

Mauritians strongly endorse media freedom and public access to government information

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Summary

Article 12 of the Mauritian Constitution enshrines citizens' freedom of expression, including the right to "receive and impart ideas and information without interference" (Limpitlaw, 2021). But despite this provision, the country's media freedom climate is less than robust (United Nations, 2023).

In 2017, the police arrested three journalists (later released on bail) for publishing a scathing report implicating then-Attorney General Ravi Yerrigadoo in a money-laundering scandal (Reuters, 2017; Freedom House, 2018). In 2018, the government amended the Information and Communication Technologies Act to punish online content that is considered offensive or defamatory with up to 10 years in prison, a move that critics say imposes restrictions on media freedom by extending censorship and control (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). After a decade-long wait, the Freedom of Information Act is yet to be passed (African Media Barometer, 2018; Ramsamy, 2023).

Media activists argue that the lack of access-to-information laws, amendments to broadcasting legislation that threaten confidential information and limit investigative journalism, the arbitrary arrest of journalists, sanctions against some private radio stations considered to be hostile toward the government, and the instrumentalisation of the police for political motives all contribute to a constrained media environment and weaken the country's democracy (Kasensally, 2022; Khan, 2022). In 2023, Mauritius fell to 63rd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index rankings, down from 56th place in 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

What are Mauritians' perceptions and evaluations of their media scene?

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that Mauritians overwhelmingly 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 government should be able to prevent publications it disapproves of. And most citizens say the public and the media should have access to information held by public authorities, such as budgets and contracts. A solid majority of Mauritians believe that media freedom exists in practice in their country.

Television and radio are the most popular news sources in Mauritius, but the Internet and social media also play a vital role, regularly providing news to more than eight in 10 citizens.

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 Mauritius, led by Straconsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in 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 surveys were conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Close to nine in 10 Mauritians (86%) say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- A similarly strong majority (84%) support media freedom, while only 12% think the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens say the country's media is “somewhat” or “completely” free to report and comment on the news without government interference, while 35% disagree.
- About half (48%) of Mauritians say that information held by public authorities should be shared with the public, while 39% think such information is for the exclusive use of government officials.
 - Regarding specific types of information, large majorities say the public and the media should have access to information about budgets and expenditures for local government councils (92%), bids and contracts for government-funded projects and purchases (87%), and the salaries of teachers and local government officials (70%).
- Television and radio are the most popular sources of news in Mauritius, used at least “a few times a week” by 96% of citizens. The Internet (82%) and social media (81%) beat out newspapers (58%) as regular news sources.

Role and freedom of the media

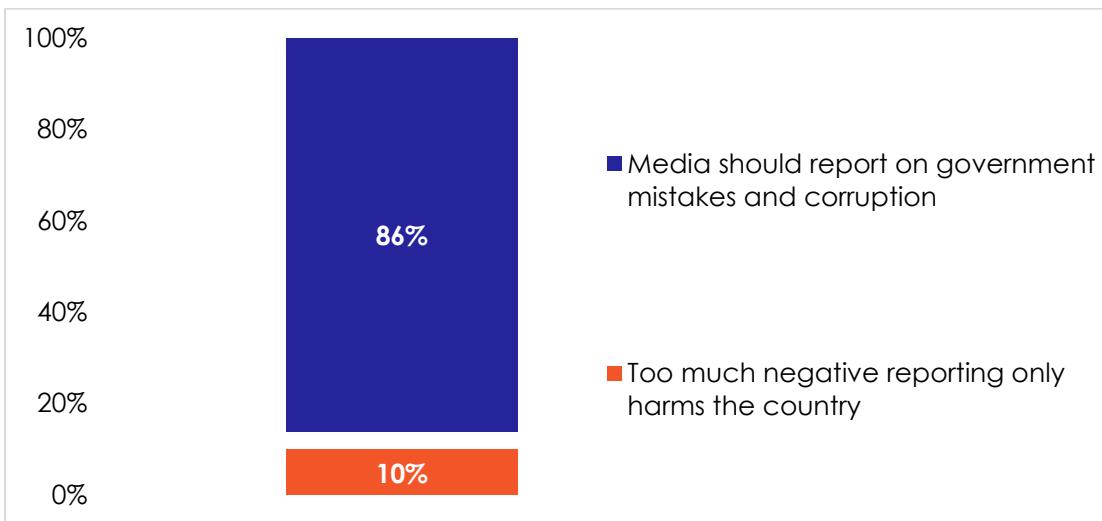
Mauritians want a media that aids in holding the government accountable. Nearly nine in 10 (86%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 10% instead emphasise that “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country” (Figure 1).

