

Ethiopians support free media holding government accountable

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 801 | Mulu Teka and Daniel Iberi

Summary

Ethiopia's media enjoyed unprecedented freedoms soon after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in April 2018. Several jailed journalists were freed, previously banned media outlets were allowed to operate, and the media landscape bloomed with a proliferation of new outlets (Amnesty International, 2019; Mumo, 2019).

However, media freedoms appear to be in trouble. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), "most of the recent press freedom gains have been lost since Ethiopia became embroiled in ethnic conflicts and civil war," and fear of reprisals persists among journalists even after the November 2022 peace accord. Ethiopia is ranked 130th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2023 World Press Freedom Index, down from 99th before the all-out war in the Tigray region in 2020.

Media freedom and independence were dealt a further blow in 2021 when Ethiopia's House of Peoples' Representatives appointed politicians to the board of the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA). According to the Media Proclamation, a statute establishing the EMA, members are supposed to be nominated in an open and transparent process free from government manipulation and interference. Further, the proclamation prohibits members and employees of any political party from serving on the EMA board of directors (Law Ethiopia, 2021). Since then, media houses and individual journalists – both local and international – have faced threats should they report on government security operations or deviate from the government's narrative (Issa, 2024).

Many international journalists have been expelled from Ethiopia, while others have been detained for days for publishing news stories that go against the government's wishes (Ethiopia Human Rights Commission, 2022; Le Monde, 2024). In 2022, 111 journalists were arrested and charged with inciting violence (Freedom House, 2023). As a result, many journalists and media outlets engage in self-censorship (Muyiwa, 2024).

Even so, the media landscape is freer and more diverse now than under the previous government (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Until April 2018, more than 200 media outlets had been banned. These media outlets are now in operation, albeit under erratic conditions. The pre-reform period of media in Ethiopia was marked by disrespect for media laws, which limited journalists' freedom of expression (Tufa & Dejene, 2023).

Findings from a recent Afrobarometer survey reveal that solid majorities of Ethiopians want a news media that is free of government interference and that helps hold the government accountable. A slim majority perceive the country's media as free.

A majority of Ethiopians own mobile phones, but few have data connectivity via their phones. The primary sources of regular news for Ethiopians are radio and television.

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 Ethiopia, led by ABCON – Research & Consulting, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ethiopians in May-June 2023. 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 Ethiopia in 2013 and 2020.

Key findings

- A large majority (71%) of Ethiopians “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- About six in 10 citizens (59%) endorse the principle that the media “should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.”
- A slim majority (51%) of respondents assess their country's media as “somewhat free” or “completely free,” while 44% consider the media “not very” or “not at all” free.
- Close to two-thirds (64%) of adults own a mobile phone, 33% a radio, 29% a television set, and 5% a computer.
 - Only 22% own a mobile phone with Internet connectivity.
- Radio is Ethiopia's most popular news source: 42% of citizens say they tune in “every day” or “a few times a week.” More than a third (35%) say they regularly get news from television, while about two in 10 are regular consumers of news from social media (18%) and the Internet (17%).

Media's role and freedom

Ethiopians want a media that helps hold the government accountable. Seven in 10 citizens (71%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while only 28% think that “too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country” (Figure 1).

