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Emaswati support media's watchdog role, insist on media freedom

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 824 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In February 2024, Eswatini's newly appointed prime minister, Russell Dlamini, sparked concern about the future of press freedom in the country by announcing plans to establish a state-controlled media regulator as part of the Media Commission Bill, which has long been on the books but inactive (Harber, 2024).

Although Section 24 of Eswatini's Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, the country's media environment is heavily restricted by laws such as the Suppression of Terrorism Act (2008), which critics argue is used to protect the monarchy from criticism (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa, 2022).

A range of colonial-era statutes also severely limit media freedom in Eswatini, and critics say they are weaponised to punish the media for investigative reporting (African Media Barometer, 2018; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021). These include the Cinematography Act (1920), the Obscene Publications Act (1927), the Sedition and Subversive Activities Act (1938), the Magistrates Courts Act (1939), the Books and Newspapers Act (1963), the Protected Places and Areas Act (1966), and the Proscribed Publications Act (1968).

In 2022, the Eswatini government declared the online publication Swaziland News and its editor, Zweli Martin Dlamini, "terrorist entities" under the Suppression of Terrorism Act (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2022). Dlamini has been in exile in South Africa since 2020 after police raided his home and held him for six hours (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). A court application to have Dlamini extradited to Eswatini to face charges of terrorism is expected to be heard by South Africa's High Court next month (Maromo, 2024; Dlamini, 2024).

Since the 2023 enactment of the long-dormant Eswatini Broadcasting Act, which looks to break the state broadcaster's stronghold on media affairs and encourage media pluralism (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Kingdom of Eswatini, 2023), Eswatini has risen sharply in the World Press Freedom Index rankings, from 131st in 2022 to 85th out of 180 countries (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). But some media observers say that journalists continue to be prevented from working freely and independently (Media Institute of Southern Africa Regional, 2023), and Freedom House (2024) rates the country as "not free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties. In early 2023, gunmen killed prominent human rights lawyer, columnist, and opposition activist Thulani Maseko (Al Jazeera, 2023).

How do Emaswati assess their media scene?

According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey, in late 2022, Emaswati broadly agree that the media should act as a watchdog over the government, exposing government missteps and wrongdoing. Citizens value media freedom and reject the notion that public information should be the exclusive preserve of government officials. However, most believe that media freedom does not exist in practice in their country.

Television and radio are the most popular news sources in Eswatini, but the Internet and social media are favoured, too, especially by youth, urban residents, and more educated 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 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Eswatini, led by QA Strategic Information, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Emaswati in October-November 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 Eswatini in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

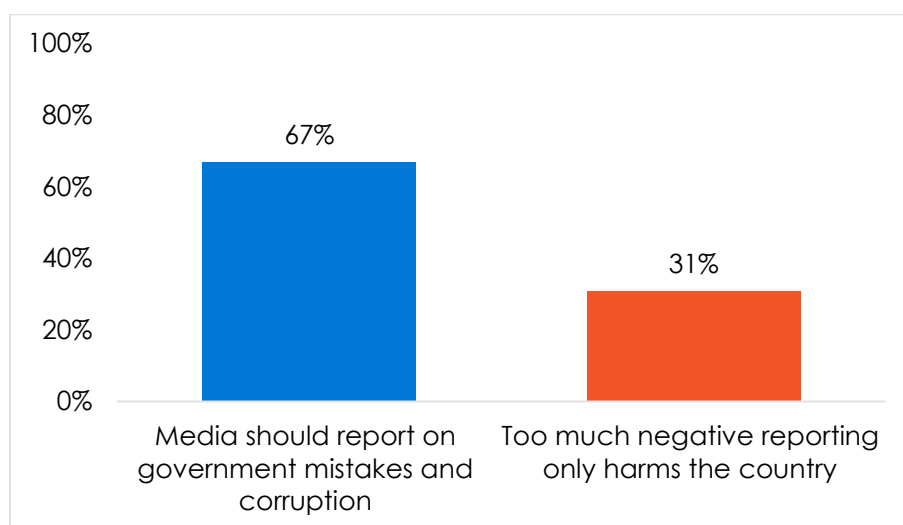
- Two-thirds (67%) of Emaswati say the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.”
- More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say the media should be free from government interference, while 26% think the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- Only one-quarter (26%) of respondents say the country's media is “somewhat free” or “completely free” to report and comment on the news without government interference, while 71% disagree.
- A narrow majority (52%) of respondents disagree with the idea that information held by public authorities is for use only by government officials.
 - In particular, strong majorities support making information about local government budgets (83%) and government contracts (77%) publicly available.
 - A slim majority (52%) support disclosing the salaries of teachers and local government officials.
- Television and radio are the most popular sources of news in Eswatini, followed closely by the Internet and social media.

