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Basotho support media's watchdog role, but many doubt that their media is free

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1051 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Lesotho experienced a cataclysmic fall from 67th to 122nd position out of 180 countries (MISA Southern Africa, 2024). This decline followed the May 2023 killing of investigative journalist and radio presenter Ralikonelo Joki, who was gunned down outside his radio station in the capital city of Maseru, allegedly because of his work as a broadcaster (Freedom House, 2024; Committee to Project Journalists, 2023).

Lesotho has since made a modest recovery, rising to 107th place in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, but media freedom in the country remains fragile (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). The safety of journalists is a major concern, particularly in a context characterised by impunity. In a case involving Lesotho Times editor Lloyd Mutungamiri, who survived an attempt on his life outside his home in 2016, justice has yet to prevail (African Freedom of Expression Exchange, 2023; Public Eye, 2023): Four soldiers of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) are still on trial nearly a decade later. An accomplice witness has testified that Mutungamiri needed to be threatened and silenced for writing "bad things" about the LDF (Lesotho Times, 2023).

In recent years, media outlets in Lesotho have also been confronted with civil defamation lawsuits, which some activists have called out as a tactic by government and corporations to undermine press freedom and discourage journalists from exposing underhanded dealings (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024; CIVICUS Global Alliance, 2024).

How do Basotho assess their media scene?

According to the 2024 Afrobarometer survey, strong majorities of Basotho value media freedom and say the media should act as a watchdog over the government, constantly investigating and reporting on government mistakes and corruption. But on whether media freedom exists in practice in their country, Basotho are divided.

While radio dominates as the most popular news source in Lesotho, more than four in 10 citizens also regularly obtain news via social media, followed by 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. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 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 adult Basotho in March 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence

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level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

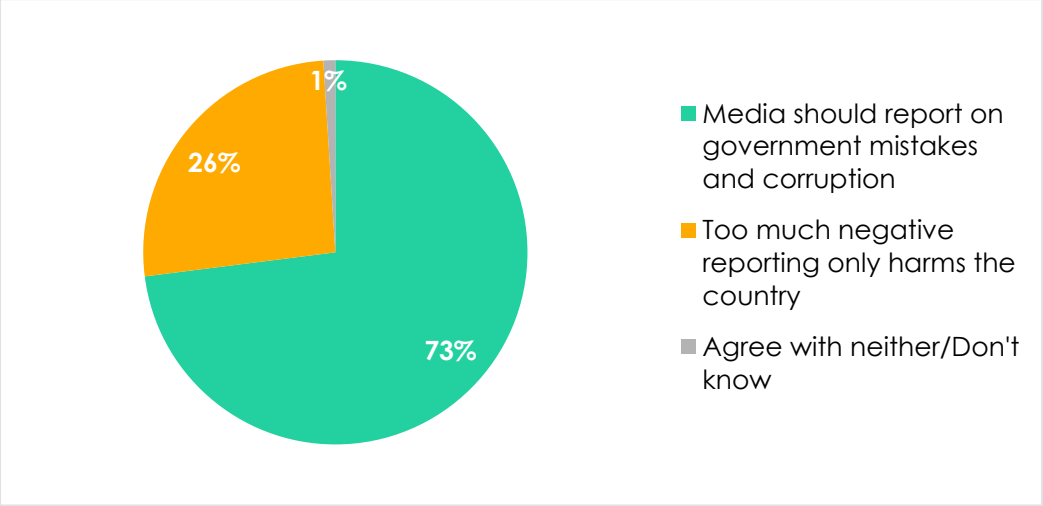
Key findings

- More than seven in 10 Basotho (73%) say the media should "constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption."
- Nearly eight in 10 (77%) insist on media freedom, while 22% endorse a government right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- In practice, only 38% of citizens say the country's media is "somewhat free" or "completely free" to report and comment on the news without government interference, while almost half (46%) disagree.
- Radio is the most popular source of news in Lesotho, used at least "a few times a week" by six in 10 citizens (59%).
    - Social media (44%), television (38%), and the Internet (20%) beat out newspapers (6%) as regular news sources.