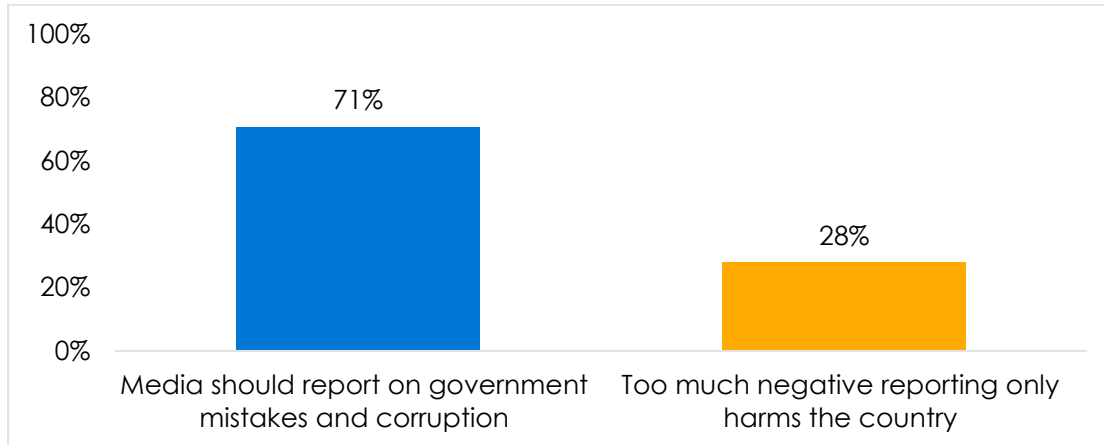
The view that the media should serve as a watchdog over the government is particularly common among the most educated citizens (78%), urban residents (76%), and respondents experiencing high lived poverty¹ (74%) (Figure 2).

Similarly, almost six in 10 Ethiopians (59%) believe in the media's right to publish any views and ideas without government control, while about four in 10 (39%) hold that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 3). Support for media freedom is the majority view across key demographic groups, registering

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).

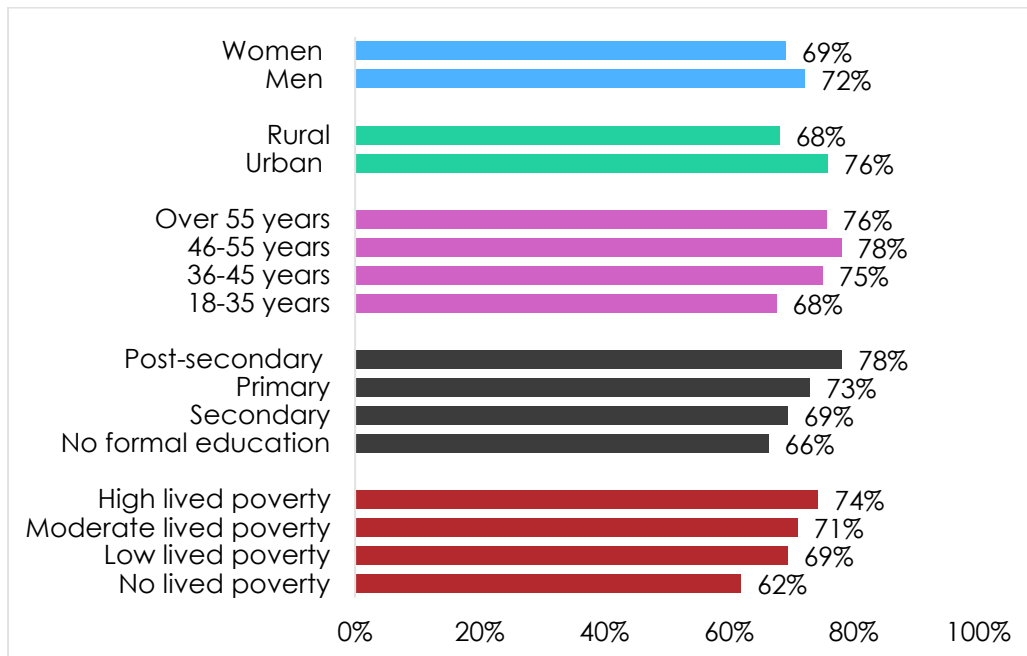
most strongly among those over age 55 (64%) and people with post-secondary education (63%) (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Media should check government vs. avoid negative reporting | Ethiopia | 2023



