

Ghanaians rely on radio and TV, but support for media freedom drops sharply

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 250 | Thomas Isbell and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye

Summary

Ghana's vibrant media has played an important role in the country's democratization. From its strong advocacy during the country's struggles for independence and democratic rule to its current watchdog role for society, the Ghanaian media has continually set the agenda on matters of critical importance, sustained the discourse, and effected change. This has earned Ghana a reputation as one of the most media-friendly countries in the world, rising steadily on the World Press Freedom Index from 67th in 2002 to 23rd in 2018, from 19th among African countries to No. 1 (Reporters Without Borders, 2002; 2018).

This success has relied on constitutional provisions for a free and independent press, including laws against censorship, government interference, and harassment (Constitution of Ghana, 1992). These provisions have not always protected the media, however: A libel and sedition law allowed authorities to intimidate and criminalize the media until its repeal in 2001 (Ampomah, 2011), and Ghana's Criminal Code still contains remnants of restrictive laws from the era of authoritarian rule that limit media freedom (Akufo-Addo, 2011). Journalists can still be charged with offensive conduct that may breach the peace and with publishing false news that may cause public fear, alarm, and panic.

On World Press Freedom Day (May 3), President Nana Akufo-Addo called on governments around the world to defend the freedoms of the media in order to promote accountable governance (Ghanaweb, 2018). And the media and various civil society organizations have been advocating for the passage of a 17-year-old Right to Information Bill (RTI), which would guarantee citizens equal rights to access information in the custody of any public institution in accordance with Article 31F of the 1992 Constitution (Myjoyonline, 2018a).

However, popular support for a free media has dropped sharply in Ghana: According to Afrobarometer survey data, a majority of citizens now say the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

Survey findings also show that most Ghanaians rely on radio and television for their news, though social media and the Internet are growing in importance as news sources, especially among young and well-educated citizens. A majority of citizens say they trust information from the media, but many also see at least some members of the media as corrupt.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 2,400 adult Ghanaians between September 9 and 25, 2017. A

sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- Most Ghanaians rely on radio and television as their main sources of news. About one-quarter get news from social media and the Internet at least a few times a month, while regular newspaper readership continues to decline. Young and well-educated Ghanaians are the most frequent users of social media and the Internet, while older and less-educated citizens rely more heavily on radio as a source of news.
- Only about one in three Ghanaians (36%) support full media freedom, a sharp drop from 55% in 2014. A majority (57%) say instead that the government should have the right to prevent the publication of information it deems harmful to society. Among 21 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018, Ghana ranks well below average (47%) in its support for media freedom.
- Around six in 10 respondents (62%) say the media has more freedom than a few years ago to investigate and criticize government actions.
- A majority of Ghanaians say they trust information from public media (60%), government sources (58%), and private media (57%) at least "somewhat." Fewer trust information from social media sources (43%).
- Three-fourths of Ghanaians believe that at least "some" members of the public and private media are corrupt, including almost one in five citizens who say that "most" or "all" media are corrupt.