Role and freedom of the media

Most Basotho want a media that holds power to account. More than seven in 10 (73%) say the media should "constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption," while just one-quarter (26%) instead emphasise that "too much reporting on negative events only harms the country" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Media's watchdog role | Lesotho | 2024



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.

An even greater majority of citizens (77%) say the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference, while 22% believe the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 2).

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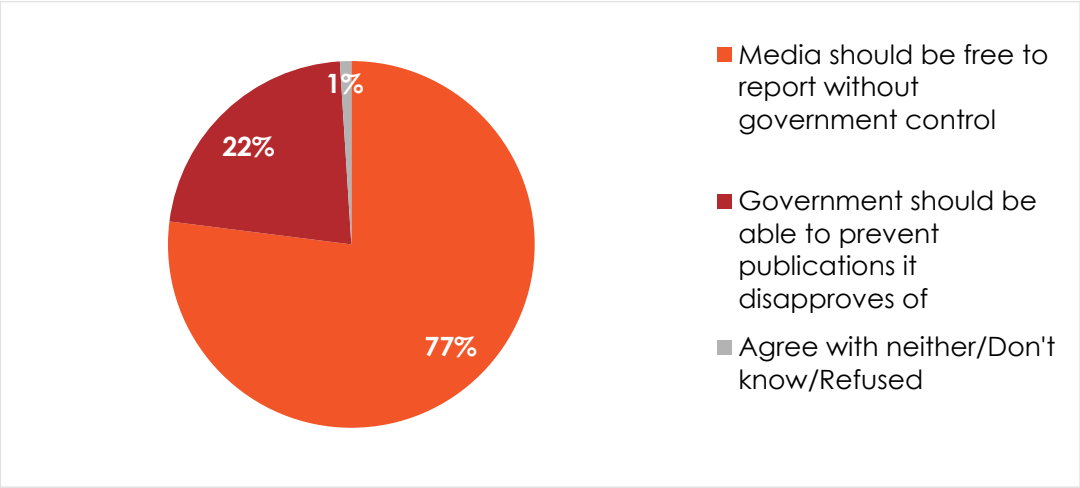
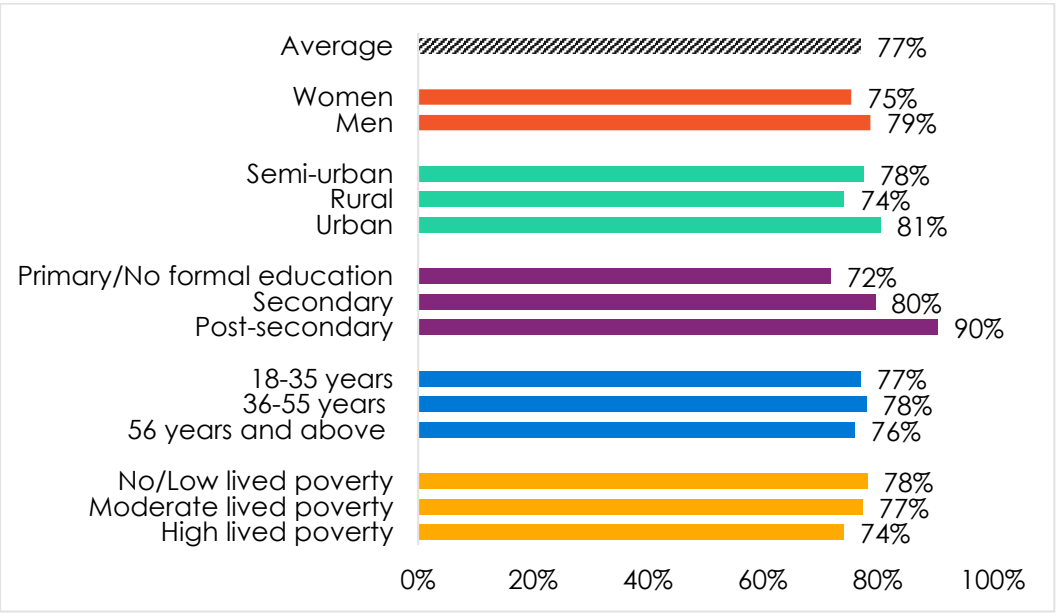
Figure 2: Should the media be free? | Lesotho | 2024



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.

