

# South Africans support media's independence and watchdog role

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 805 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma**

## Summary

In the recently released 2024 World Press Freedom Index, South Africa has dropped from 25<sup>th</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup> position out of 180 countries globally (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2024). While the country's robust media scene still ranks third in Africa, after Mauritania and Namibia, it faces clear challenges.

In April, the online Daily Maverick (2024) initiated a 24-hour shutdown to highlight the issue of inadequate funding for media outlets, which has had grave implications for the country's media pluralism and quality of journalism (Daniels, 2024). Over the past 15 years, nearly 70% of South Africa's media workforce has been lost to job cuts (Daily Maverick, 2024).

Added to that, some journalists endure harassment, cyberbullying, social media toxicity, and fear that digital threats might become real-life attacks. Women in the profession are especially vulnerable (CIPESA, 2022). In 2019, veteran journalist Karima Brown faced hateful online abuse and threats after her phone number was leaked on social media (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019).

More recently, legal journalist Karyn Maughan and a state prosecutor have been embroiled in prolonged court action instituted by former President Jacob Zuma, who claims that the pair illegally leaked court documents pertaining to his corruption case (Kgosana, 2024), a move that critics have branded as a ploy to intimidate journalists and restrict the public's right to information (South African National Editors Forum, 2023).

Ahead of the hotly contested May election, President Cyril Ramaphosa has been accused of placing media freedom in jeopardy after he was heard in a leaked audio recording from the African National Congress' National Executive Committee meeting insisting that the party will not tolerate any negative coverage because "TV stations have no right to be negative" toward the ruling party (Sithole, 2024; Stone, 2024).

A week later, the State Security Agency summoned the head of news of the South African Broadcasting Corporation for security vetting, including a polygraph test, in what critics have termed "pre-election intimidation" (Campaign for Free Expression, 2024).

What are South Africans' perceptions and evaluations of their media landscape?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, in late 2022, show that most South Africans say 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 the government should be able to prevent publications it disapproves of. Most citizens say the public and the media should have access to information held by public authorities, such as budgets and contracts. And a strong majority say South Africa's media today is at least "somewhat" free.

Television is the most popular news source in South Africa, but radio and social media also play a vital role, regularly providing news to more than seven in 10 citizens.

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

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

## Key findings

- Three-quarters (74%) of South Africans say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” rejecting the idea “too much reporting on negative events ... only harms the country.”
- A similarly clear majority (72%) insist on media freedom, while 23% endorse the government’s right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- About seven in 10 citizens (68%) say the country’s media is “somewhat free” or “completely free” to report and comment on the news without government interference, but 28% disagree with that assessment.
- More than half (57%) of South Africans think the public and the media should have access to government information, while 30% say such information should be for use by government officials only and should not be shared with the public.
  - In particular, strong majorities say that local government budgets (79%) and government bids and contracts (75%) should be shared with the public.
- Television is the most popular source of news in South Africa. But radio and social media follow close behind, regularly providing news to more than seven in 10 citizens.