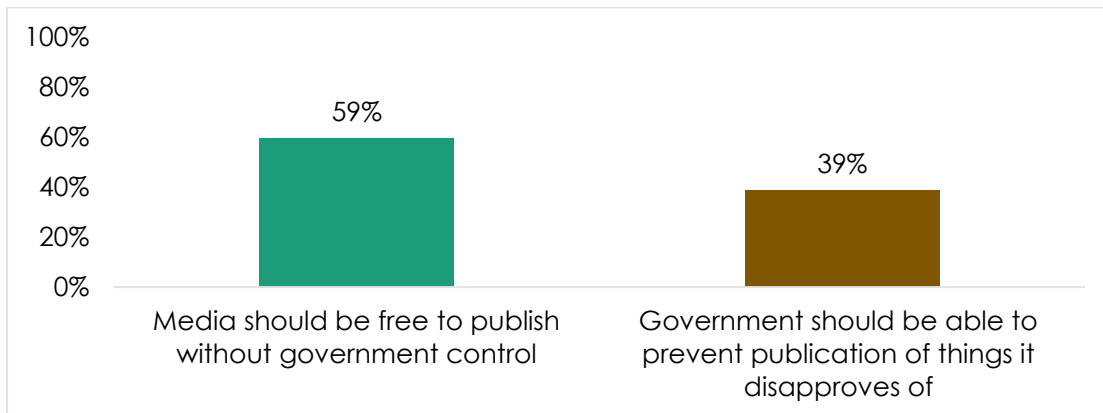
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the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

Figure 2: Media should check government | by demographic group | Ethiopia | 2023



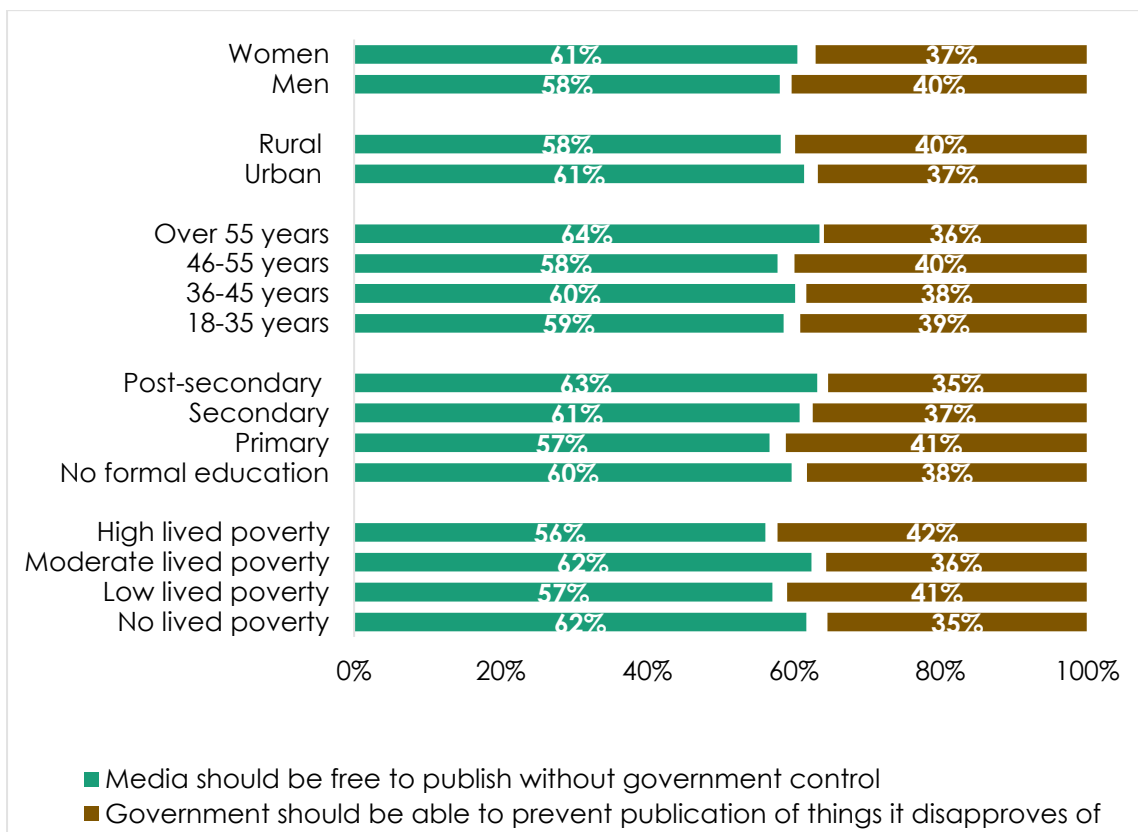
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 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