Role and freedom of the media

Most Emaswati want a media landscape that aids in holding the government to account. Two-thirds (67%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, while 31% instead emphasise that “too much reporting on negative events only harms the country” (Figure 1).

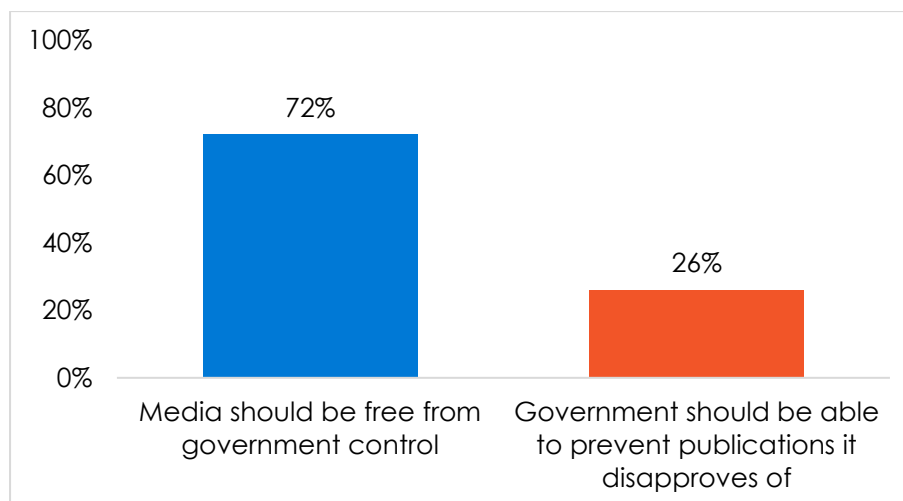
More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say the media should be free from state control, while one-quarter (26%) hold that the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Media's watchdog role | Eswatini | 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)

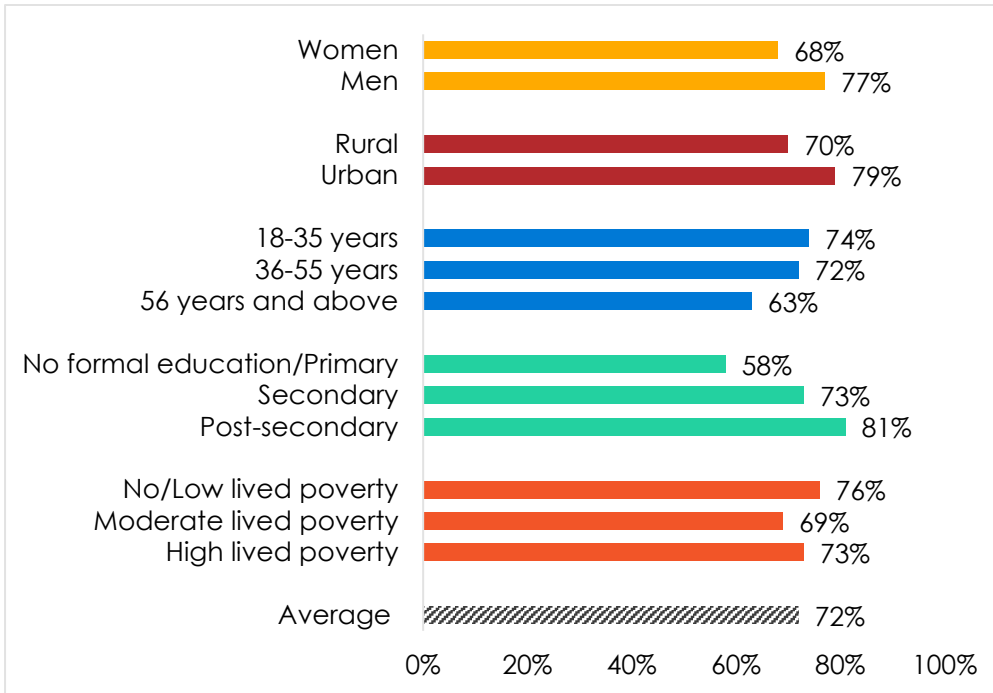
Figure 2: Media freedom | Eswatini | 2022