A similar share (84%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while only 12% believe the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 2).

While support for media freedom is strong across the board, rural residents are slightly less likely than urbanites to offer their endorsement of a free media (83% vs. 87%). Older respondents (79%), citizens with primary schooling or less (78%), and those who are economically well off¹ (80%) are also less likely to favour media freedom than their various counterparts (Figure 3).

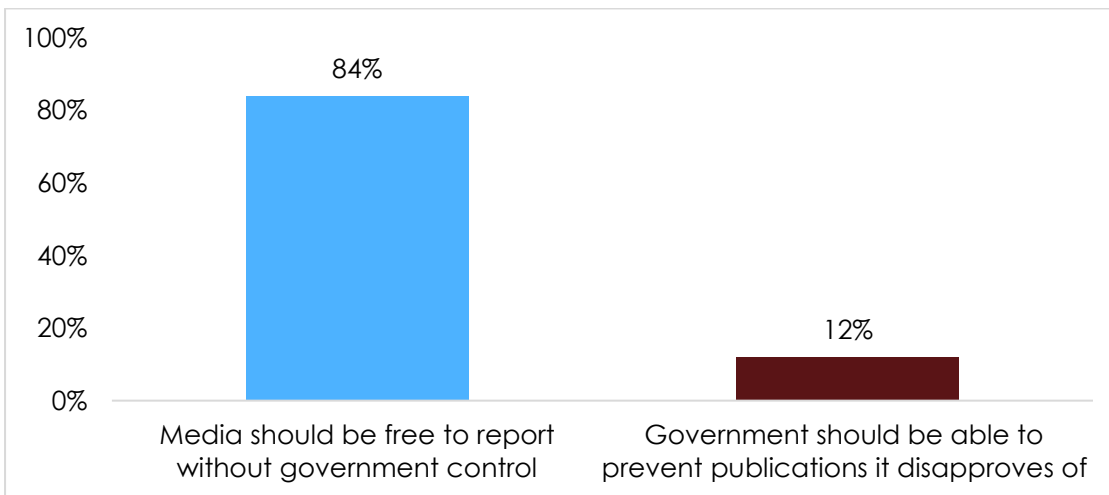
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Support for media’s watchdog role | Mauritius | 2022



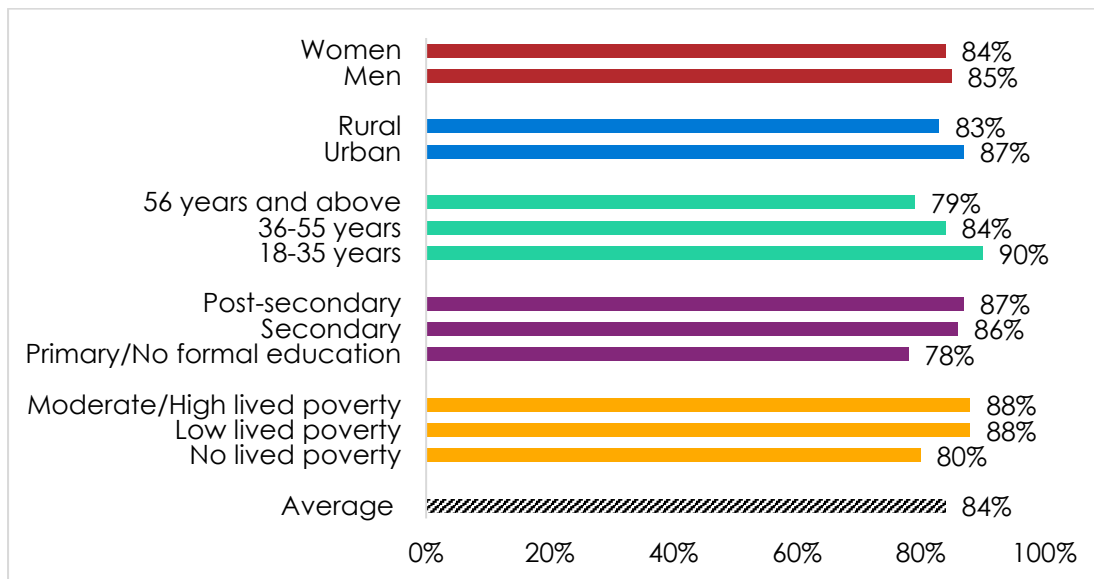
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the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