Radio remains dominant news source; new media surpasses newspapers

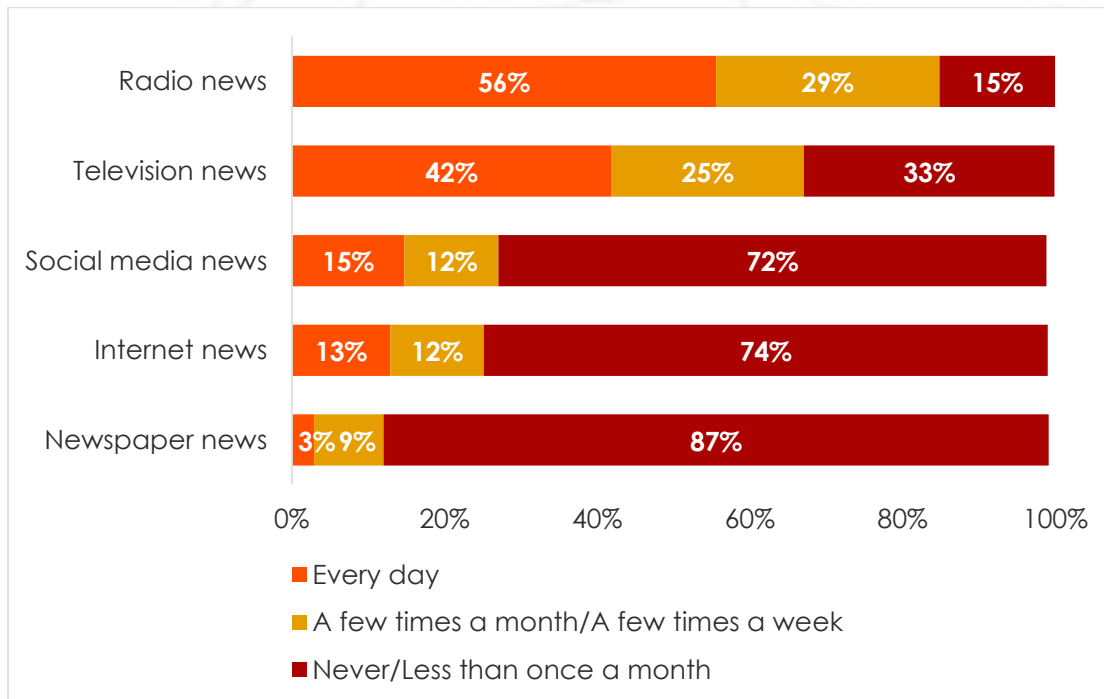
Ghanaians widely rely on radio and television for their news. More than half (56%) say they listen to radio news every day, and 29% use radio "a few times a month" or "a few times a week" (Figure 1). Four in 10 (42%) say they consume television news daily, while 25% say television is their news source "a few times a month" or "a few times a week."

About a quarter of respondents say they use social media and the Internet at least a few times a month, including 15% and 13%, respectively, who report daily use. Newspapers are the least-used source of news; almost nine in 10 citizens (87%) say they read newspapers "less than once a month" or "never."

Radio has been the most-used source of news among Ghanaians since 2002 (Figure 2), although daily use (56%) has decreased by 10 percentage points since 2014 (66%). With about 471 authorized radio broadcasting stations (367 of which are currently operational) in Ghana, radio tends to be a more accessible source of news than TV (14 stations) or print media (32 outlets) (National Communications Authority, 2017; Government of Ghana, 2018). The country's 74 community radio stations and a rising number of local-language stations help make news and public discourse accessible to rural and uneducated citizens.

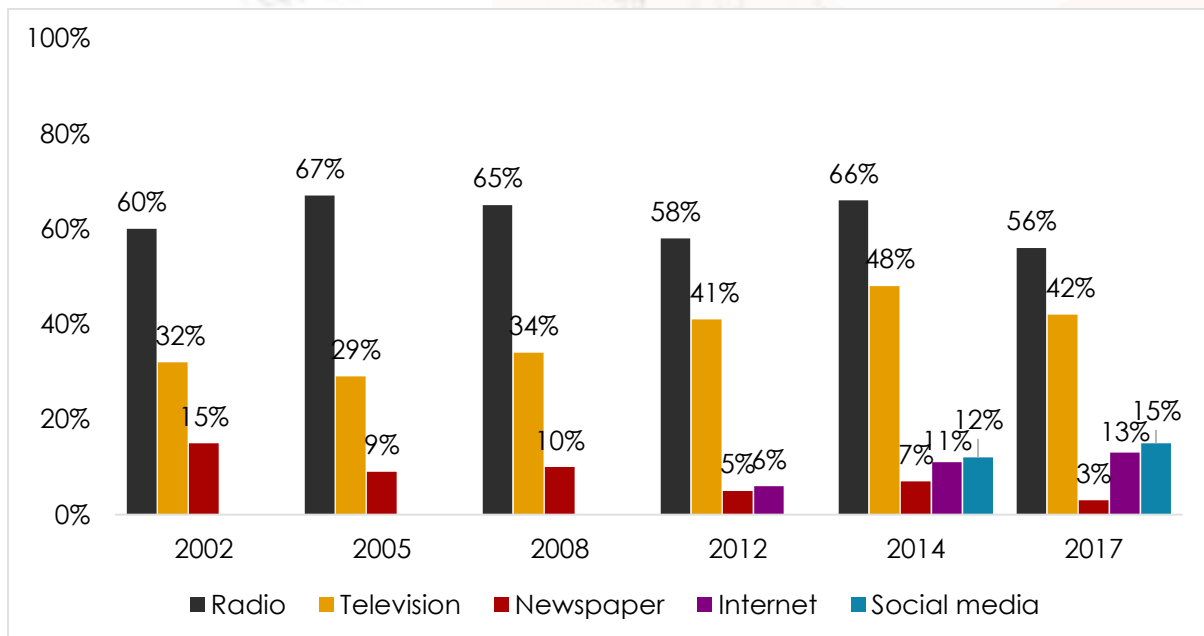
With about 10 million active Internet users (Myjoyonline, 2018b) – almost one-third of the country's population – the use of the Internet and social media as news sources is increasing. Daily Internet use for news has more than doubled since 2012. Social media has become an essential platform for a recent wave of youth civic activism, such as Occupy Ghana and Citizen Ghana, that is helping keep public officials on their toes and occasionally exposing government corruption, abuse of office, and mismanagement (Gyimah-Boadi, 2018).