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)

Support for media freedom is stronger among men (77%) and urbanites (79%) than among women (68%) and rural residents (70%) (Figure 3). This support declines as respondents' age increases, from 74% among 18- to 35-year-olds to 63% among those aged 56 years and above. But it increases as education levels rise, ranging from 58% among citizens with primary education or less to 81% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

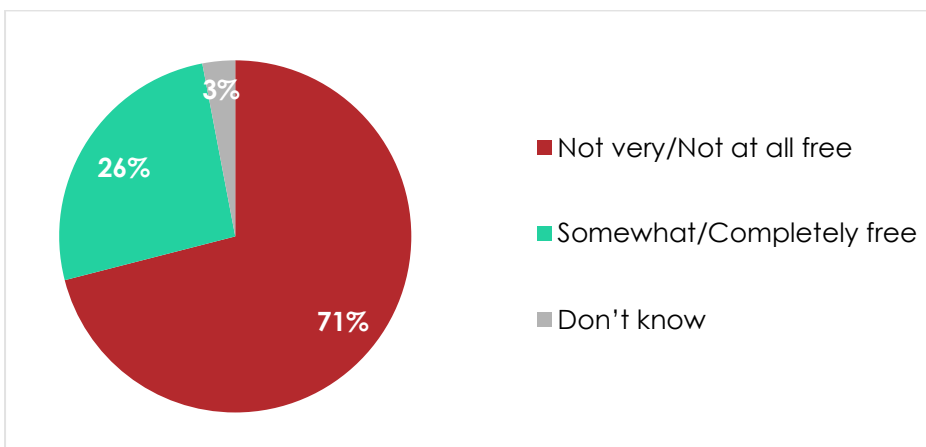
Figure 3: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Eswatini | 2022



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)

But while most citizens endorse media freedom, only one-quarter (26%) say the country’s media are in fact “somewhat free” or “completely free” to report and comment on the news without government censorship or interference, whereas 71% consider the media “not very” or “not at all” free (Figure 4).

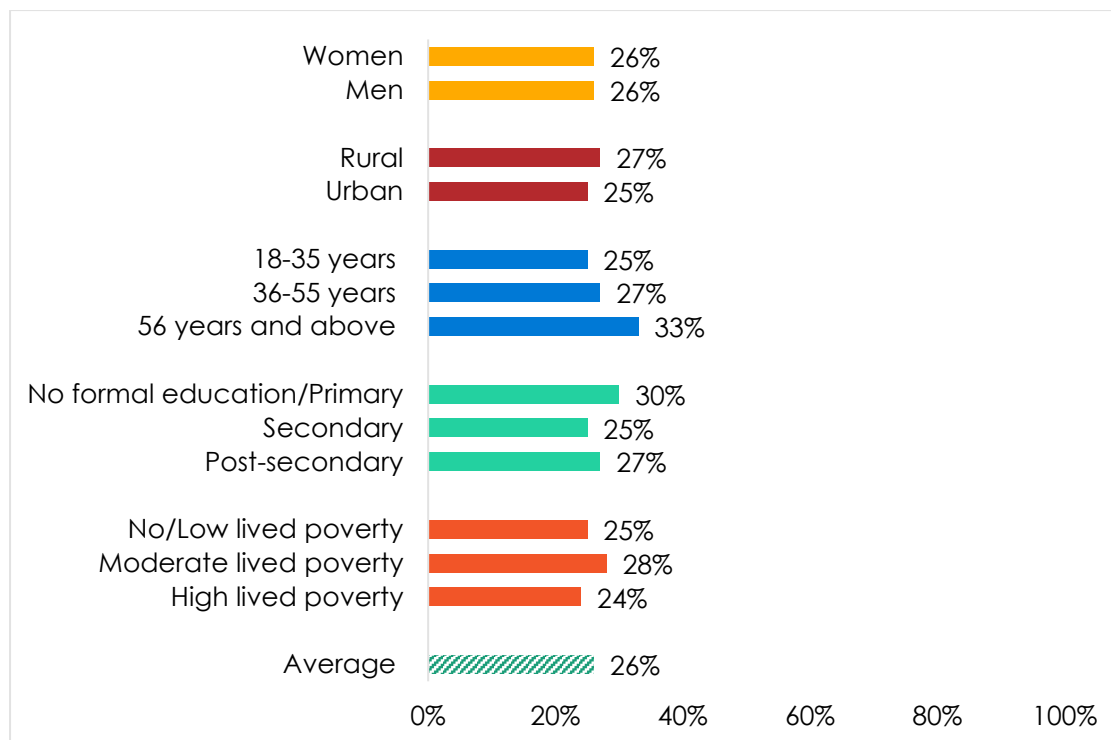
Figure 4: How free is the media? | Eswatini | 2022