Figure 2: Should the media be free? | Mauritius | 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 | Mauritius | 2022

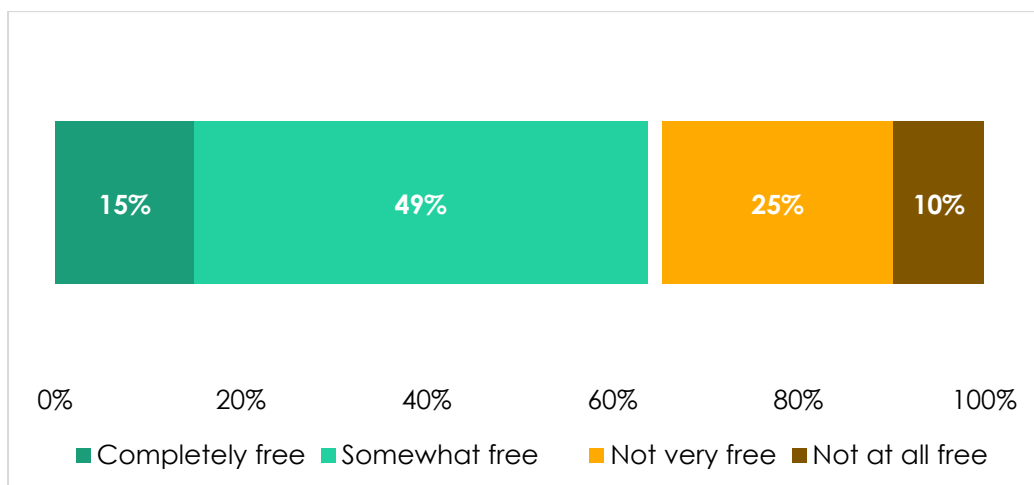


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your views?
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

In practice, more than six in 10 (64%) Mauritians say the country's media is "somewhat free" (49%) or "completely free" (15%) to report and comment on the news. But more than one in three (35%) consider the media "not very free" (25%) or "not at all free" (10%) (Figure 4).

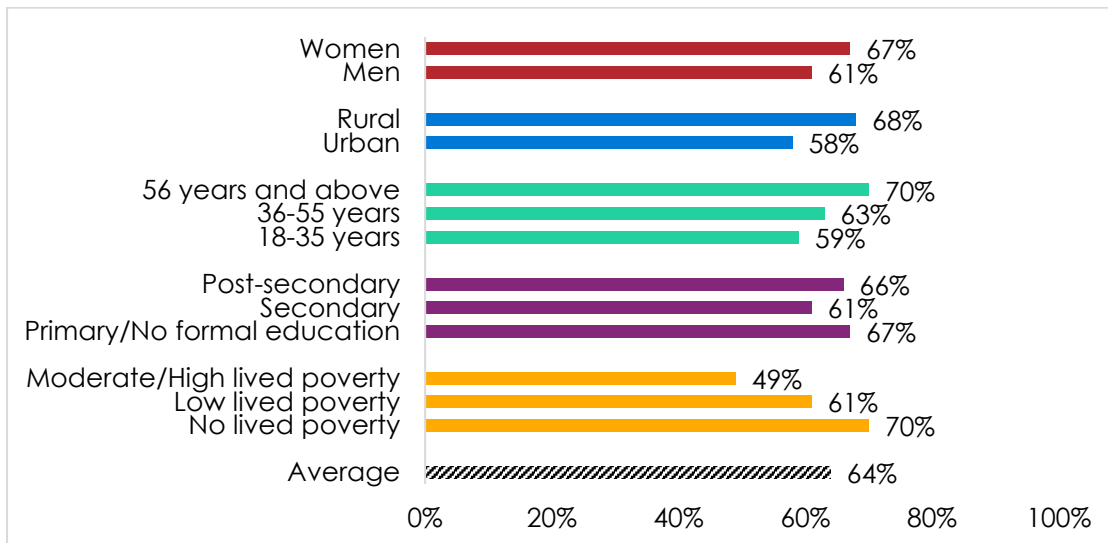
Assessments of the media as largely free are less common among men (61%), urban residents (58%), younger respondents (59%), and the poor (49%) than among women (67%), rural dwellers (68%), the elderly (70%), and the wealthy (70%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: How free is the media? | Mauritius | 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?