Although support for media freedom is strong across the board, it is slightly higher among men compared to women (79% vs. 75%), urbanites compared to rural residents (81% vs. 74%), and well-off citizens compared to the poor (77%-78% vs. 74%). Support for this view also increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from 72% among those with primary schooling or less to 90% among those with tertiary qualifications (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Support for media freedom | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



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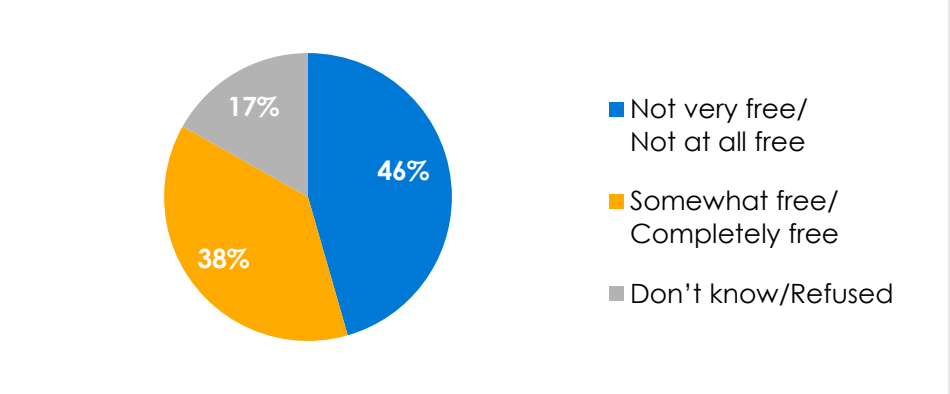
Views on whether media freedom exists in practice in Lesotho are quite mixed. Nearly four in 10 Basotho (38%) say the country's media is "somewhat free" or "completely free" to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government. But nearly half (46%) consider the media "not very free" or "not at all free," while 17% say they "don't know" or declined to answer the question (Figure 4).

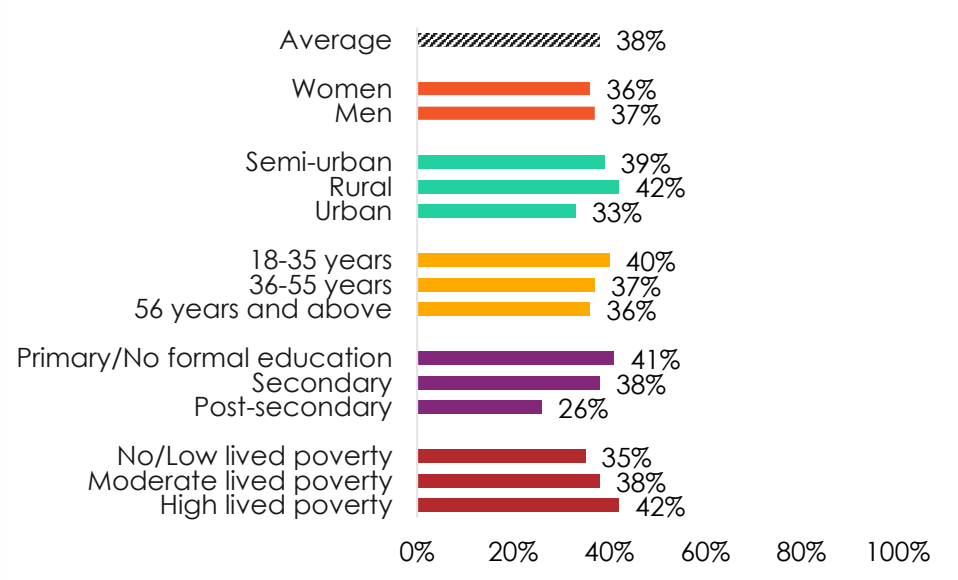
Perceptions that the media is free are more common among youth (40%), the least educated citizens (41%), rural residents (42%), and the poor[1] (42%) than among their various counterparts (Figure 5).

Figure 4: How free is the media? | Lesotho | 2024



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: Media is free | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



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")*

[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without 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 Lekalake (2025).

