



# Ethiopians support media's watchdog role but want regulated access to Internet, social media

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 448 | Mulu Teka**

## Summary

Free and independent media is still a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. Although the downfall of the military regime in May 1991 triggered an unprecedented proliferation of print media, it didn't last long. Draconian media laws promulgated by the Federal Parliament drove many of them out of business, and the media landscape in Ethiopia continues to be dominated by state and quasi-state operators.<sup>1</sup>

Ethiopia has a long history of cracking down on media and imprisoning journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). In 2015, Human Rights Watch (2015) reported that "Ethiopia now has the most journalists in exile of any country in the world other than Iran."

After major political reforms and a leadership change in 2018, a number of journalists, bloggers, social media activists, and opposition party members were released from prison, and new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed promised to promote freedom of the press. At the end of 2018, for the first time in more than 10 years, no journalist was in prison in Ethiopia, and the country climbed 40 places in the World Press Freedom Index, to 110<sup>th</sup> in the world (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

Though accused of "revert[ing] to old tactics" such as Internet blackouts and the jailing of journalists in 2019 (Mumo, 2019), Ethiopia welcomed the international media community for that year's World Press Freedom Day celebrations in Addis Ababa and rose to 99<sup>th</sup> on the World Press Freedom Index, completing a two-year gain of 51 places – "the greatest leap of any country anytime – by far" (Skjerdal & Moges, 2020; Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

How do Ethiopian citizens see their media? The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows that a majority assess the media as generally free. But they hold mixed views on just how much freedom the media should have. Most want the media to help keep the government honest, but only about half fully endorse press freedom, and majorities favour the government's ability to block false information, hate speech, and publications that "criticize or insult" the prime minister.

While digital platforms still rank well behind radio and television as news sources in Ethiopia, citizens express a distinct wariness about social media, and more than half favour government regulation of access to social media and the Internet.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Media Support (2018) Media and Freedom of Expression Assessment lists 25 publicly owned radio stations in Ethiopia, some national and others regional. Ten private radio stations operate in the country. A number of other radios have regional stations, and 31 community radio stations are operational. Ethiopia has four publicly owned national newspapers and several state-owned regional newspapers, along with 19 privately owned newspapers.

## 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. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

These findings are drawn from a survey of 2,400 adult citizens conducted in December 2019-January 2020 by ABCON – Research & Consulting with financial support from Freedom House. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. A previous survey was conducted in Ethiopia in 2013.

## Key findings

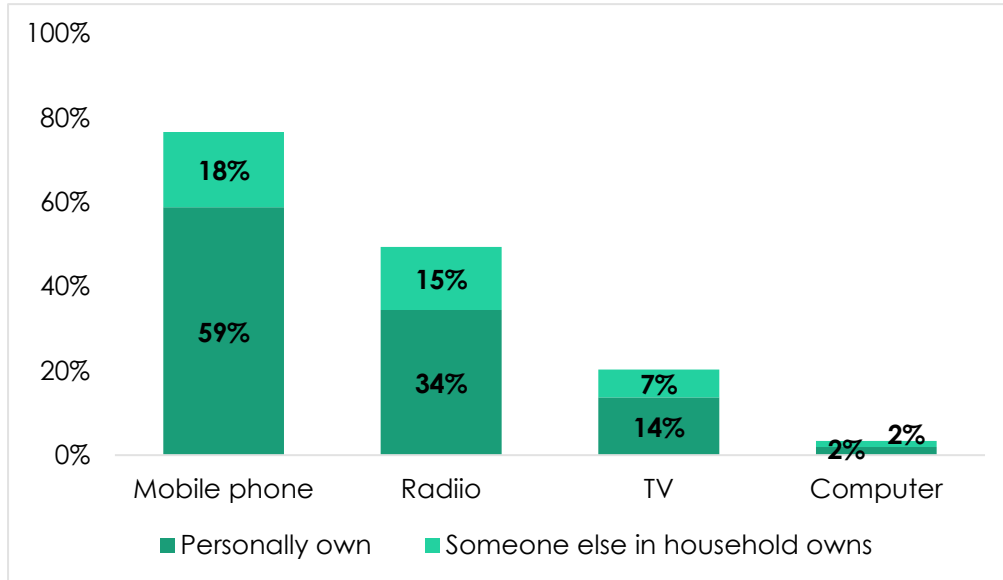
- Six in 10 adult Ethiopians (59%) own a mobile phone. But only 16% own a phone with Internet access. One in three (34%) own a radio, while 14% have a television set and only 2% have a computer.
- The most common source of regular news (“every day” or “a few times a week”) for Ethiopians is the radio (50%), followed by TV (24%), social media (12%), the Internet (9%), and newspapers (2%).
- A majority (59%) of Ethiopians assess the media as “somewhat free” or “completely free.” Only one in four (26%) consider the media “not very” or “not at all” free.
- But Ethiopians hold mixed views on just how free the media should be. While more than three-fourths (77%) want the media to report on government mistakes and corruption, almost half (48%) say the government should have the right to prevent the publication of things it disapproves of.
- And large majorities endorse the government’s right to prohibit the sharing of false information (79%) and hate speech (73%).
- Majorities say social media users (55%), politicians (52%), and activists (51%) “sometimes” or “often” knowingly spread false information or “fake news.”
- Only three in 10 Ethiopians (30%) have heard about social media. Among these citizens, more than half (54%) say social media has “somewhat positive” or “very positive” effects on society, while 35% see its effects as mostly negative.
- More specifically, large majorities say social media helps make people more informed (79%) and effective (72%) citizens, but also makes them more likely to believe false news (67%).
- More than half (53%) of Ethiopians believe that the government should regulate access to social media and the Internet.