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 news media in Eswatini is free from government interference increases with respondents' age, ranging from a quarter (25%) among youth to one-third (33%) among those over age 55 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Media is somewhat/completely free | by demographic group | Eswatini | 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

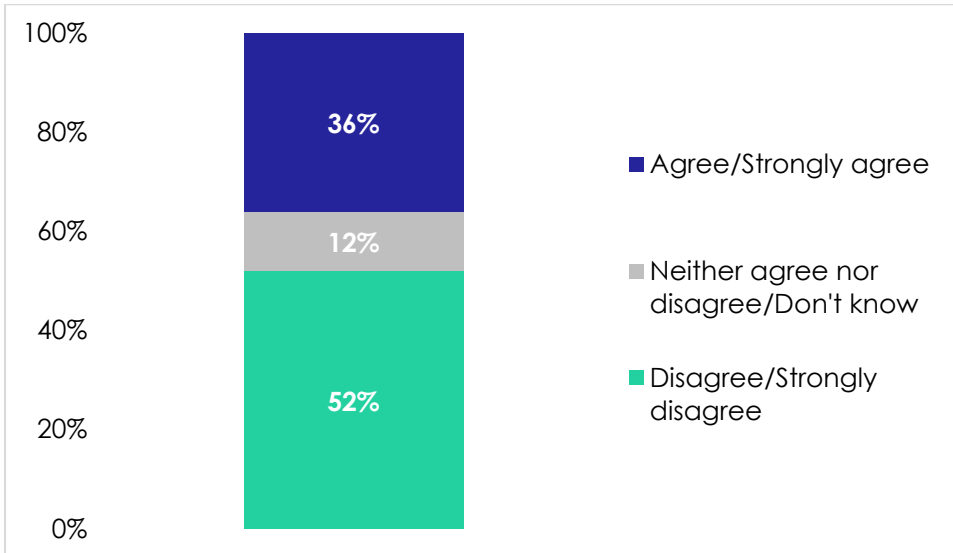
What do Eswatini think about restrictions on access to information? Do they believe their government should be required to share information with the public?

A slim majority (52%) of Eswatini 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). More than one-third (36%) support limiting such information to official use.

Support for public information sharing is somewhat stronger among men than women (55% vs. 50%), and among urbanites than rural residents (57% vs. 51%) (Figure 7). Older citizens are less likely to insist on the public's right to access government information (41% among those over age 55), as are respondents experiencing high levels of lived poverty¹ (48%).