Figure 3: Support for media freedom | Ethiopia | 2023



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 4: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Ethiopia | 2023

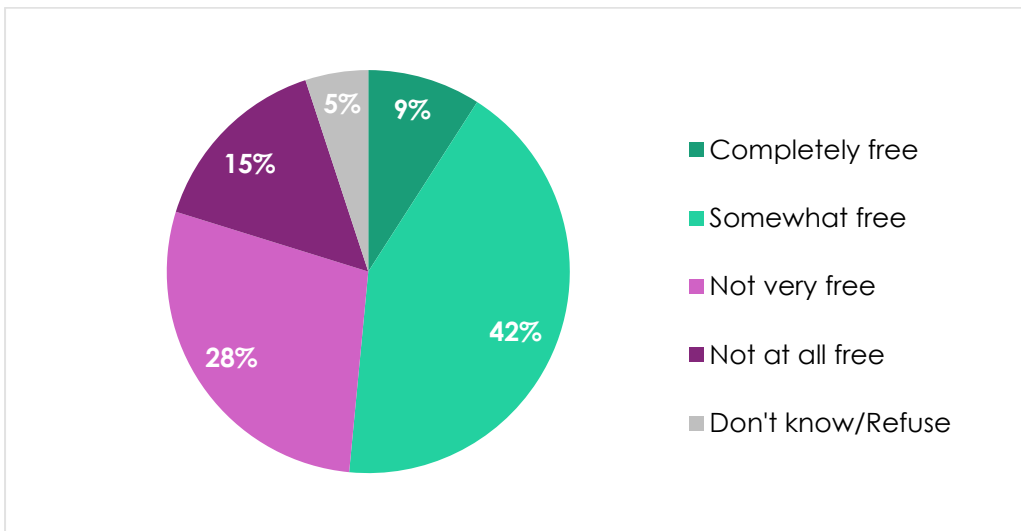


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 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
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 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

However, Ethiopians are divided in their assessments of how free their country's media actually is. A slim majority (51%) believe the media is at least "somewhat free," though only 9% say it is "completely free." More than four in 10 think it is "not very free" (28%) or "not at all free" (15%) (Figure 5).

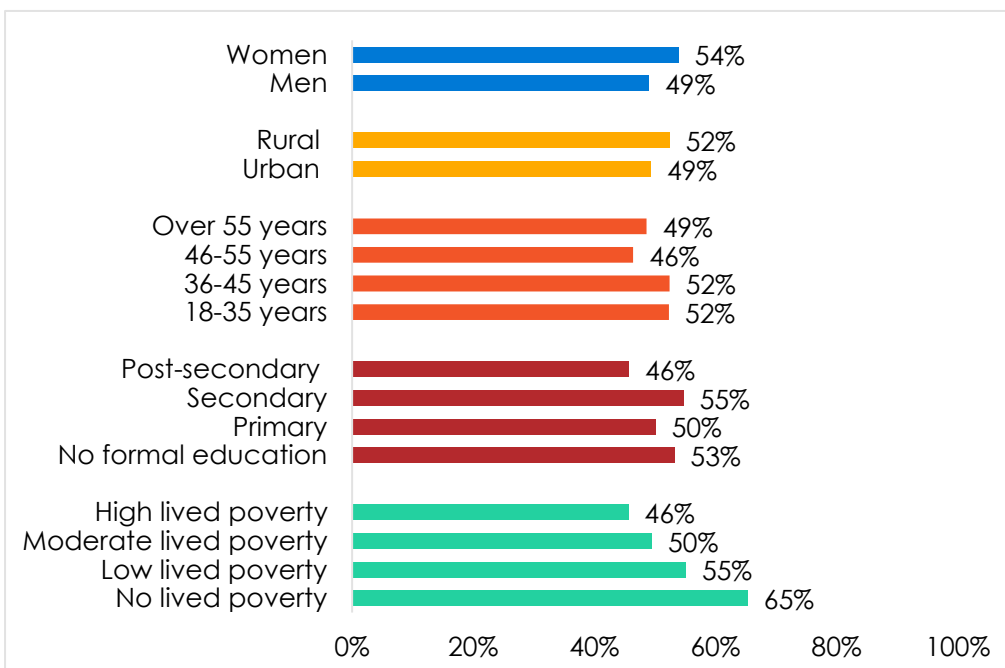
Perceptions that the media is free are somewhat more common among women than men (54% vs. 49%) and among younger respondents (52% of 18- to 45-year-olds) than their elders (46%-49%) (Figure 6). This perception gathers strength as respondents' economic status improves, ranging from 46% among those experiencing high lived poverty to 65% among those with no lived poverty.