## Access to communication devices and the Internet

Nearly six out of 10 adult Ethiopians (59%) own a mobile phone, and about half either own a radio (34%) or have access to one owned by someone else in the household (15%) (Figure 1). Only one in five either own a television (14%) or live in a household that owns one (7%).

Access to computers is quite low; only 2% personally own one, while another 2% have access through someone in their household.

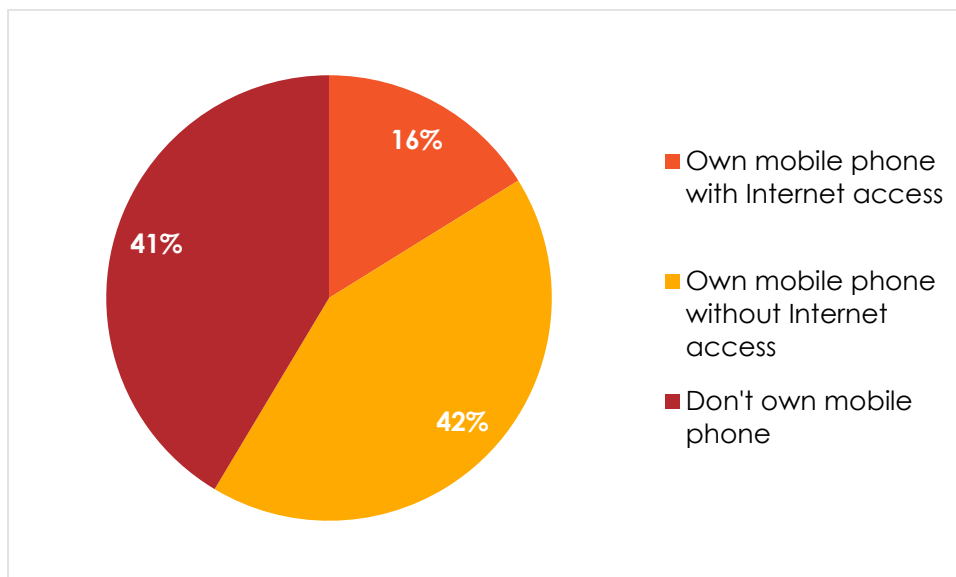
**Figure 1: Access to communication devices | Ethiopia | 2020**



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

Among those who personally own a mobile phone, only about one-fourth (27%) have phones that can access the Internet, meaning that of all Ethiopians, only 16% have phones with data connectivity (Figure 2). Ownership of mobiles with Internet access is more common in cities (38% vs. 10% in rural areas) and among youth (22% of those aged 18-35). Men are about twice as likely as women to have smartphones (21% vs. 11%), and Internet access via mobile phones increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 3% of those with no formal schooling to 64% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