Figure 5: Freedom of media | by demographic group | Mauritius | 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”)

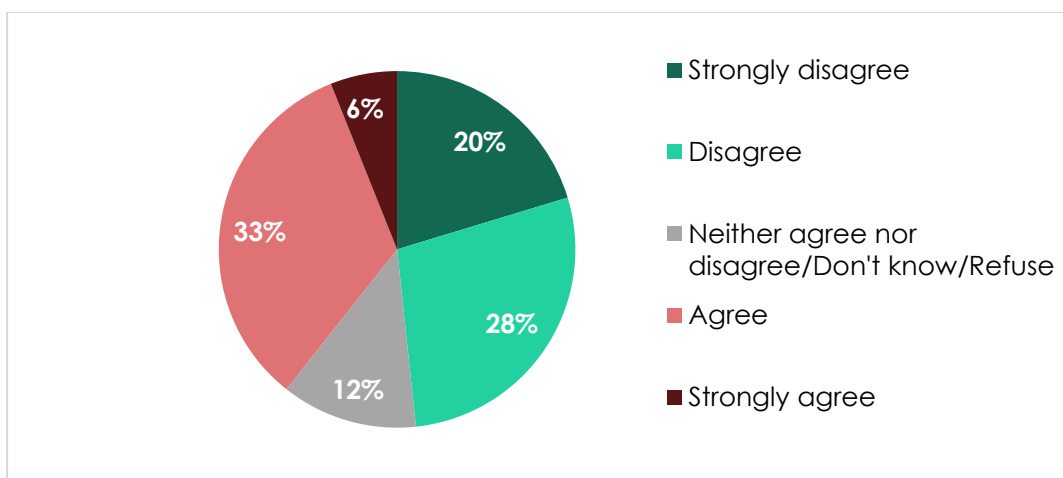
Government restrictions on information

Access to information held by public authorities remains elusive in many African countries despite a wave of right-to-information laws (Okello, Sunderland, & Asunka, 2024).

About half (48%) of Mauritians favour citizens' right to information held by the government, disagreeing with the assertion that such information is for use only by government officials (Figure 6). But about four in 10 (39%) support limiting such information to government use.

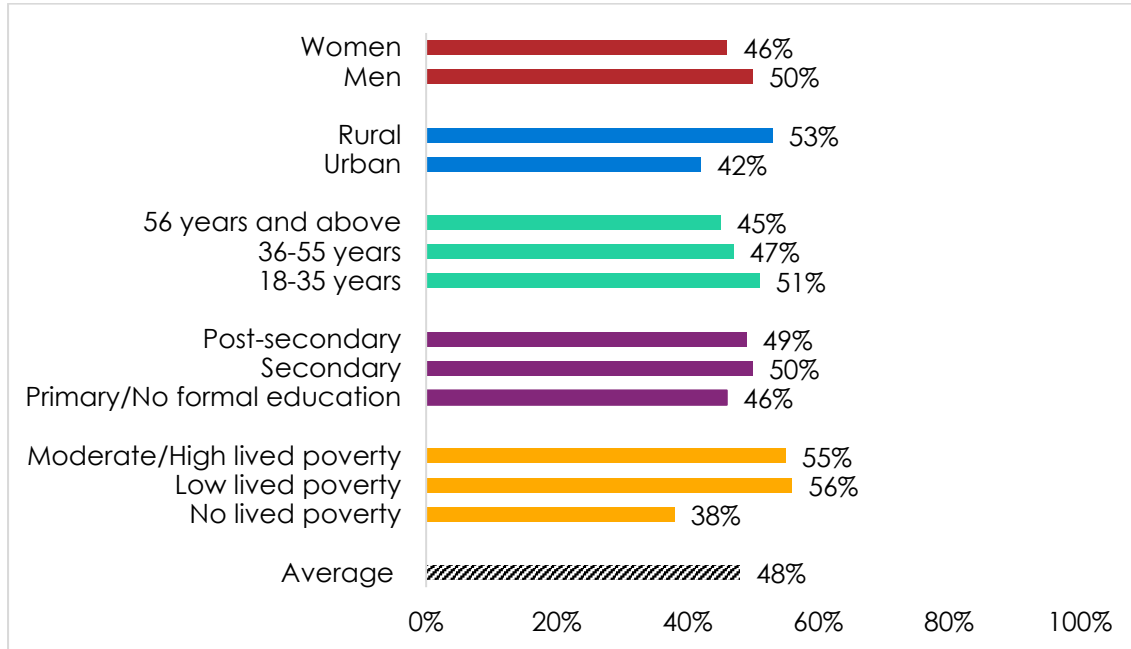
Support for public access to government information is weaker among urban than rural residents (42% vs. 53%) and among economically well-off respondents (38%) compared to their poorer counterparts (55%-56%) (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Should information held by public authorities be hidden from the public?
 | Mauritius | 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.