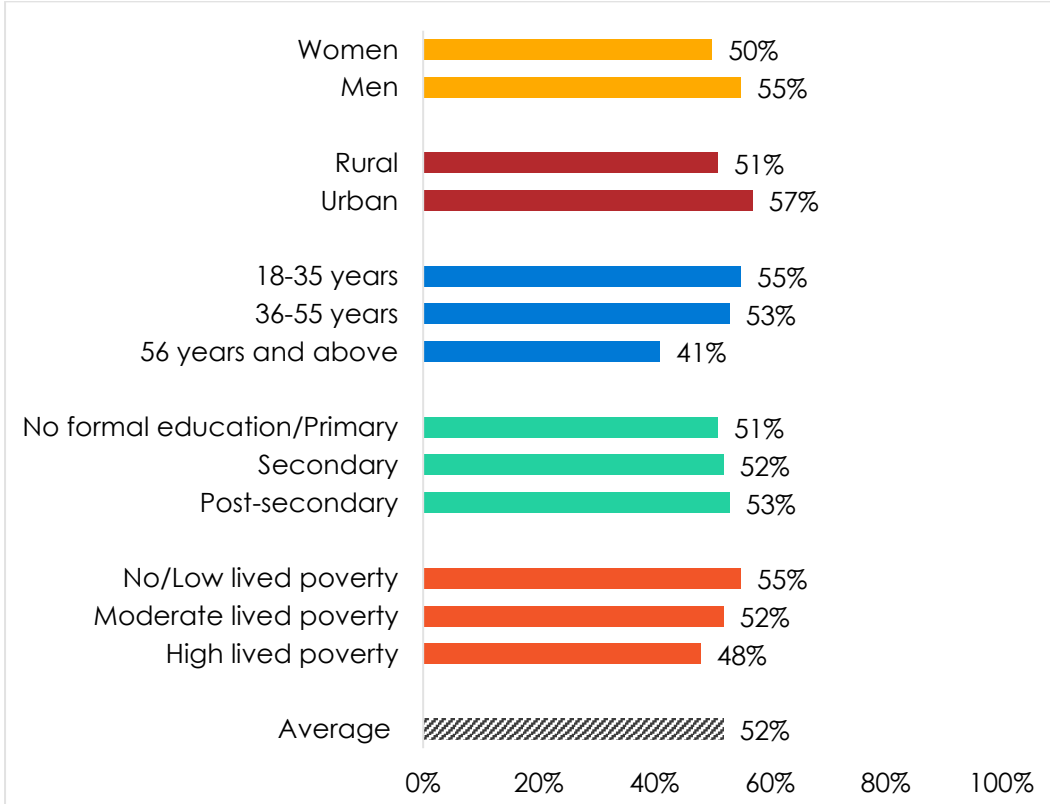
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty,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

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

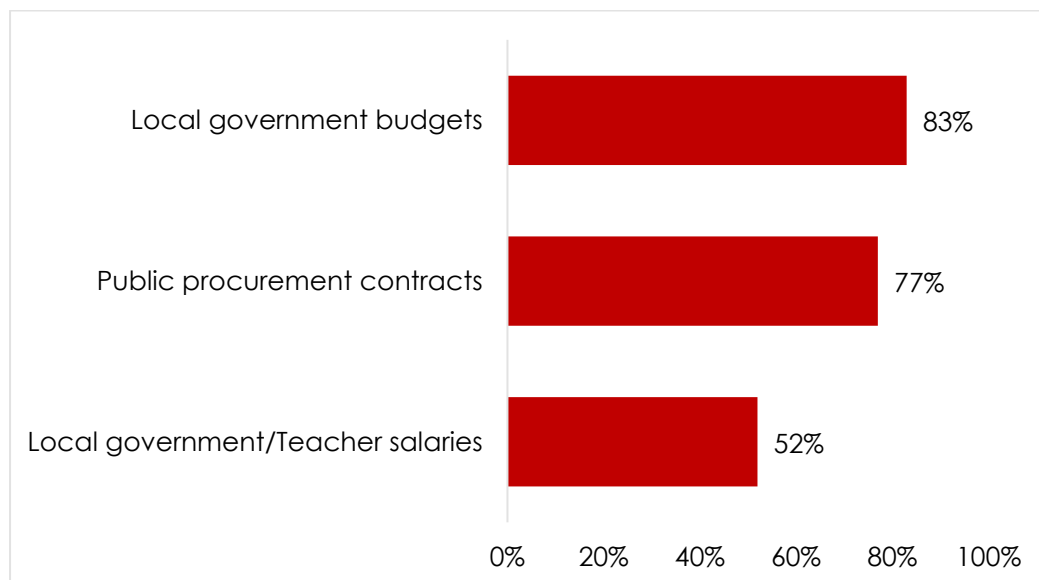
Figure 7: Information should be made public | by demographic group | Eswatini
 | 2022



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")

Strong majorities of Eswatini support the proposition that specific types of information should be made publicly available, including information regarding budgets and expenditures for local government councils (83%) and bids and contracts for government-funded projects or purchases (77%) (Figure 8). Only a narrow majority (52%) endorse making the salaries of teachers and local government officials public.

Figure 8: Should citizens and the media have the right to obtain certain types of government information? | Eswatini | 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:

Budgets and expenditures for the local government council?

All bids and contracts with businesses that have competed for government-funded projects or purchases?

