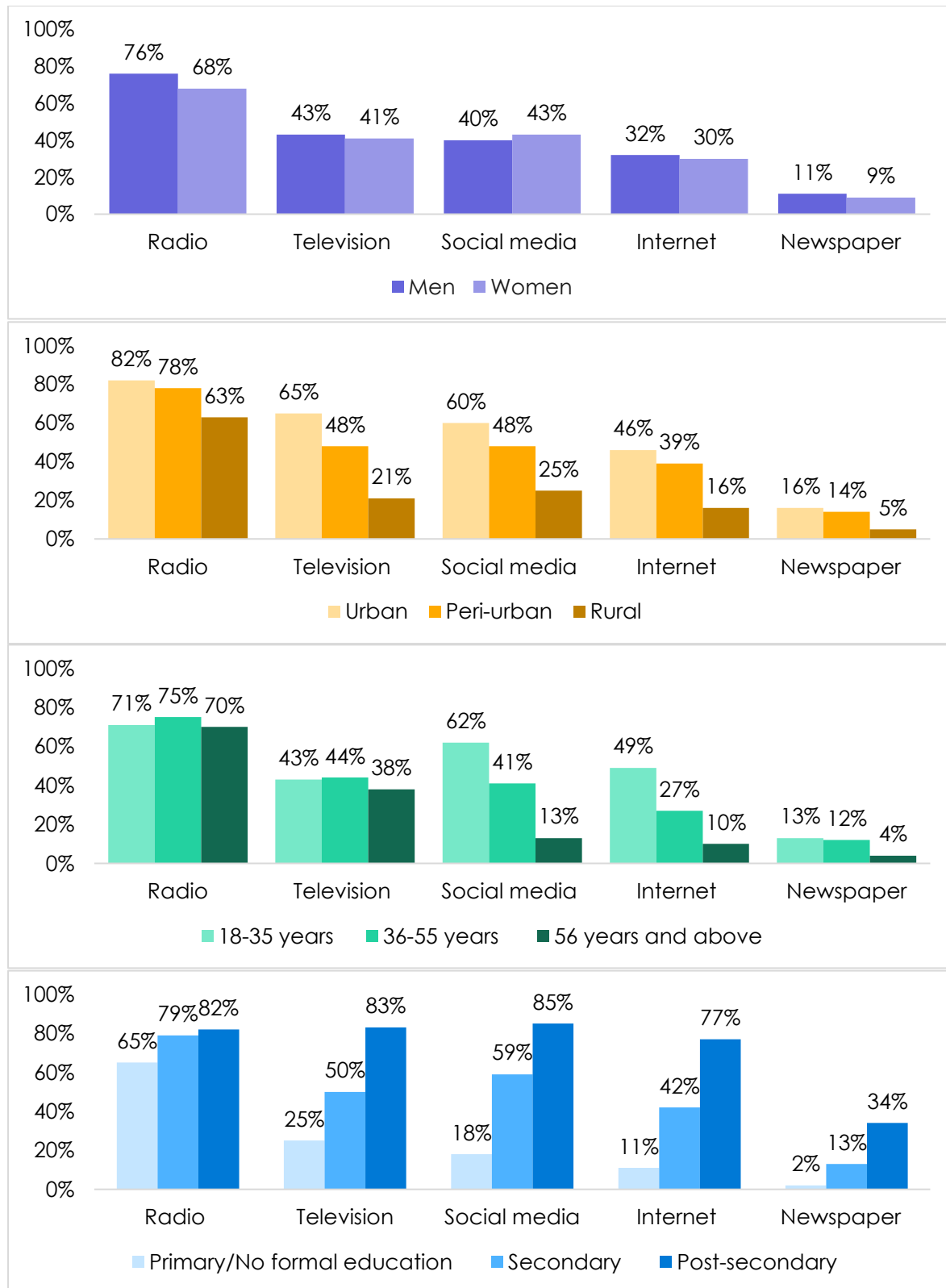


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources?

News consumption varies significantly by demographic group (Figure 10). More men than women regularly tune in to radio news (76% vs. 68%).

All five channels are more frequently used news sources in cities than in rural areas – by a margin of roughly 3 to 1 for television, social media, the Internet, and newspapers.

**Figure 10: Source of news | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2022**



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



Among youth (aged 18-35), social media (62%) and the Internet (49%) beat television (43%) for second place, behind radio (71%). Middle-aged and older citizens are significantly less likely to use new digital media.

While radio is king across all education levels, the regular use of television, social media, the Internet, and newspapers increases dramatically with respondents' education level.

## Conclusion

Basotho value the media's role as a watchdog on government and support media freedom, but they are divided on whether their country's media is actually free. Majorities endorse public access to government-held information such as bids and contracts, local government council budgets, and salaries of teachers and local government officials.

While radio is king among news sources in Lesotho, television and social media play a vital role as well, providing news to more than four in 10 citizens on a regular basis.

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