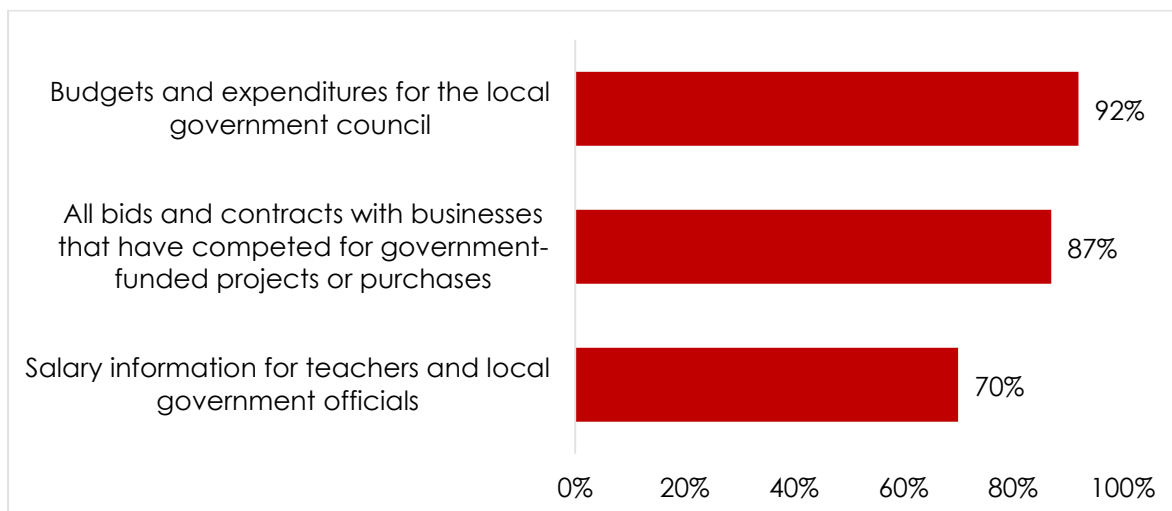
Figure 7: Information held by public authorities should not be hidden from the public
 | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



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”)

But while views are mixed regarding the right to access government information in general, overwhelming majorities favour public access to information on budgets and expenditures of local government councils (92%), bids and contracts for government-funded projects and purchases (87%), and the salaries of teachers and local government officials (70%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Access to government budgets, contracts, and salaries | Mauritius | 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

Radio and television are the primary media platforms for news in Mauritius: Almost all citizens say they get news via radio (96%) and television (96%) “every day” or “a few times a week” (Figure 9).

Most also report getting news regularly from the Internet (82%) and social media (81%). Nearly six in 10 (58%) rely on newspapers as regular news sources.