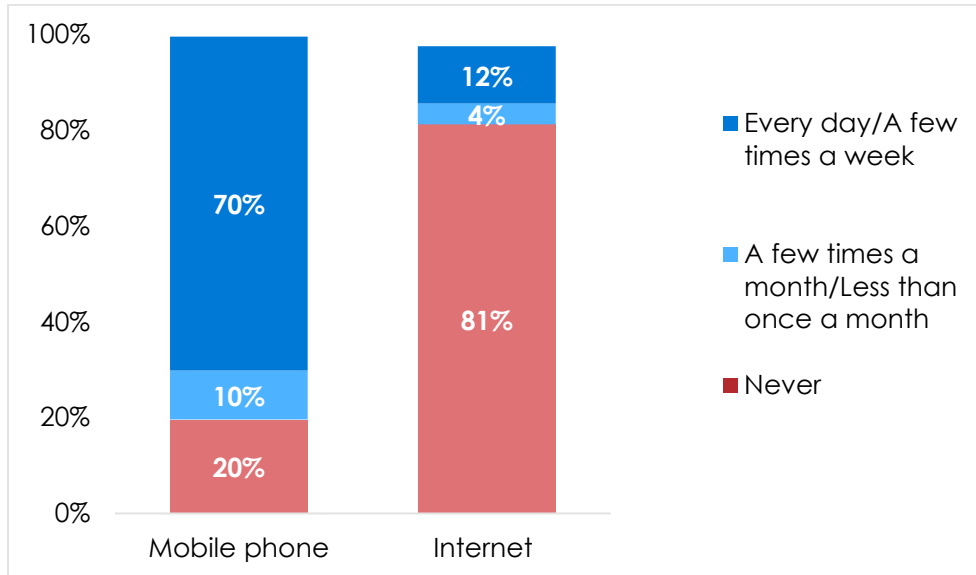
**Figure 2: Ownership of mobile phone with access to Internet | Ethiopia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of these things do you personally own: Mobile phone? [If “yes”:] Does your phone have access to the Internet?

Concerning frequency of use, more than two-thirds (70%) of adult Ethiopians say they use their mobile phone “every day” (53%) or “a few times a week” (17%). However, only 12% are regular users of the Internet (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Frequency of using mobile phone and Internet | Ethiopia | 2020**



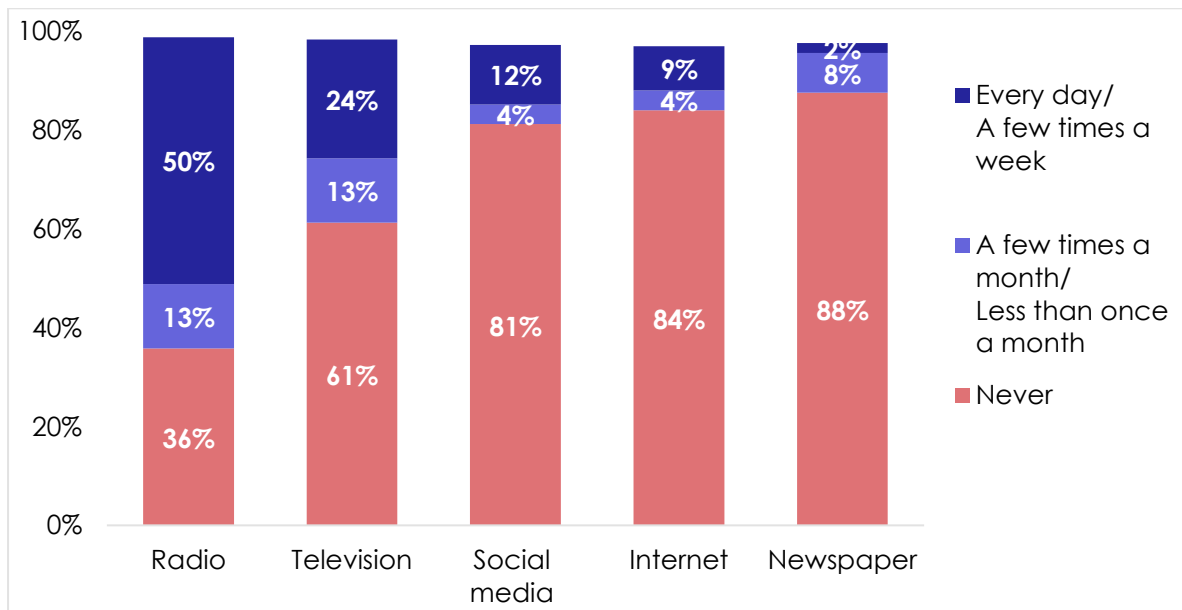
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you use: A mobile phone? The Internet?