Figure 1: News media consumption | Ghana | 2017



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

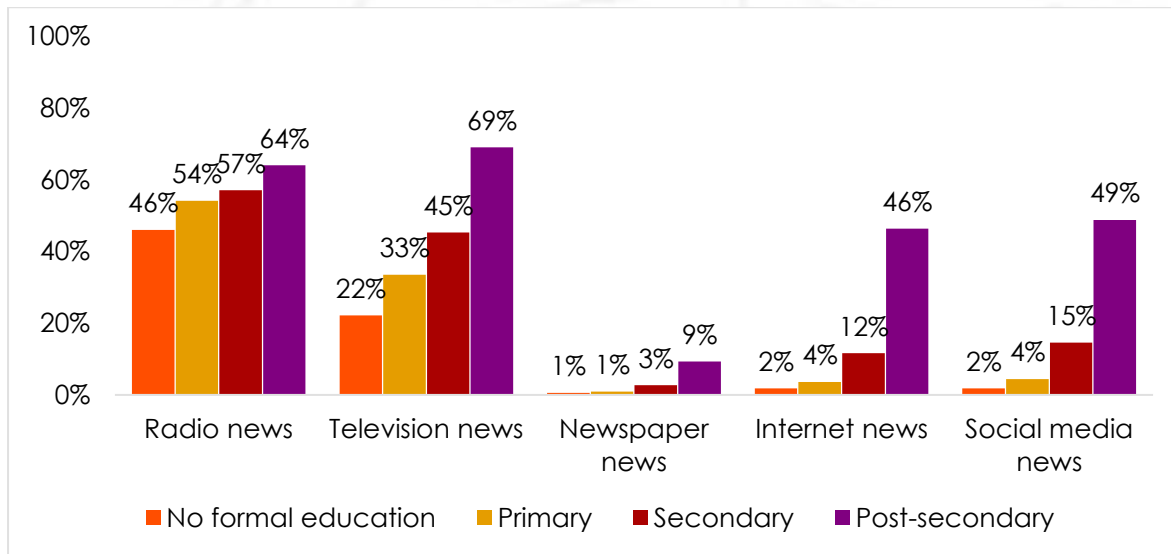
Figure 2: Daily news media consumption | Ghana | 2002-2017



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

Daily news consumption increases with respondents' level of education across all news channels. This is particularly pronounced when it comes to social media and the Internet. Almost half of respondents with post-secondary education say they get news from the Internet (46%) and social media (49%) on a daily basis (Figure 3).