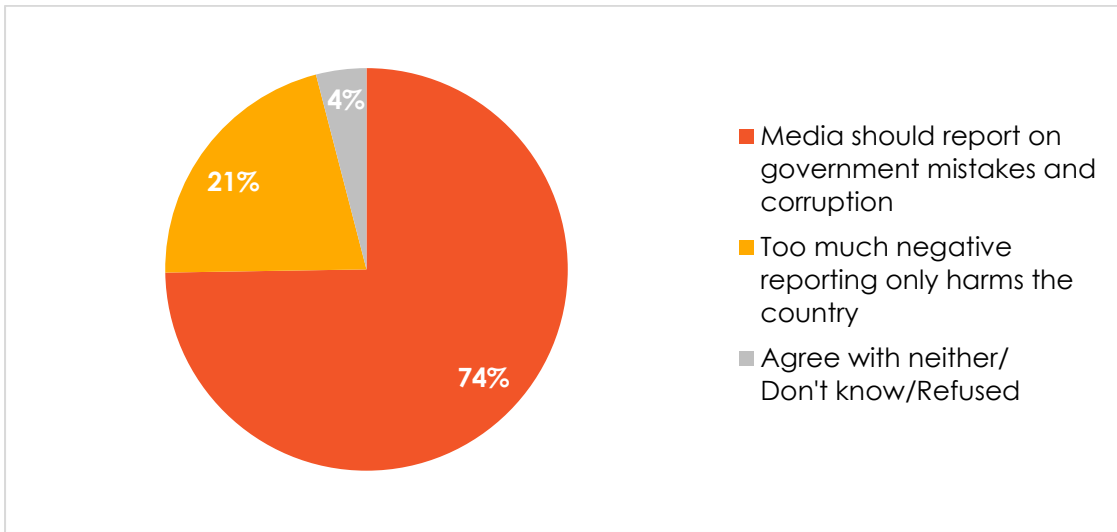
## The role of the media

Most South Africans believe the media must hold the government accountable. Three-quarters (74%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while just 21% instead emphasise that “too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country” (Figure 1).

Similarly, more than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while only 23% believe the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 2).

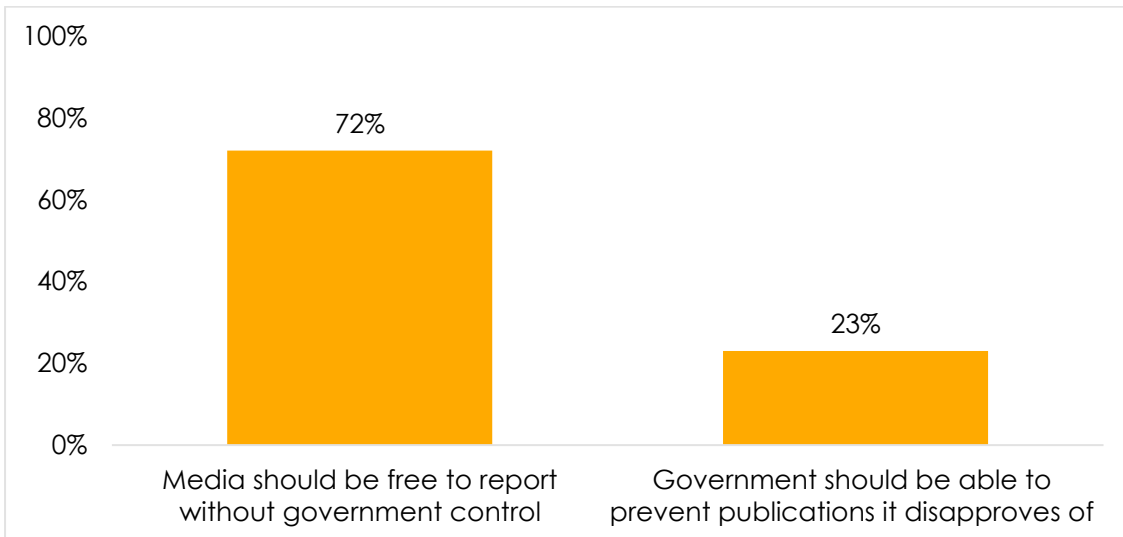
Media freedom wins greater approval in cities than in rural areas (79% vs. 70%) and among more educated citizens compared to their less educated counterparts (73% vs. 68%). Support also increases as respondents’ age rises, ranging from 70% among those aged 18-35 to 76% among those aged 56 years and above (Figure 3).