Figure 5: How free is the media? | Ethiopia | 2023



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 6: Media is somewhat/completely free | by demographic group | Ethiopia | 2023

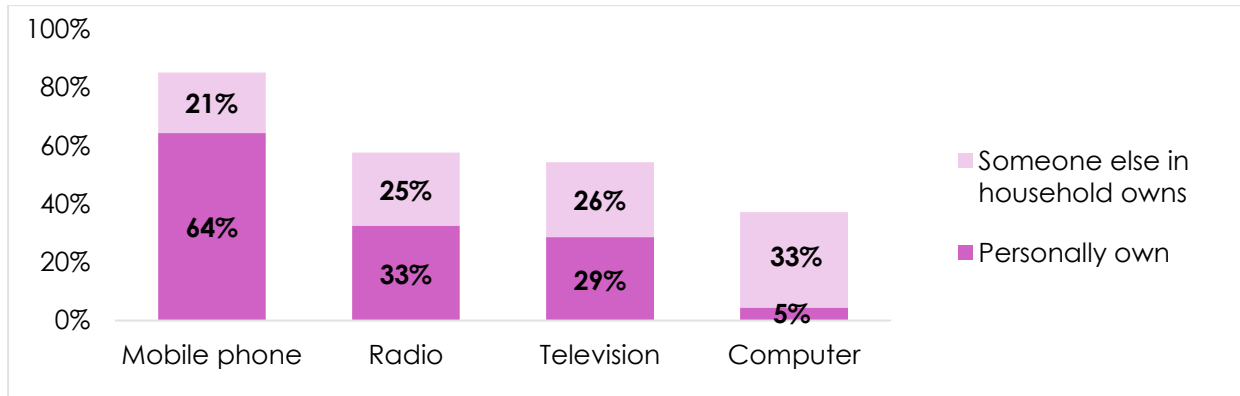


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

Access to communication devices and to the Internet

Close to two-thirds (64%) of Ethiopians own a mobile phone, up 5 percentage points since 2020 (Teka, 2021), and nearly six out of 10 either personally own or live in a household where someone else owns a radio (58%) or a television (55%) (Figure 7). Although personal ownership of computers remains low (5%), one in three (33%) have access to a computer through someone in their household.

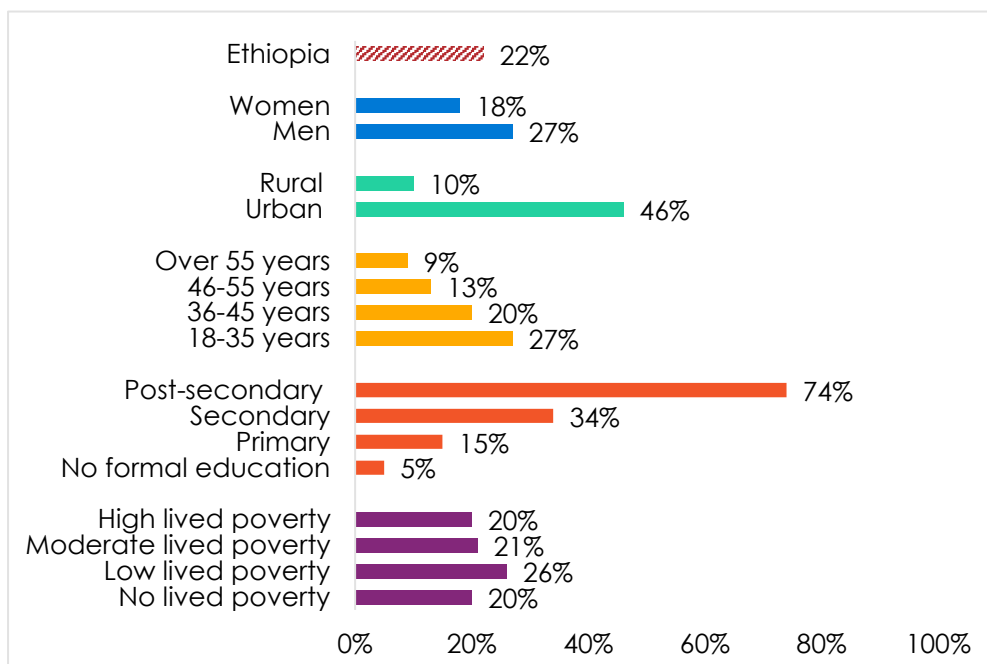
Figure 7: Access to communication devices | Ethiopia | 2023