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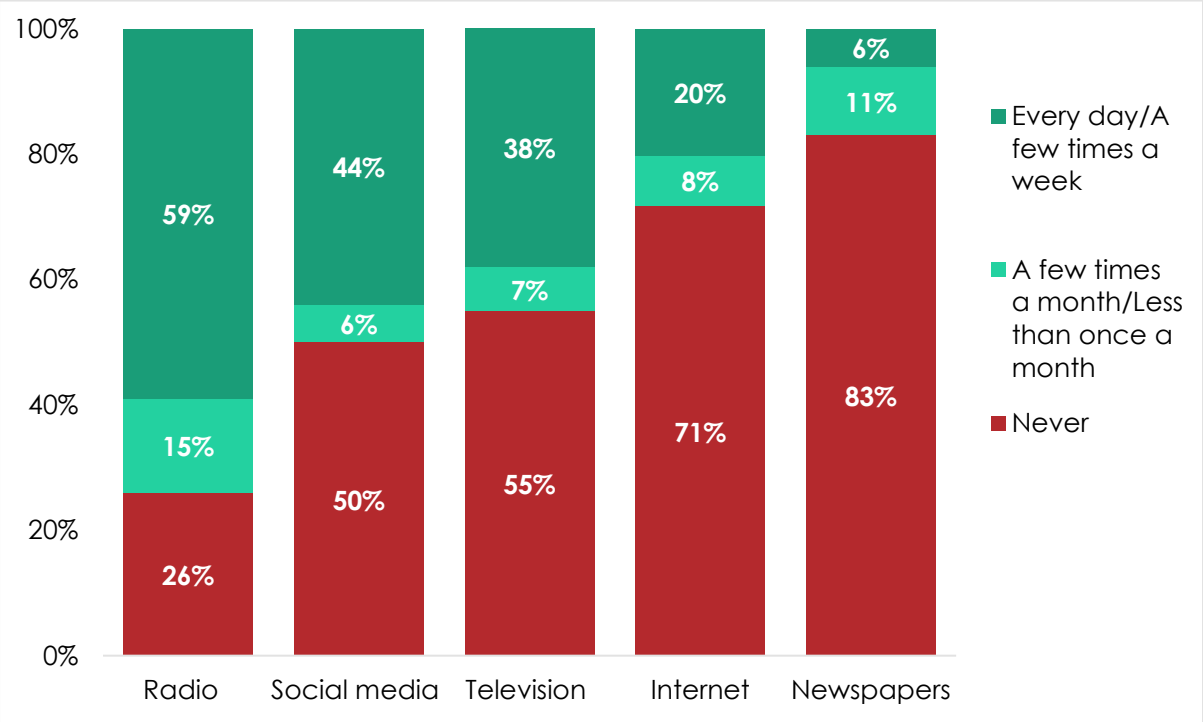
Sources of news

Radio is by far the most widely used mass media channel through which Basotho get their news. Six in 10 citizens (59%) say they get news via radio "every day" or "a few times a week," while one-quarter (26%) say they "never" use the radio as a news source (Figure 6).

Survey findings show that after radio, social media is the most popular source of news. More than four in 10 adults (44%) regularly obtain news from social media, while more than one-third (38%) turn to television. One-fifth (20%) rely on the Internet, and only 6% make use of newspapers for their regular news.

Figure 6: Sources of news | Lesotho | 2024



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

Youth (aged 18-35) are less likely than middle-aged (aged 36-55) and elderly citizens (56 years and above) to obtain their news regularly from radio and more likely to turn to social media and the Internet (Figure 7). Interestingly, they are as likely as their middle-aged counterparts to get news from television and newspapers.

Regular news consumption from all five channels increases sharply with respondents' education level. Gaps between the least educated and the most educated are especially wide when it comes to social media (21% vs. 80%) and the Internet (5% vs. 61%).

Urban residents are significantly more likely than their rural counterparts to obtain news regularly via the radio as well as the other four channels. Citizens living in semi-urban areas place between urban and rural residents in the use of these news channels.

Men are more likely than women to consume news via radio, television, and the Internet, but more women than men rely on social media (47% vs. 40%) for their news.