**Figure 1: Media's watchdog role** | South Africa | 2022



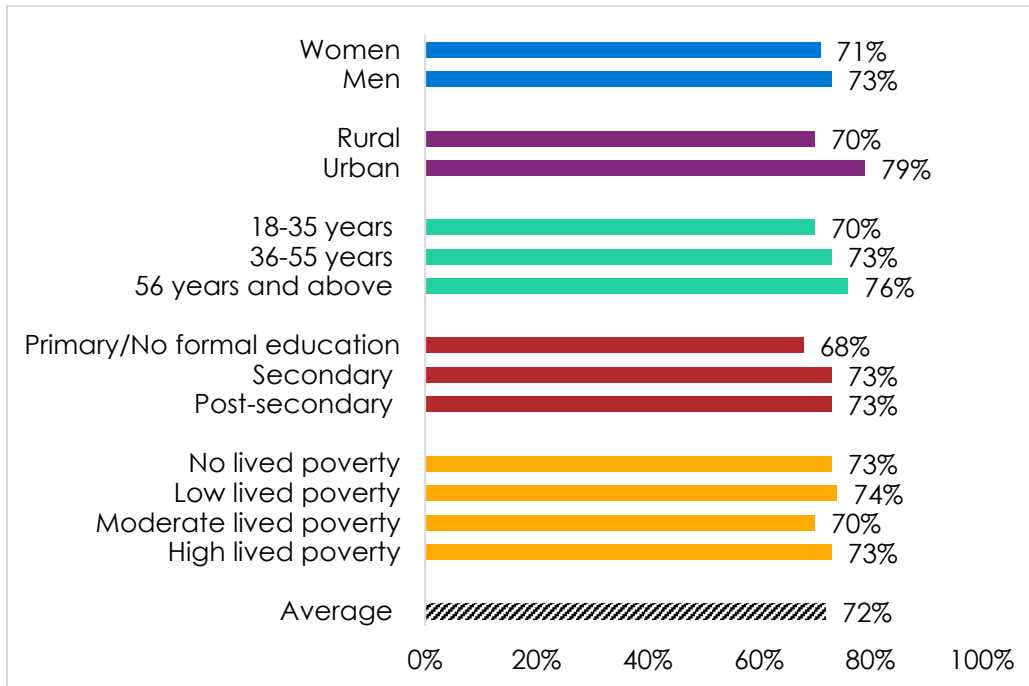
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.  
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms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

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



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

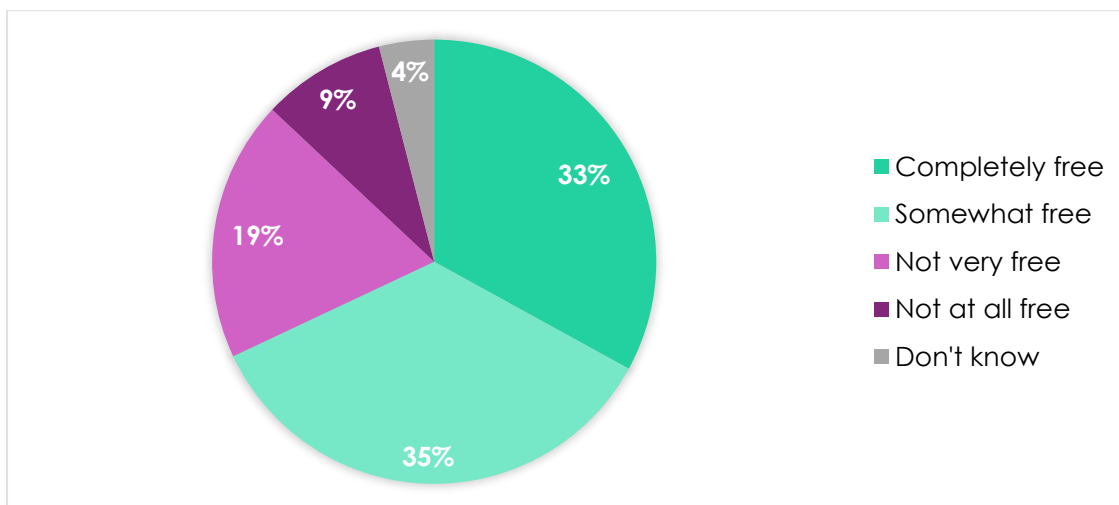
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

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 Statement 1)

Almost seven in 10 citizens (68%) say the country's media is "somewhat free" (35%) or "completely free" (33%) to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference. But about three in 10 (28%) consider the media "not very free" (19%) or "not at all free" (9%) (Figure 4).