### News media consumption

Radio is the mass medium most commonly used by Ethiopians as a source of news. Half (50%) of all adults say they listen to radio news “every day” or “a few times a week.” About one in four (24%) rely on television for regular news (Figure 4).

About one in 10 people use social media (12%) and the Internet (9%) as regular sources of news, while only 2% are regular newspaper readers.

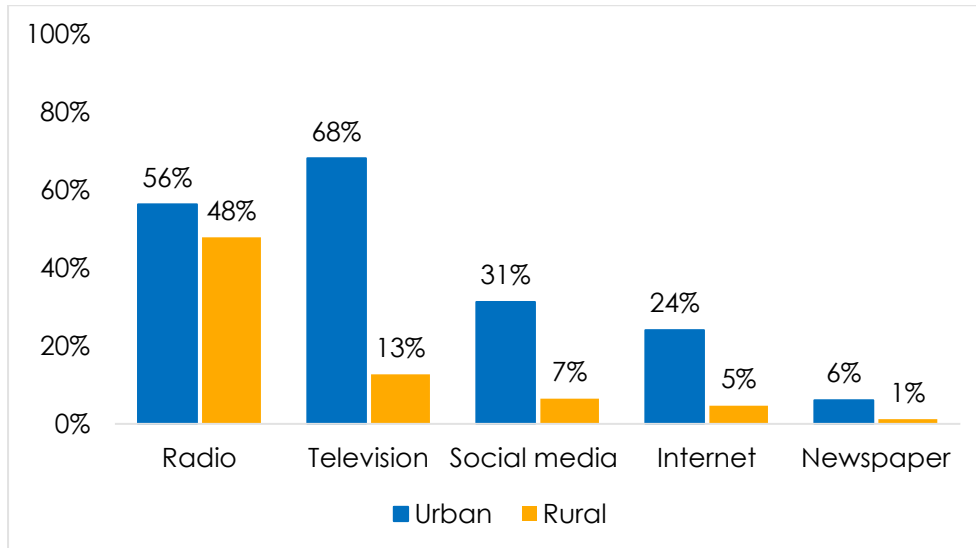
**Figure 4: Source of news | Ethiopia | 2020**



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

But news habits vary considerably by respondents' area of residence, gender, age, and education. Urban residents are somewhat more likely than their rural counterparts to use the radio for news (by 8 percentage points) and far more likely to use sources that are less accessible in rural areas: television (a 55-point gap), social media (24 points), and the Internet (19 points) (Figure 5).

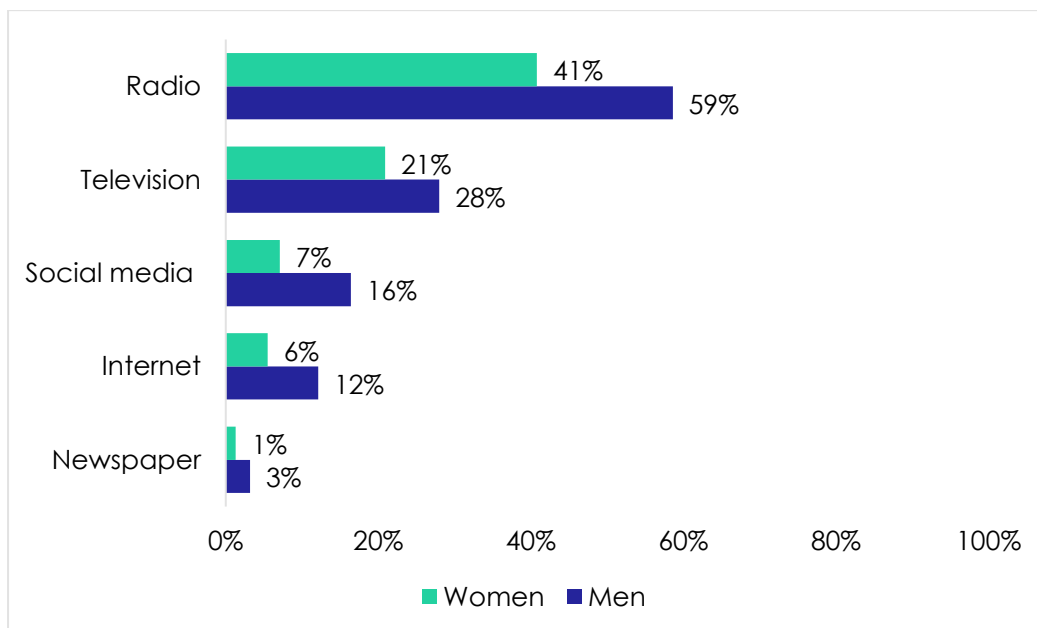
**Figure 5: Regular news media consumption | urban vs. rural | Ethiopia | 2020**