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own? [If “no”:] Does anyone else in your household own one?

Among citizens who personally own a mobile phone, 35% have Internet access via their phones. This means that of all adults, about one in five (22%) have phones with data connectivity, an increase of 6 percentage points compared to 2020 (Teka, 2021). Ownership of a mobile phone with Internet access is most common in cities (46%, vs. 10% in rural areas), among men (27%, vs. 18% of women), among youth (27%, vs. 9% of seniors), and among the most educated citizens (74%, vs. 5% of those with no formal schooling) (Figure 8).

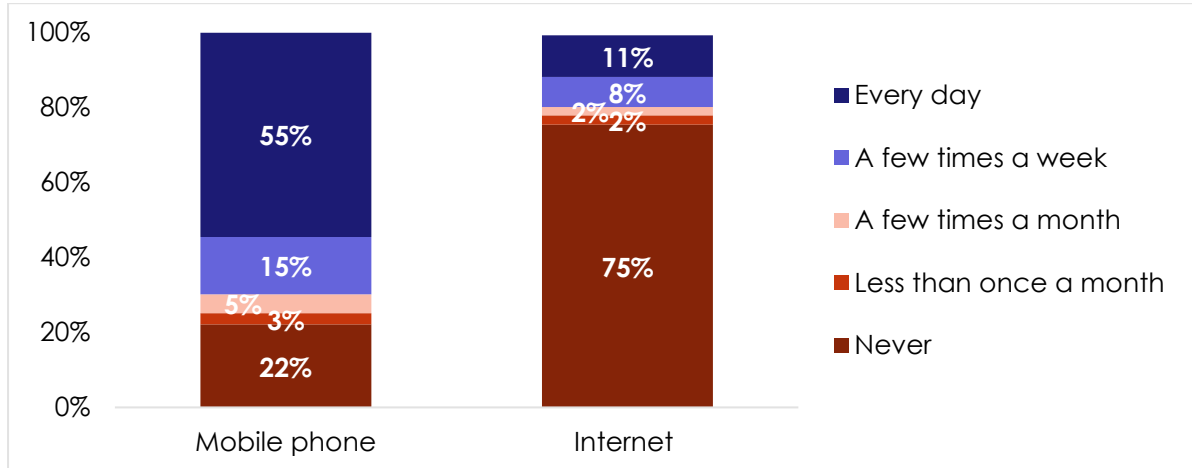
Figure 8: Ownership of mobile phone with access to Internet | Ethiopia | 2023



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own: Mobile phone? [If yes:] Does your phone have access to the Internet? (Figure shows % of all respondents who own a mobile phone with Internet access.)

With regard to frequency of use, a majority (55%) of Ethiopians say they use a mobile phone “every day,” and another 15% use it “a few times a week” (Figure 9). However, only one in five (19%) are regular users of the Internet, though this proportion has grown by 7 percentage points compared to 2020 (Teka, 2021).