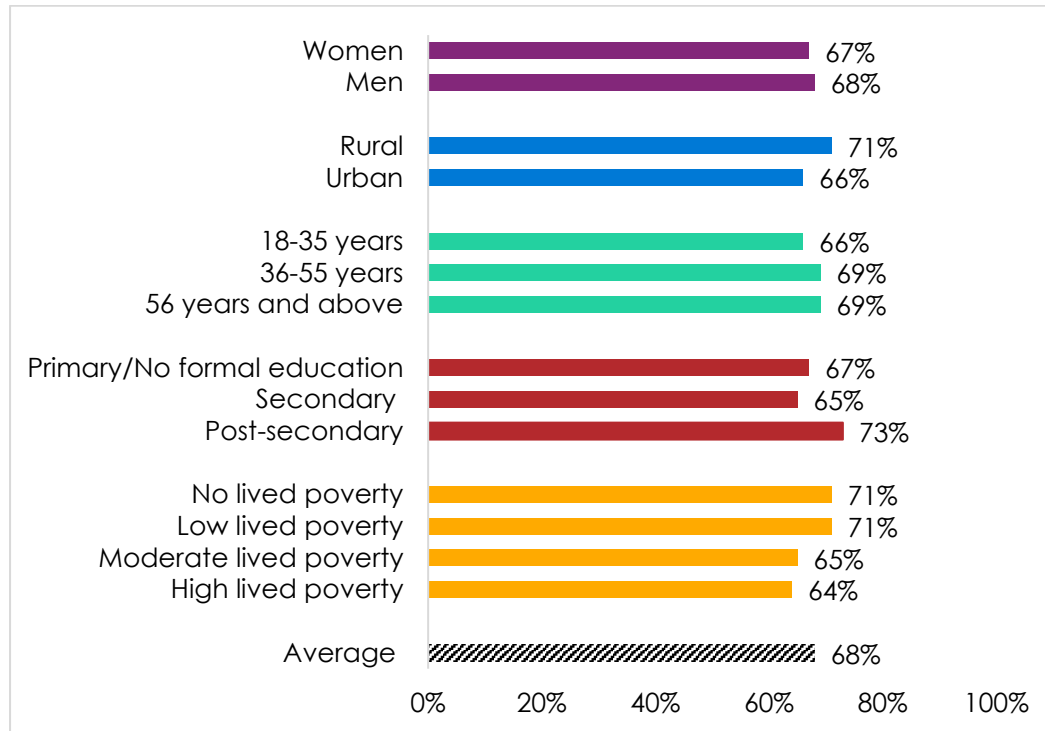
**Figure 4: How free is the media?** | South Africa | 2022



**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?

The view that the media is “somewhat” or “completely” free is more common among rural residents (71%) than urbanites (66%), among older respondents (69%) than the youth (66%), and among those with post-secondary qualifications (73%) compared to their less educated counterparts (65%-67%) (Figure 5). Citizens experiencing no or low lived poverty (71%) are also more likely to say that the news media in the country is free compared to poorer respondents (64%-65%).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 5: Media is somewhat/completely free** | by demographic group | South Africa | 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

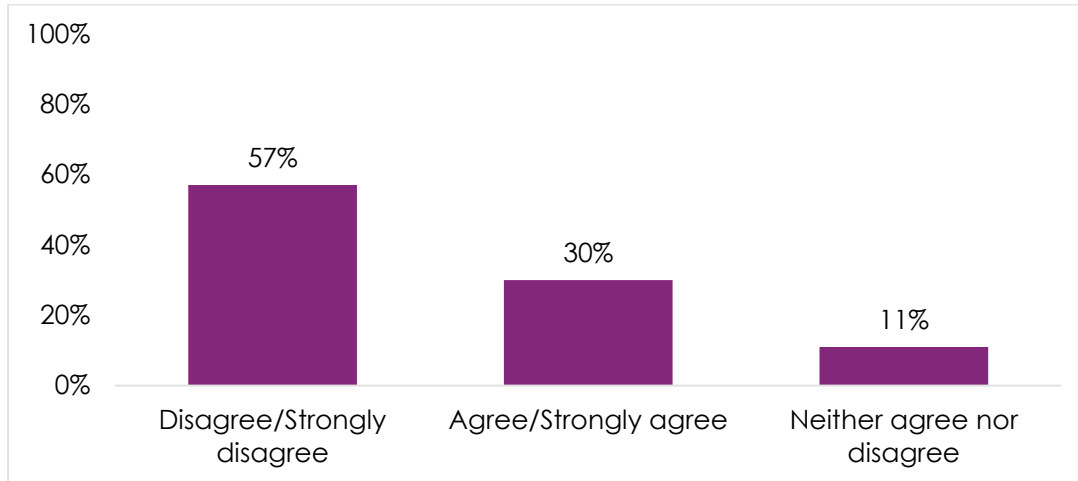
What do South Africans think about restrictions on access to information? Do they believe their government should be required to share information with the public?