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

Men are more likely than women to use each of these sources to access news (Figure 6). The gap is particularly large for radio (18 percentage points), but men are also about twice as likely as women to get news regularly from social media and the Internet.

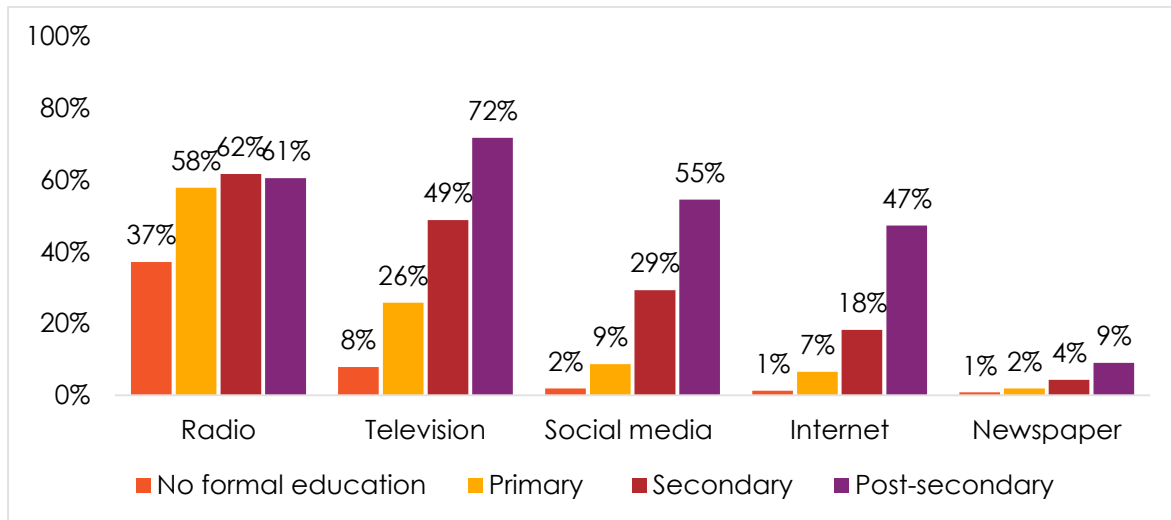
**Figure 6: Regular news media consumption | by gender | Ethiopia | 2020**



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

The frequency of news media consumption from each of these outlets increases substantially with respondents' education level (Figure 7). Even with regard to regular radio news, citizens without formal education trail by more than 20 percentage points. But the gaps become enormous when it comes to television (64 percentage points between those without formal schooling and those with post-secondary education), social media (53 points), and the Internet (46%).

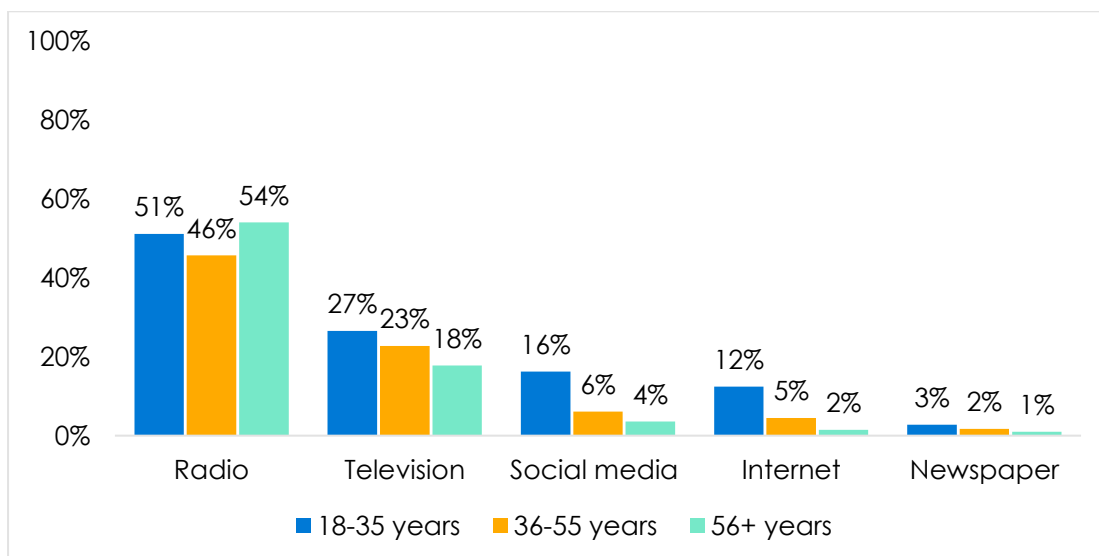
**Figure 7: Regular news media consumption | by education level | Ethiopia | 2020**