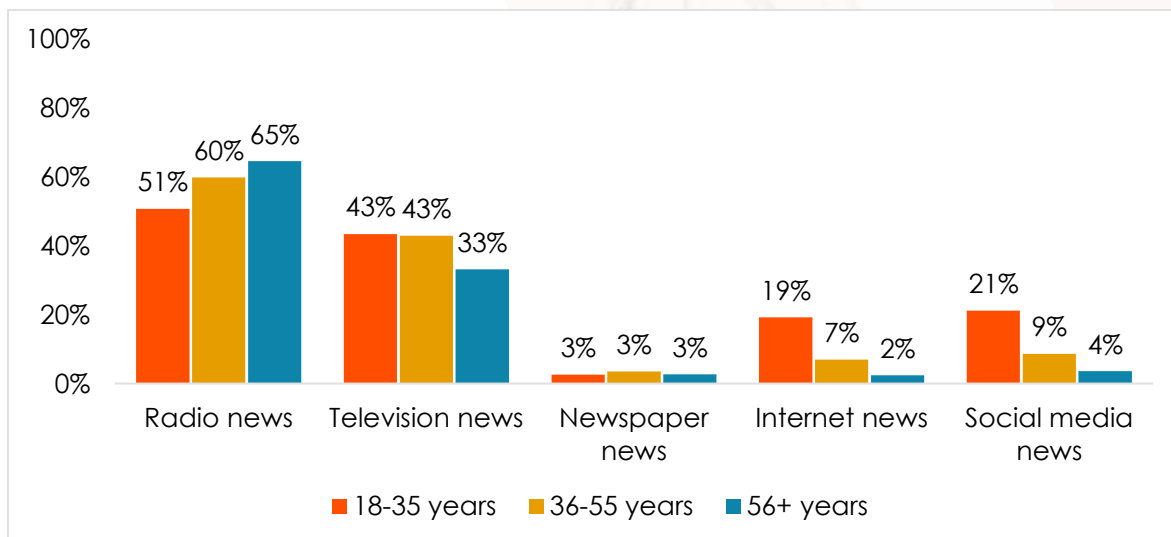
Figure 3: Daily news media consumption | by level of education | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

Similarly, daily Internet and social media use is far more common among younger Ghanaians: About one-fifth of 18- to 35-year-olds get news every day from the Internet (19%) and social media (21%) (Figure 4). Radio news is most commonly used daily by older Ghanaians (65% of those aged 56 or older).

Figure 4: Daily news media consumption | by age group | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

Media freedom and government control

When asked about the general development of media freedom, 62% of Ghanaians say the media now has “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom than a few years ago to investigate and criticize the government. Only one in 10 (9%) say that media freedom has decreased, while one in four (24%) see no change (Figure 5).

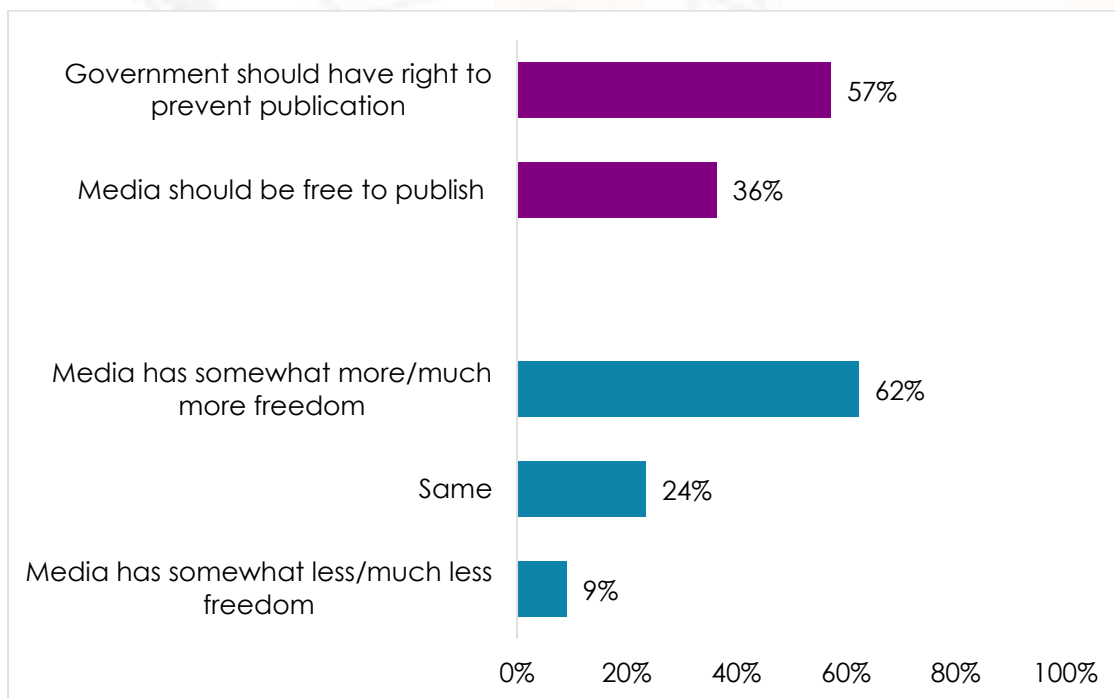
However, more than half (57%) of Ghanaians say the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society, including 40% who say they feel “very strongly” on this issue. Only about one in three (36%) say the media should be free to publish any views or ideas without government interference.