Salary information for teachers and local government officials?

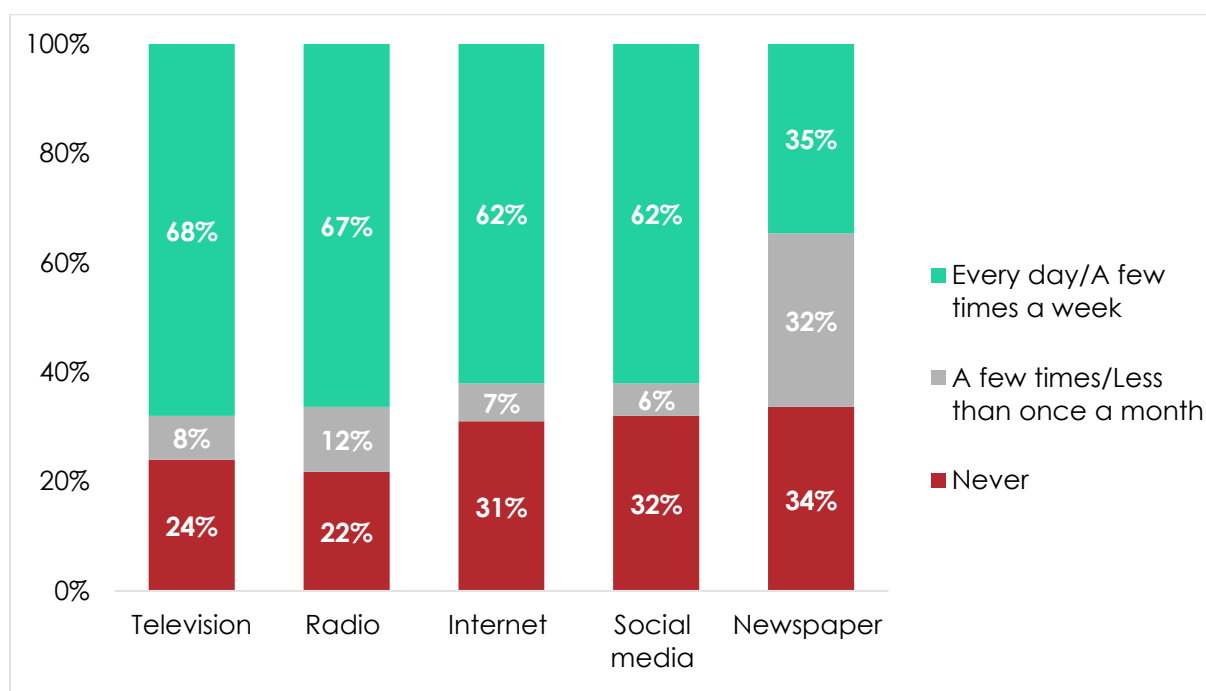
(% who say "this information should be available to the public")

Sources of news

Eswatini are loyal to their televisions and radios, which are the most widely used mass media channels for getting news. About two-thirds of citizens say they get news via television (68%) and radio (67%) "every day" or "a few times a week" (Figure 9). Fewer than one-quarter say they "never" tune in to the news on television (24%) or radio (22%).

The Internet and social media still trail television and radio as popular sources of news, but not by much: More than six in 10 Eswatini regularly obtain news from these digital sources (62% each). Only 35% rely on newspapers as regular news sources.

Figure 9: Sources of news | Eswatini | 2022



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

Television is an especially popular news source among the middle-aged (72% of those aged 36-55) (Figure 10). While youth are less likely than their elders to obtain their news from radio (63% vs. 71%-74%), they are much more likely to make use of the Internet (74% vs. 22%-55%) and social media (75% vs. 21%-54%).