More than half (57%) of South Africans favour citizens' right to government information, disagreeing with the assertion that information held by public authorities is for use only by government officials (Figure 6). Three in 10 (30%) support limiting such information to government use, while 11% neither agree nor disagree.

Support for public information sharing is fairly consistent across key demographic groups (Figure 7).

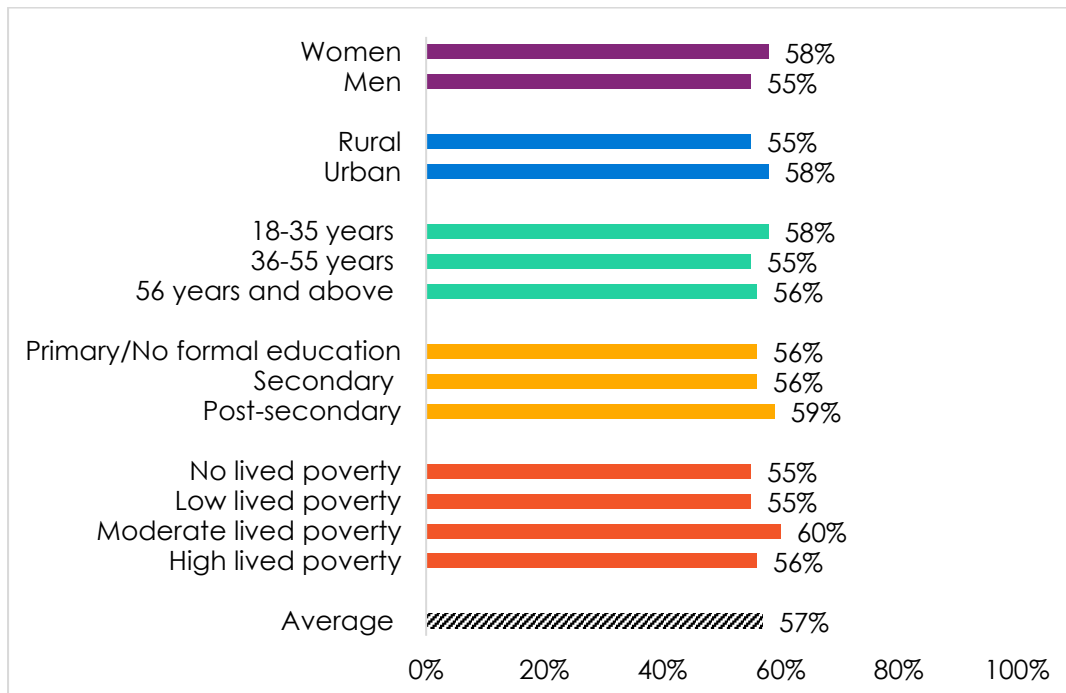
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on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

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

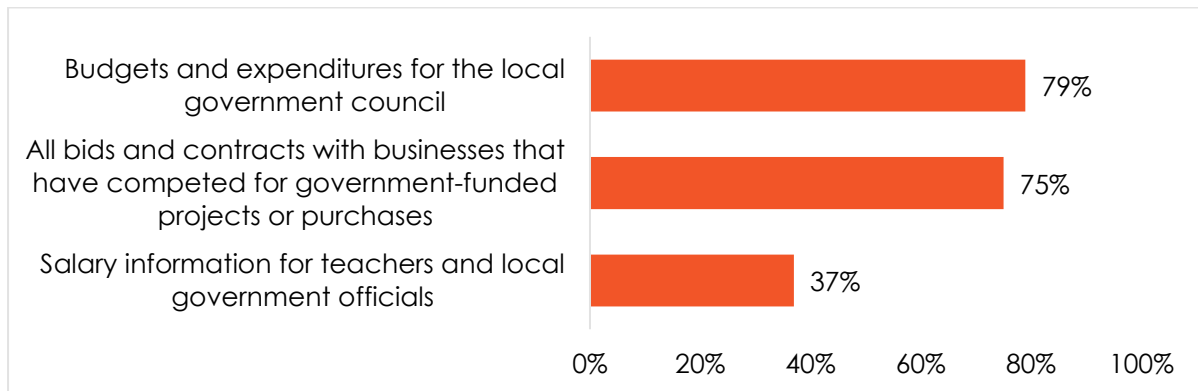
**Figure 7: Information held by public authorities should not be hidden from the public**  
 | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