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

Differences by age groups are less pronounced except with regard to social media and the Internet, where 18- to 35-year-olds are two to three times as likely to be regular users as their elders (Figure 8). Young people are also somewhat more frequent consumers of television news than older citizens, whereas radio news is most popular among older Ethiopians (54% of those aged 56 or above).

**Figure 8: Regular news media consumption | by age | Ethiopia | 2020**

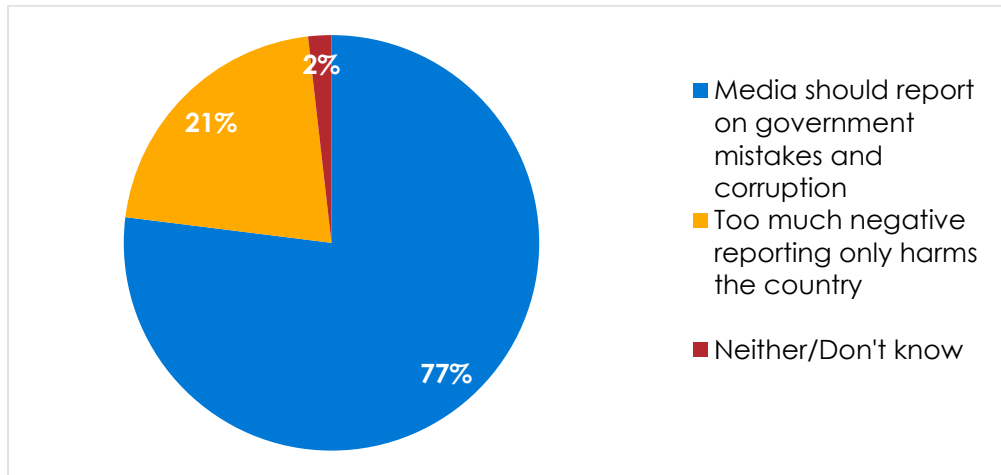


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

### Media freedom and government restrictions

Most Ethiopians want a media that helps hold the government accountable. More than three-fourths (77%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while only one in five (21%) think that too much negative reporting only harms the country (Figure 9).

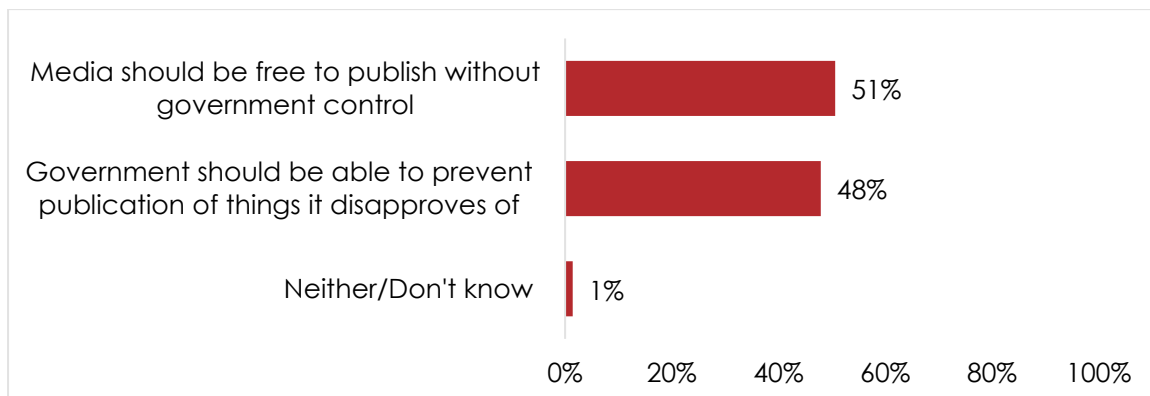
**Figure 9: Media should check government vs. avoid negative reporting** | Ethiopia | 2020