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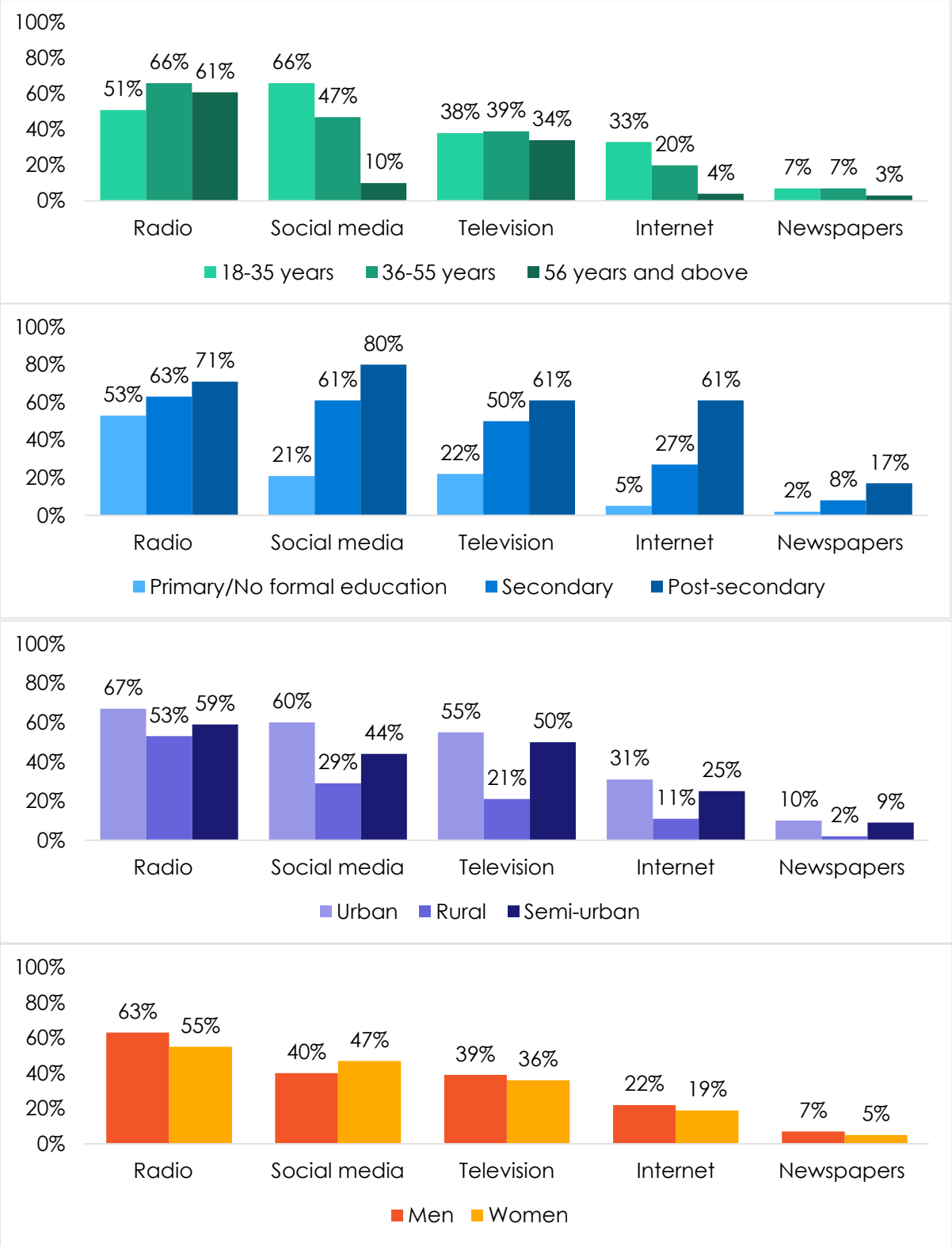
Figure 7: Sources of news | by age, education, location, and gender | Lesotho | 2024



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

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Conclusion

Strong majorities of Basotho support media freedom and value the media's role as a watchdog over government. But in practice, views are split on whether media freedom exists in their country.

While radio is the most preferred news source in Lesotho, social media also plays a major role, providing news to more than four in 10 citizens on a regular basis.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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