Figure 9: Frequency of using mobile phone and Internet | Ethiopia | 2023



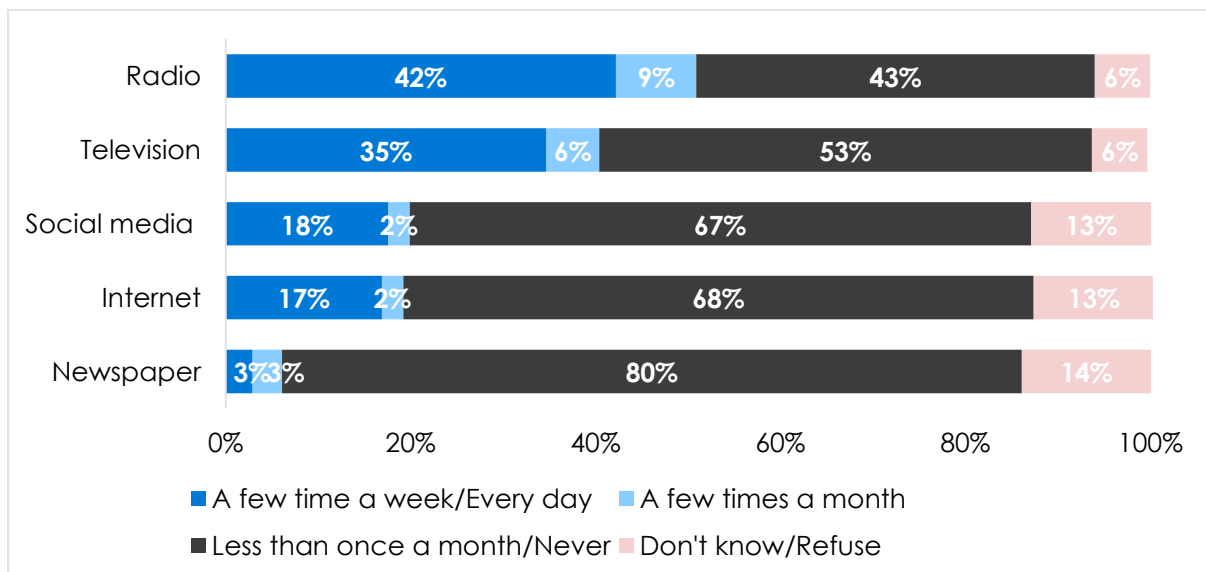
Respondents were asked: How often do you use: A mobile phone? The Internet?

News media consumption

Radio remains the most commonly used source of news among adult Ethiopians: More than four in 10 (42%) say they listen to radio news “every day” or “a few times a week,” while about one in three (35%) rely on television for regular news (Figure 10). However, this reflects a shift in favour of television: The share of regular users of television news has increased by 11 percentage points compared to 2020, while that of regular consumers of radio news has dropped by 8 points (Teka, 2021).

Close to one in five cite digital media (18% social media and 17% Internet) as regular sources of news, while only 3% say they read newspapers “every day” or “a few times a week.”