**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 (79%) and bids and contracts for government-funded projects or purchases (75%) should be accessible to the public (Figure 8). However, fewer than four in 10 (37%) 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**  
 | South Africa | 2022



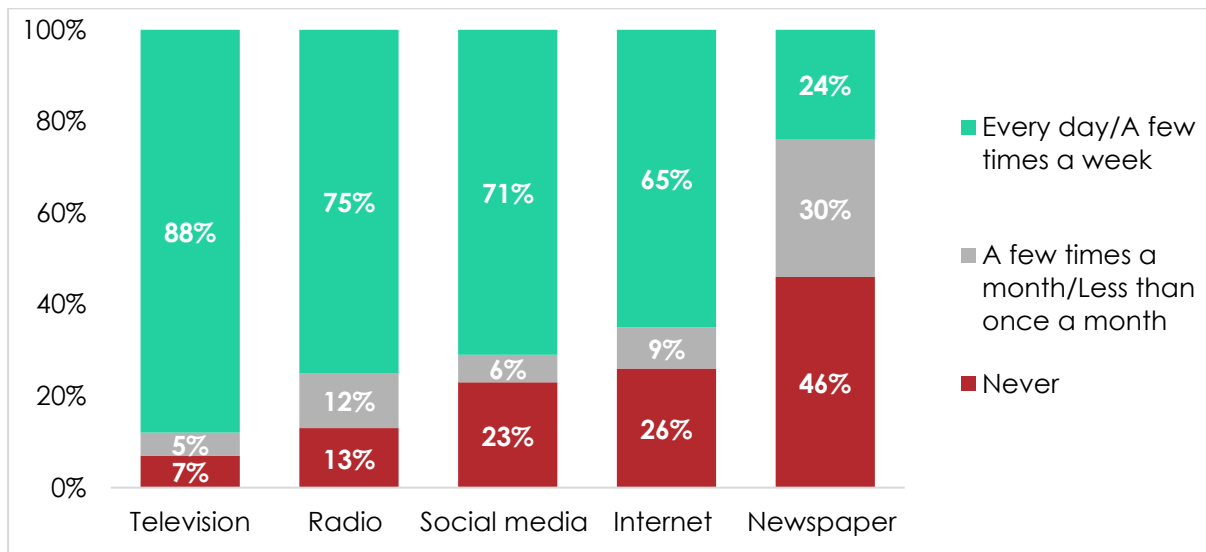
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from government, or whether government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public. (% who say “this information should be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

### South Africans’ sources of news

South Africans are loyal to their televisions, which is by far the most widely used mass media channel for getting news. Almost nine out of 10 citizens (88%) say they get news via television “every day” or “a few times a week.” Only 7% say they “never” use television as a news source (Figure 9).

After television, radio and social media are the most popular sources of news. More than seven in 10 South Africans regularly obtain news from radio (75%) and social media (71%), while about two-thirds (65%) turn to the Internet and 24% rely on newspapers as regular news sources.