This is a reversal of attitudes during previous survey rounds. In four surveys between 2005 and 2014, a majority of Ghanaians consistently endorsed media freedom from government interference. But in 2017, support for media freedom dropped from 55% to 36% (Figure 6). These findings may be interpreted within the context of longstanding concerns about sensationalism, false reportage, misinterpretation of information, and the use of violence-inciting language on the part of some partisan media (Ghana News Agency, 2011; Ghanaweb, 2012; Myjoyonline, 2016).

The Media Foundation for West Africa (2018) cites declining popular support for journalists – due in part to perceptions of fallen ethical standards and corruption – as a prime reason behind violent attacks on journalists, often by security personnel or police and generally unpunished. The foundation documents 17 such cases between January 2017 and April 2018.

Comparing responses across 21 countries sampled in Afrobarometer's most recent survey round, Ghana scores well below average (47%) in terms of supporting media freedom (Figure 7), raising questions about Ghana's No. 23 ranking (No. 1 among African countries) on the 2018 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2018).

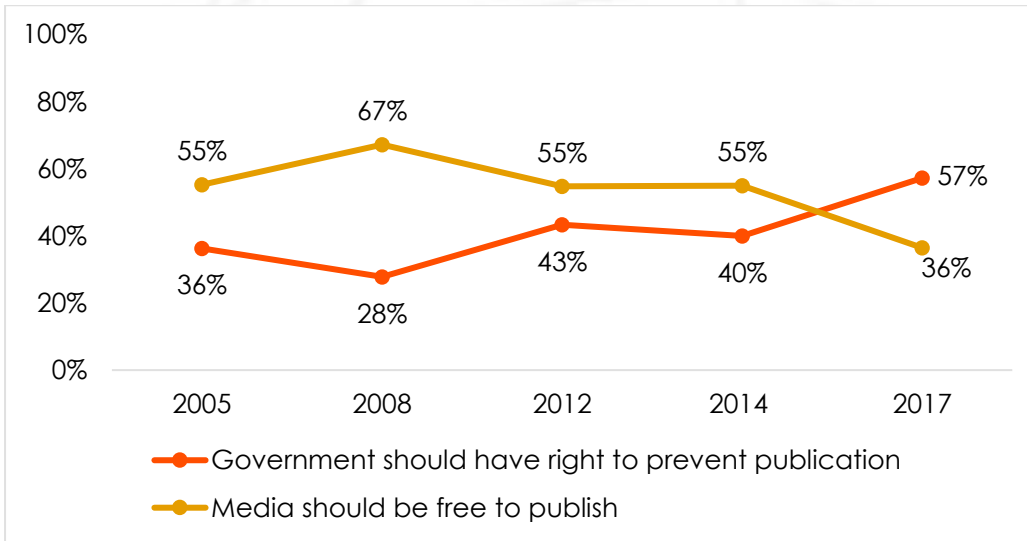
Figure 5: Media freedom | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)
 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 considers harmful to society.
- Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?