**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)

However, Ethiopians are almost evenly divided on the question of just how much freedom the media should have. A slim majority (51%) believe in the media's right to publish any views and ideas without government control, but almost as many (48%) hold that the government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Support for media freedom** | Ethiopia | 2020

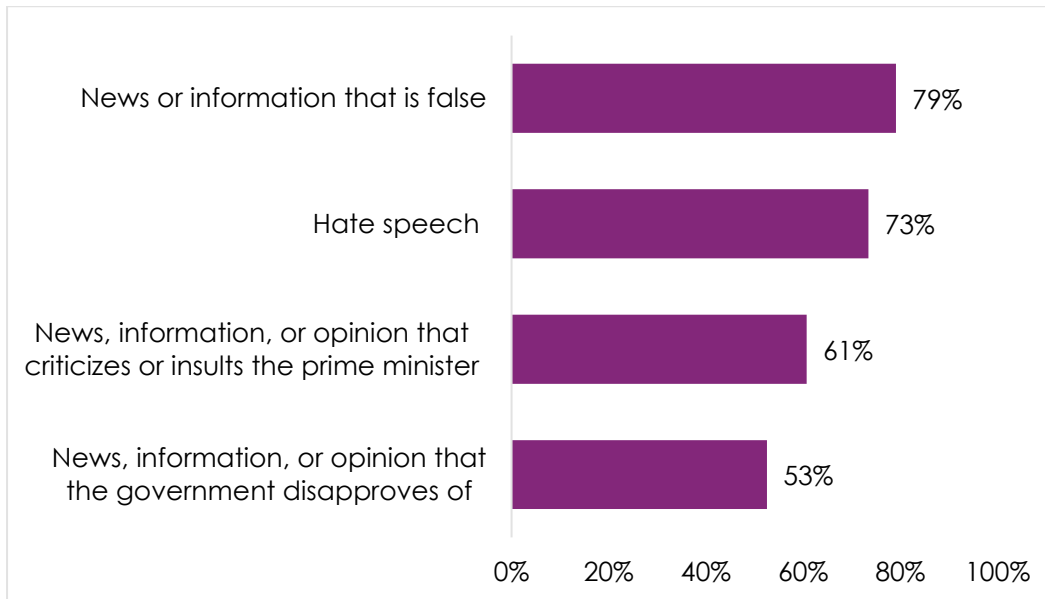


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your views?  
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.  
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.  
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

In particular, strong majorities endorse their government's right to prohibit the sharing of false information or news (77%) and of hate speech (73%) (Figure 11).

A clear majority (61%) also support the government's ability to block information that "criticizes or insults the prime minister," while more than half (53%) would allow restrictions on news, information, and opinions that the government disapproves of.

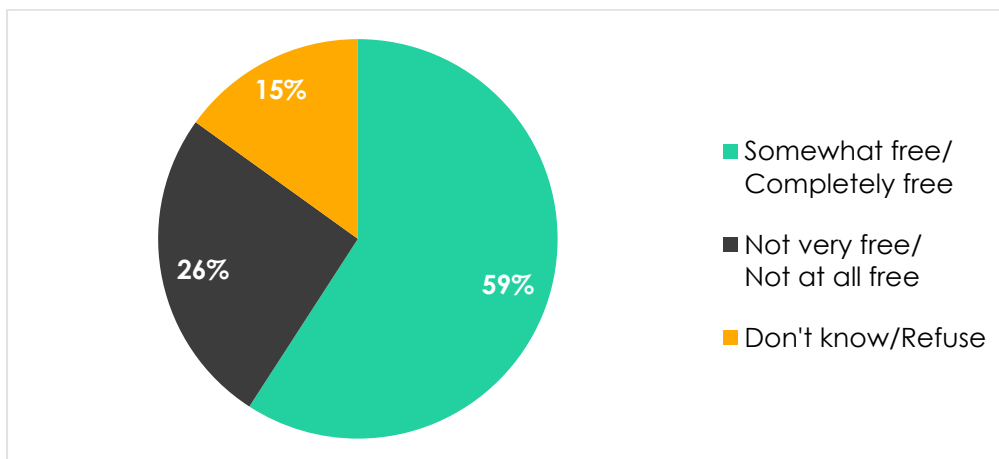
**Figure 11: Should the government be able to limit the sharing of certain information?**  
 | Ethiopia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit sharing of: a) News or information that is false? b) News, information, or opinion that the government disapproves of? c) News, information, or opinion that criticizes or insults the prime minister? d) Hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In practice, six in 10 Ethiopians (59%) say the media is "somewhat free" or "completely free." Only one in four (26%) consider the media "not very" or "not free at all" free (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: How free is the media?** | Ethiopia | 2020