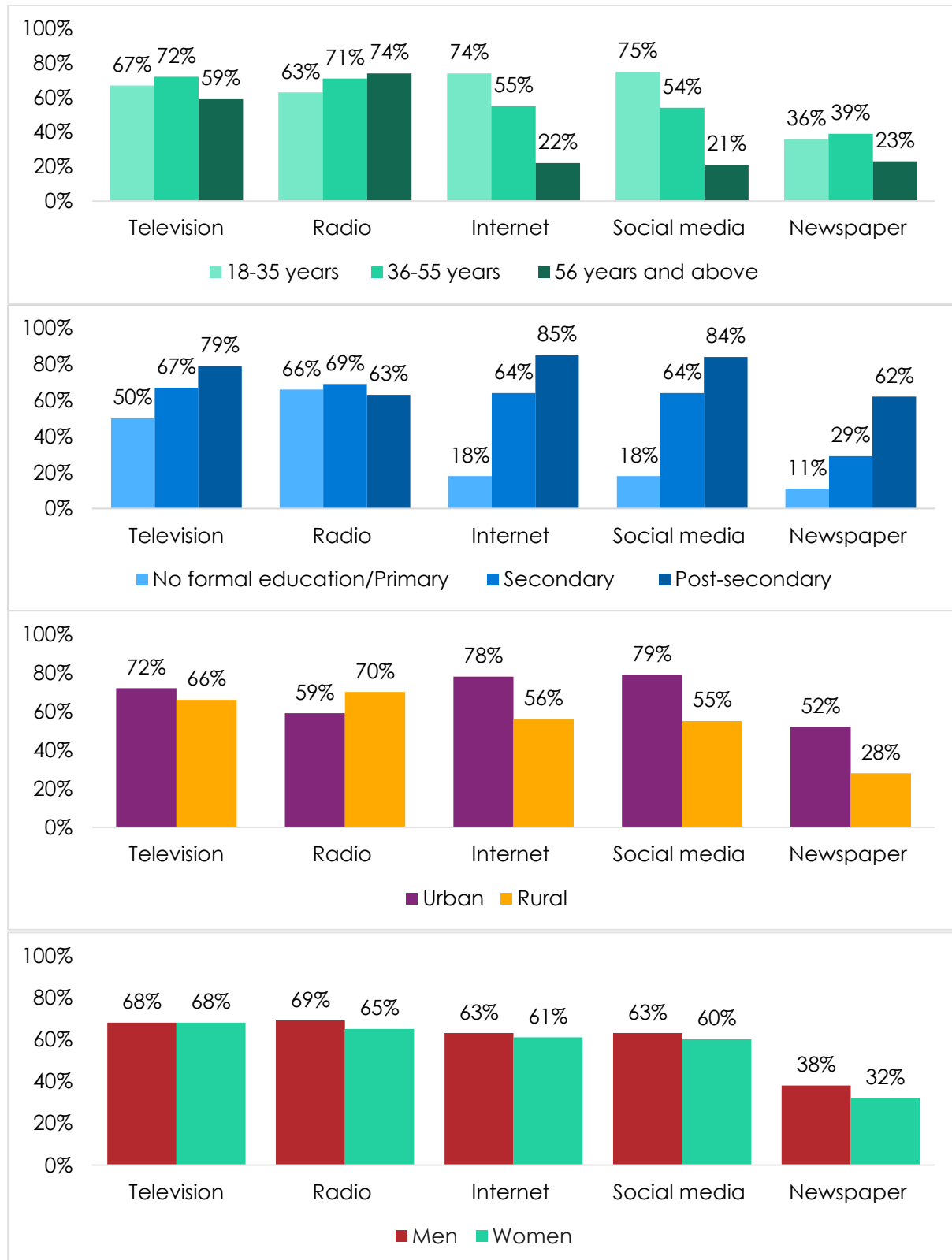
The use of television, the Internet, social media, and newspapers increases dramatically with respondents' education. Fewer than one-fifth of those with primary schooling or no formal schooling at all regularly consume news via print media (11%) or digital media (both 18%). In contrast, overwhelming majorities of respondents with post-secondary education access news via the Internet (85%) and social media (84%), while a significant proportion (62%) read newspapers.

Compared to their urban counterparts, rural residents are more likely to obtain their news from the radio (70% vs. 59%) and less likely to access the other four media channels for news: television (72% vs. 66%), the Internet (78% vs. 56%), social media (79% vs. 55%), and newspapers (52% vs. 28%).

Men and women are fairly similar in their news habits, though more men than women frequently read newspapers (38% vs. 32%).

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

Eswatini value the media's role as a watchdog over government, and they support media freedom. A majority endorse public access to information held by public authorities, especially information about government budgets and contracts.

But most citizens say media freedom does not exist in Eswatini. Survey findings suggest that journalists, civil society, and political leaders have public backing for efforts to protect and expand media freedom and citizens' access to information.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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