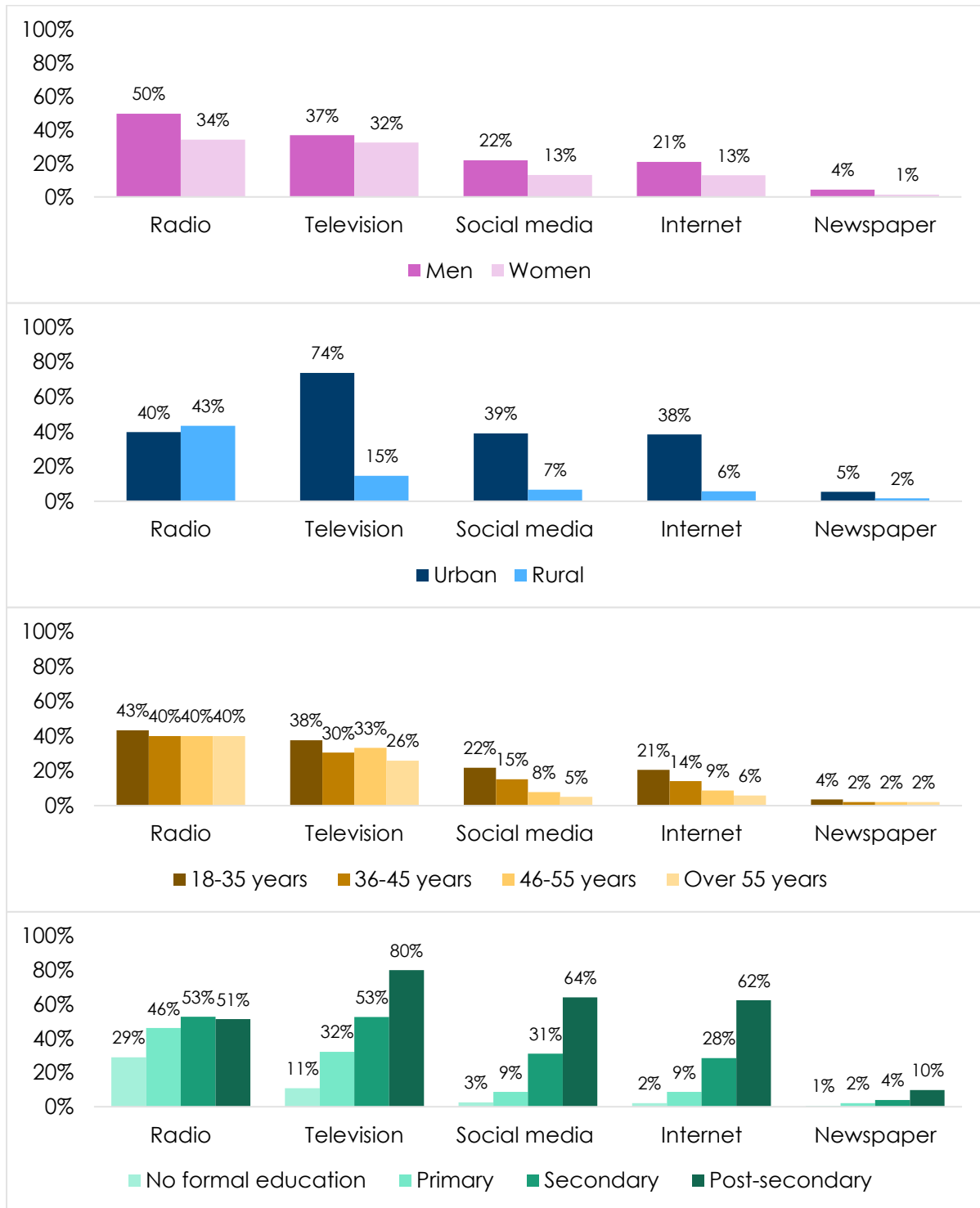
Figure 10: Sources of news | Ethiopia | 2023



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

More men than women use each of these sources to access news (Figure 11). The gap is particularly large for radio (16 percentage points) but is also substantial for social media (9 points) and the Internet (8 points).

Figure 11: Regular news media consumption | by gender, urban-rural location, age, and education | Ethiopia | 2023



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

Media consumption habits also vary considerably depending on respondents' area of residence. Urban residents are far more likely to use sources that are less accessible in rural areas: television (a 59-point gap), social media (32 points), and the Internet (32 points). These gaps have increased significantly in recent years, especially concerning the use of social media and the Internet (gaps of 24 and 19 points, respectively, in 2020) (Teka, 2021).

Youth are more likely than their elders to be regular news consumers via each of these channels, especially digital media, and education appears to be a major driver of news media habits. Compared to citizens with post-secondary education, those without formal schooling trail by 22 percentage points in the regular use of the radio for news, and the gaps are even wider for television (69 points), social media (61 points), and the Internet (60 points).

Conclusion

A clear majority of Ethiopians are supportive of media freedom and endorse the media's watchdog role in fostering government accountability. At a time of continued government attacks on the media (Ethiopia Human Rights Commission, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023), these survey findings suggest a need for policy makers and government officials to improve media freedom in the country by reviewing and amending laws that restrict press freedom, ending the use of criminal charges against journalists, and encouraging responsible journalism among reporters and media outlets.

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