Figure 6: Freedom vs. control of media | Ghana | 2005-2017

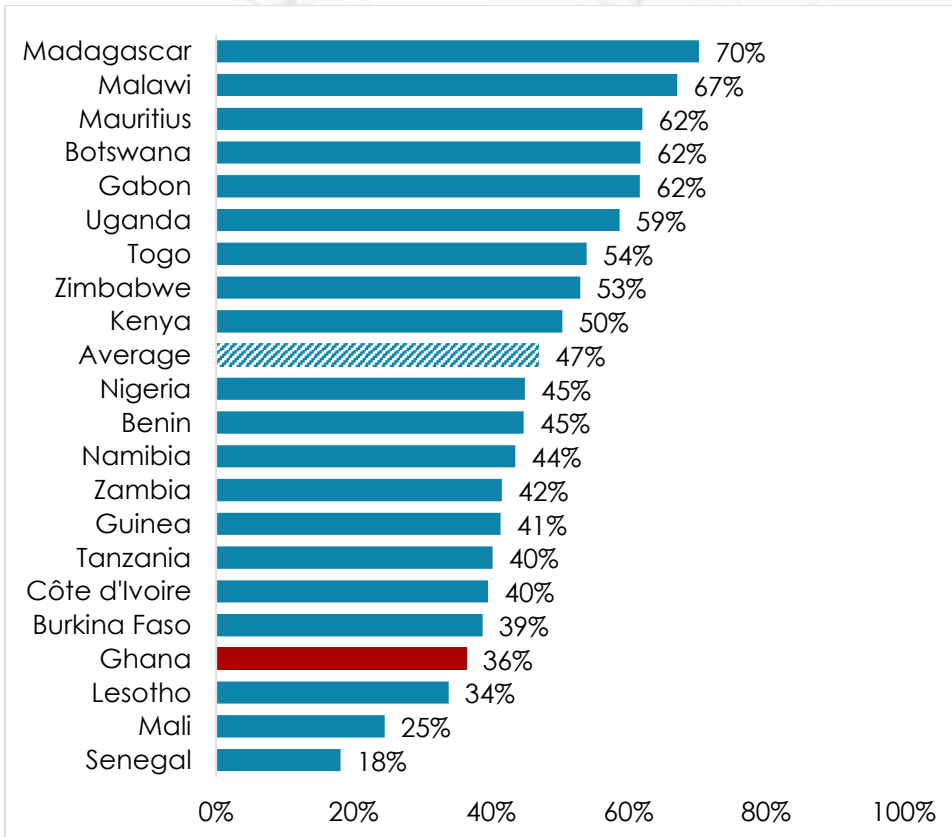


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Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

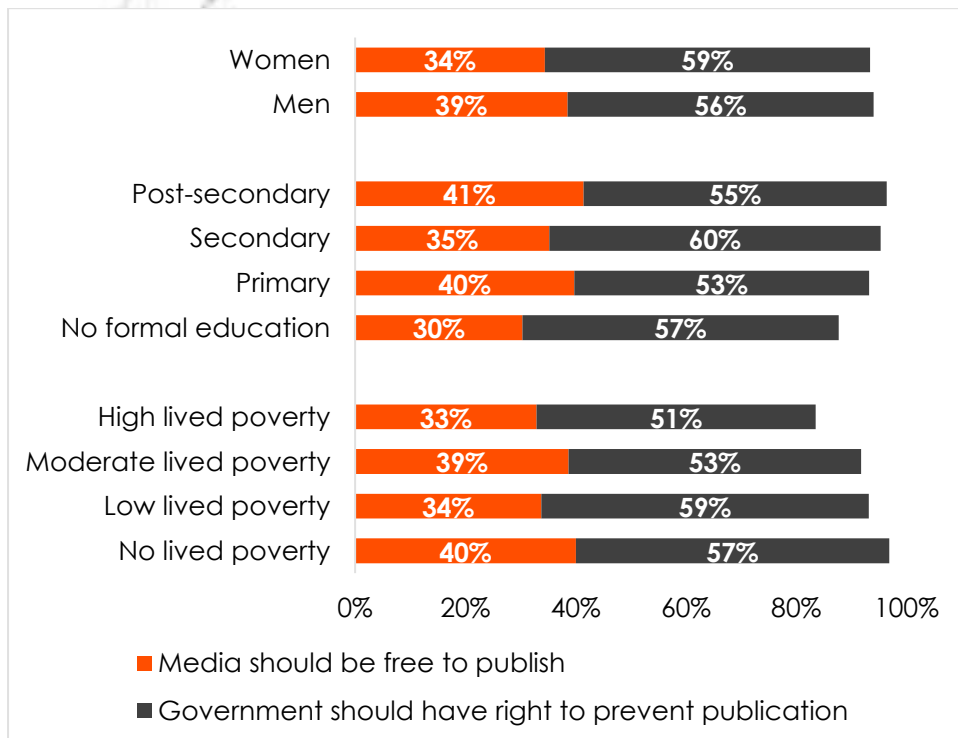
Figure 7: Freedom vs. control of media | 21 African countries | 2016/2018