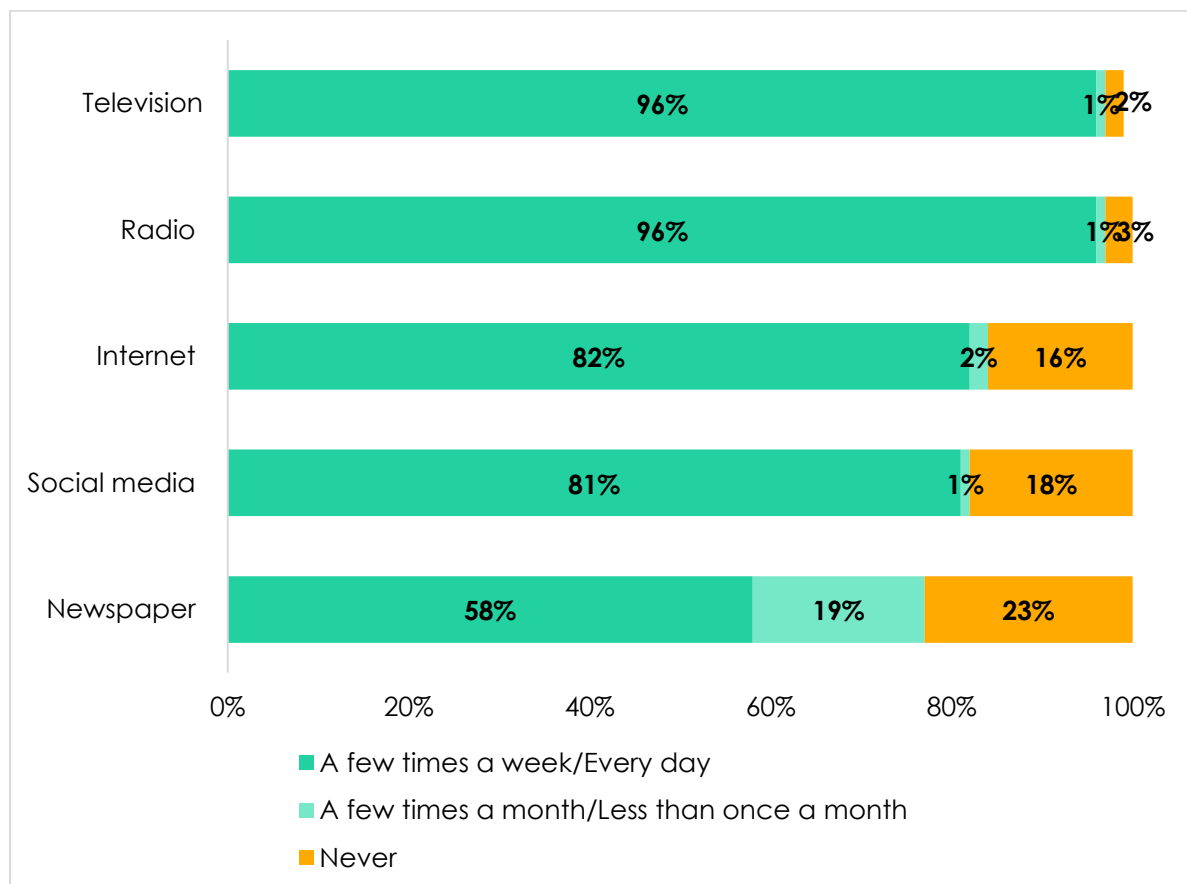
While television and radio are popular across all age groups, youth (aged 18-35 years) and middle-aged citizens (aged 36-55 years) are roughly twice as likely to obtain their news from digital media than the elderly (aged 56 years and above) (Figure 10). Younger respondents are also more likely than the elderly to regularly read newspapers (59%-62% vs. 49%).

While television prevails across all education levels, citizens with post-secondary qualifications are less likely than their counterparts in other education categories to rely on the radio for their news (63% vs. 95%-98%). Internet and social media use increases dramatically with respondents' education level, as does reliance on newspapers for regular news.

Rural and urban residents are equally likely to obtain their news regularly from the Internet, social media, and newspapers, but slightly more rural residents than urbanites get their news from the radio (99% vs. 93%) and television (98% vs. 94%).