**Figure 9: Sources of news** | South Africa | 2022

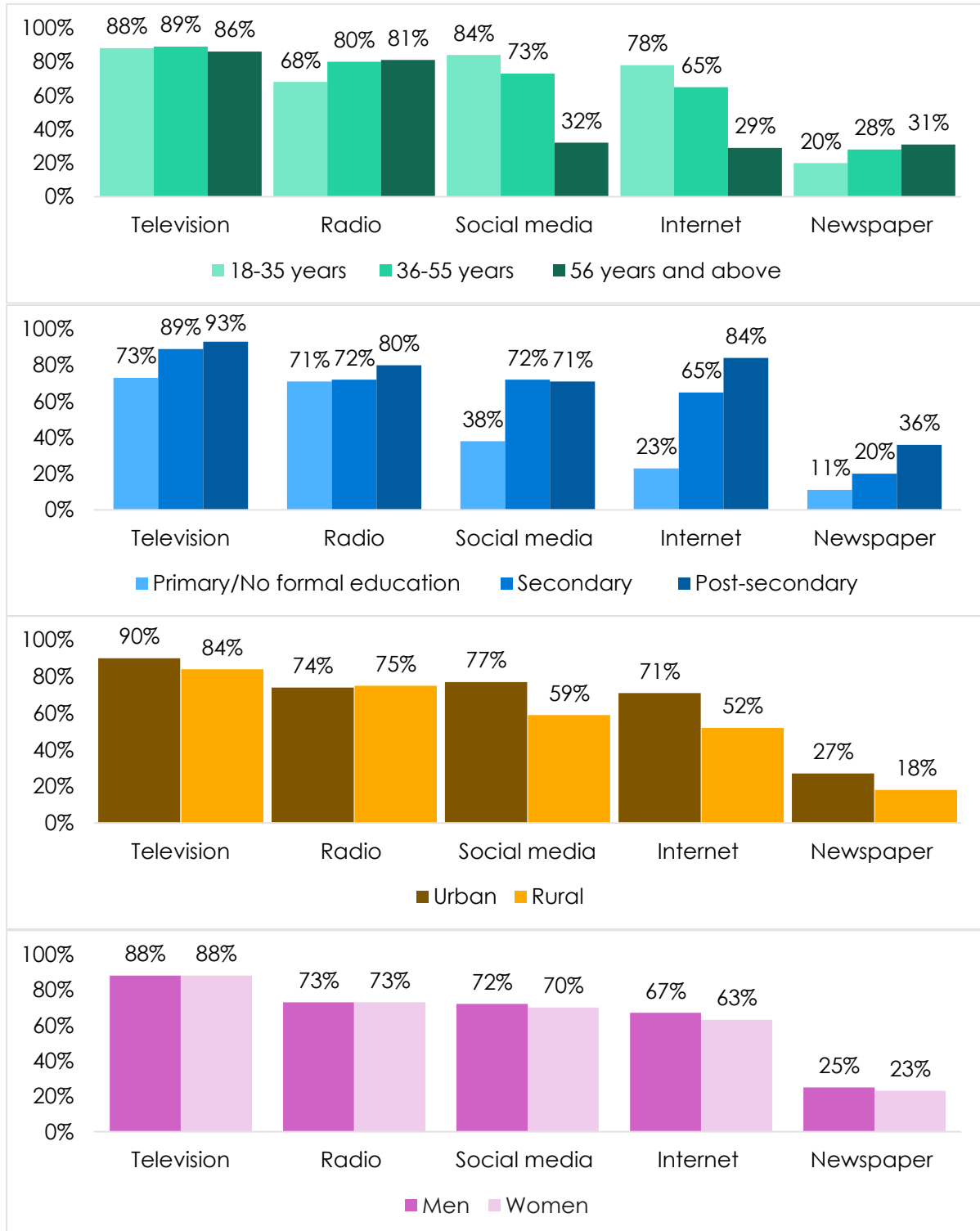


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources?

While television is popular across all age groups, youth (aged 18-35 years) are more than twice as likely to obtain their news from digital media as the elderly (aged 56 years and

above) (Figure 10). But younger respondents are less likely than older cohorts to tune in regularly to the radio (68% vs. 80%-81%) or to read newspapers (20% vs. 28%-31%).

**Figure 10: Regular sources of news** | by age, education, urban-rural location, and gender | South Africa | 2022



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



Use of all five of these media channels for news increases significantly with respondents' education level, especially for digital media, reaching a gap of 61 percentage points for the Internet.

More urbanites than rural residents get their news from television (90% vs. 84%), social media (77% vs. 59%), the Internet (71% vs. 52%), and newspapers (27% vs. 18%), but urbanites and rural residents are equally likely to get their news from the radio.

Men and women are almost identical in their news consumption, registering only a modest 4-percentage-point advantage for men in the regular use of the Internet for news.

## Conclusion

South Africans clearly value the media's role as a watchdog and the free flow of public information. Majorities demand media freedom and public access to information such as government bids and contracts and local government council budgets and expenditures. And a strong majority think South Africa's media today is at least "somewhat" free. This is good news for democracy advocates, as citizens show a desire for government accountability through checks by the media and the right to freedom of speech.

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**Asafika Mpako** is Afrobarometer's communications coordinator for Southern Africa. Email: [ampako@afrobarometer.org](mailto:ampako@afrobarometer.org).

**Stephen Ndoma** is Afrobarometer's assistant project manager for Southern Africa. Email: [ndomashe@gmail.com](mailto:ndomashe@gmail.com).

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 805 | 9 May 2024**