(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control)

Different socio-demographic groups show only modest differences in support for media freedom. Urban and rural residents hold almost identical views, as do different age groups. Men are slightly more likely than women to support a free media (39% vs. 34%), and respondents with no formal education are less supportive of media freedom (30%) than their better-educated counterparts (Figure 8). Perhaps surprisingly, wealthy respondents tend to support government control more (57% and 59% among those with no or low lived poverty) than poor respondents.¹

Figure 8: Freedom vs. control of media | by gender, education, and lived poverty levels | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

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

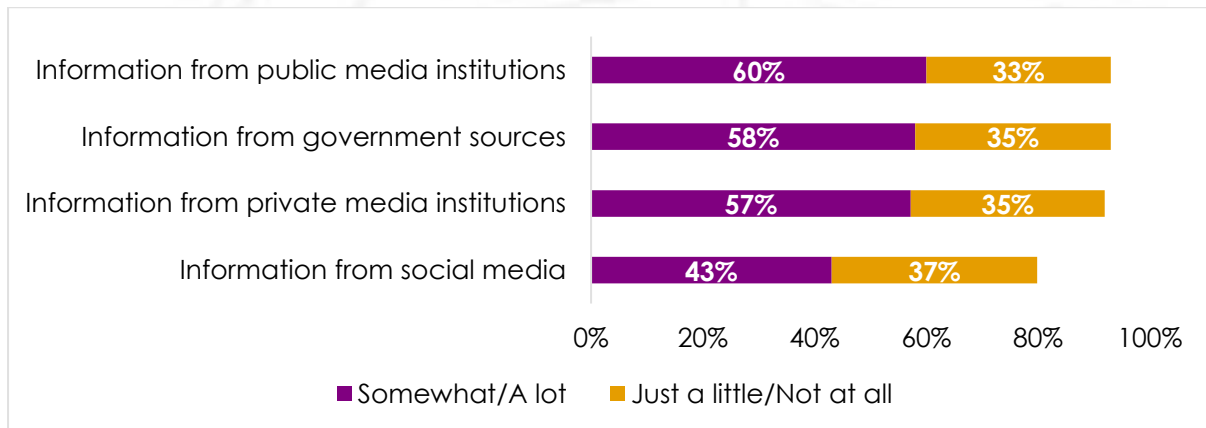
Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

Trust in information sources

Amid growing fake news dissemination and intentional misinformation around the world, a majority of Ghanaians say they trust information from public media (60%), government sources (58%), and private media (57%) “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 9). Far fewer trust information from social media (43%). Around one in three Ghanaians say they trust information from each of these sources “just a little” or “not at all.”