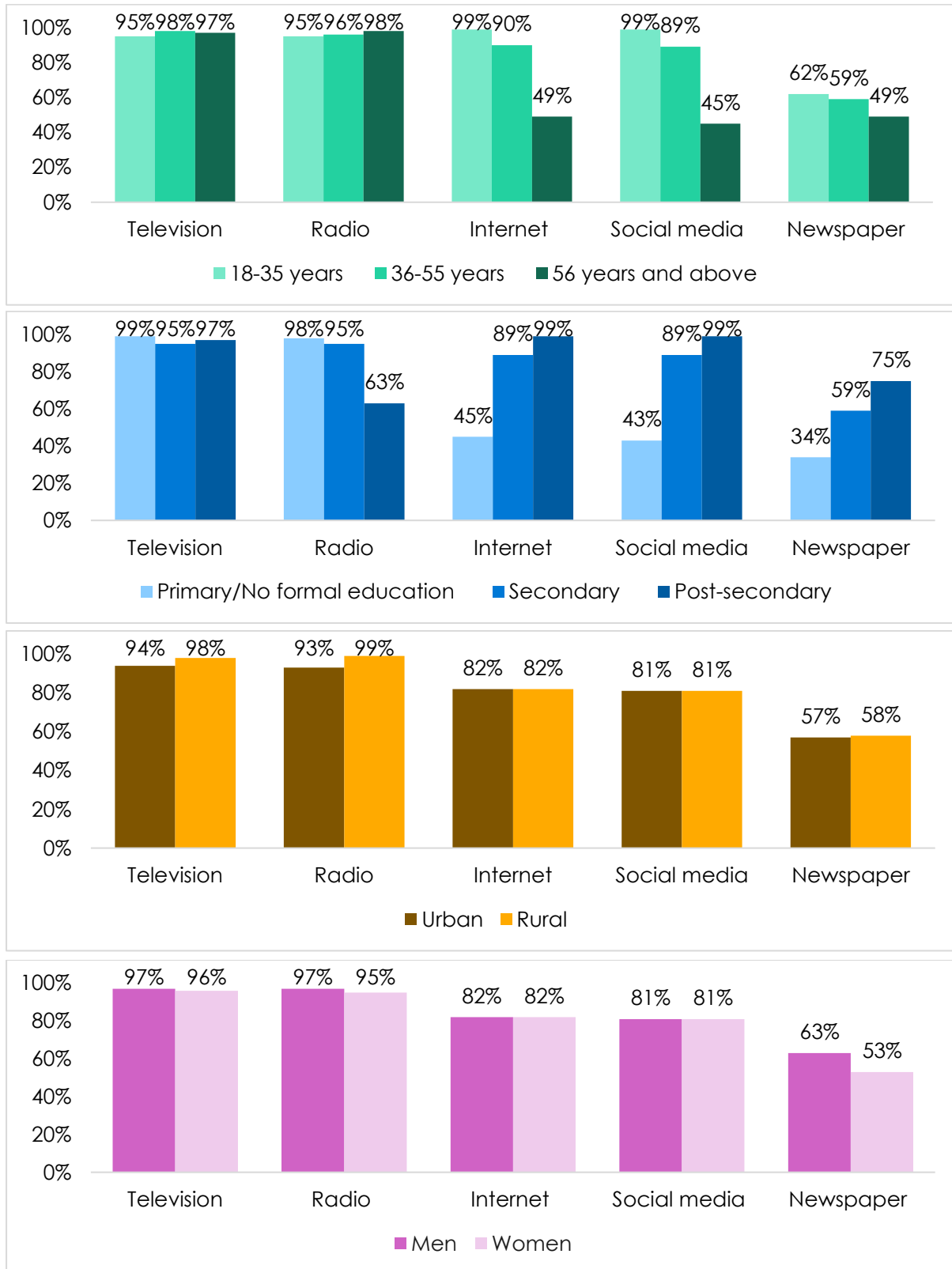
Men and women are equally likely to consume news via television, radio, the Internet, and social media, while more men than women rely on newspapers for their news (63% vs. 53%).

Figure 9: Sources of news | Mauritius | 2022



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

Figure 10: Sources of news | by age, education, urban-rural location, and gender
 | Mauritius | 2022



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

Conclusion

Mauritians take a strong stand on freedom of information: Overwhelming majorities value the media's role as a watchdog on government, think the media should be free of government interference, and demand public access to information held by the government, such as budgets and contracts. A majority – but not all – also believe that their media is in fact “somewhat” or “completely” free.

While television and radio are king among news sources in Mauritius, the Internet and social media also play a vital role, providing news to more than eight in 10 citizens on a regular basis.

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