¹ Afrobarometer assesses respondents’ “lived poverty” based on responses to the following questions: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Figure 9: Trust information from various sources | Ghana | 2017

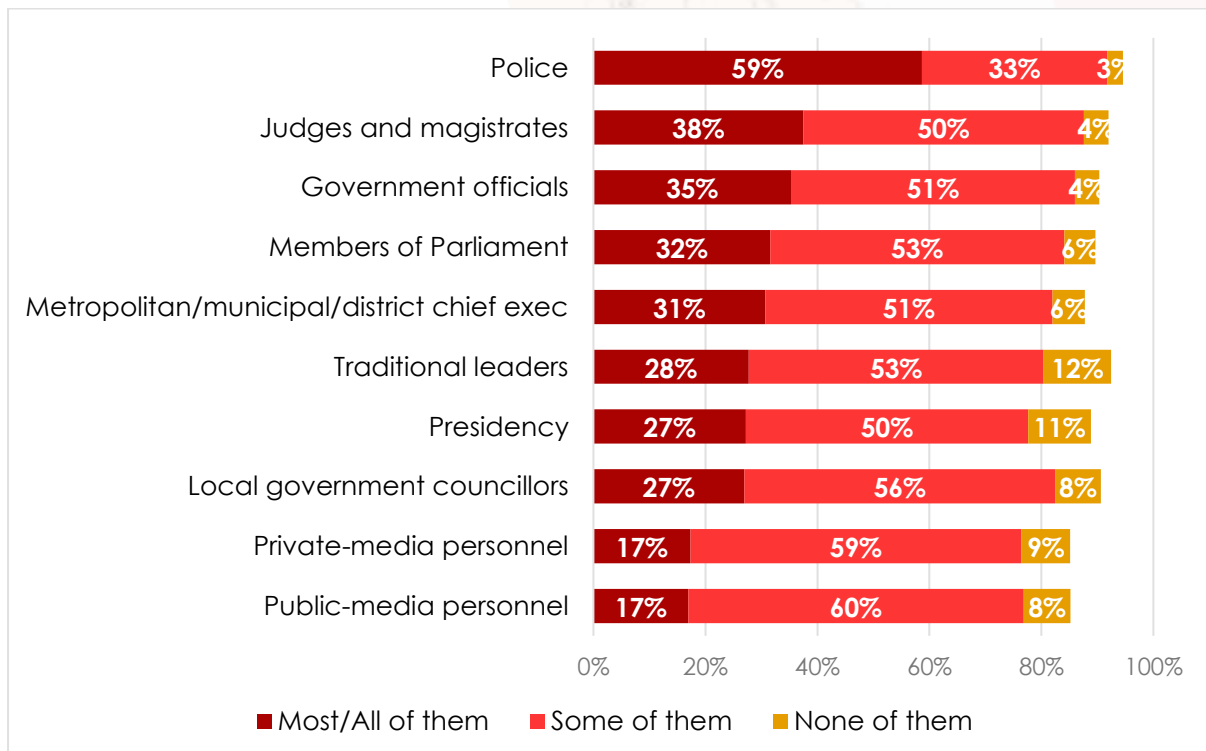


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Perceived corruption in the media

Members of the media fare considerably better than the police, judges, elected leaders, and traditional leaders when it comes to Ghanaians' perceptions of corruption. One in six citizens say "most" or "all" media personnel are corrupt, compared to 59% who say the same about the police, 38% about judges, 28% about the Presidency, and 27% about traditional leaders (Figure 10). Still, three-fourths of Ghanaians see at least "some" media personnel as corrupt; only one in 10 think that "none" of them are involved in corruption. Public and private media score almost identically in citizens' perceptions of corruption.

Figure 10: Perceived corruption | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Conclusion

The perception of increasing media freedom, on one hand, and growing calls for government control over the media, on the other, presents a puzzle. If the call for government control reflects popular concerns about unethical conduct on the part of some media personnel, this is an issue of concern for media-freedom advocates, as state authorities could, under the pretext of ensuring public tranquility, stifle media independence. The social-responsibility theory of media freedom places a premium on media accountability and the obligation to serve the public good that comes with press freedom; it demands that these obligations be ensured through professional self-regulation, by other agencies, and/or by the public (Ravi, 2012).

Advocates of media freedom would thus face a double challenge: To work with the National Media Commission to ensure professionalism in the media, and to educate citizens about the benefits of a free media.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 250 | 6 November 2018