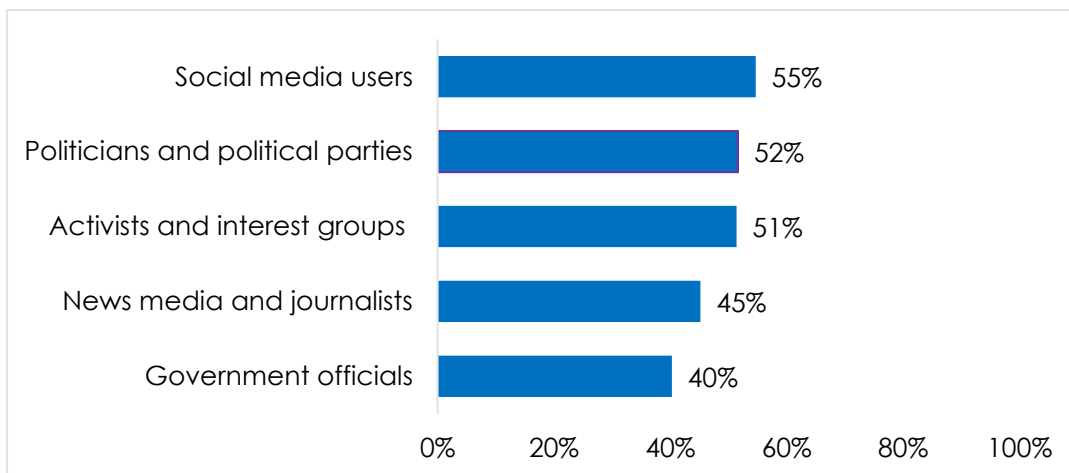
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?



### Sources of false (fake) news

The spread of “fake news” or false information of all sorts, including misinformation and disinformation, has emerged as a serious problem, particularly since the advent of digital media platforms. When asked who they think disseminates false information in Ethiopia, survey respondents blame a wide variety of actors. More than half (55%) say people using social media spread information they know to be untrue. Almost as many put the blame on politicians and political parties (52%) and activists/interest groups (51%), while somewhat fewer finger journalists (45%) and government officials (40%) as culprits (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Who spreads fake news/false information? | Ethiopia | 2020**

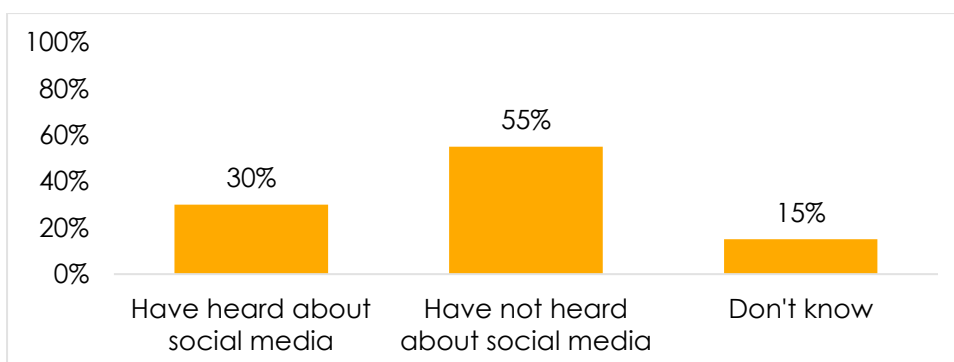


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false. (% who say “sometimes” or “often”)

### Views on digital media

Only three in 10 Ethiopians (30%) say they have heard about social media (Figure 14). This is low compared to other African countries but hardly surprising given that about eight in 10 Ethiopians live in rural areas, that literacy rates are relatively low, that only one in four own a mobile phone with Internet access, and only one in 10 are regular users of the Internet.

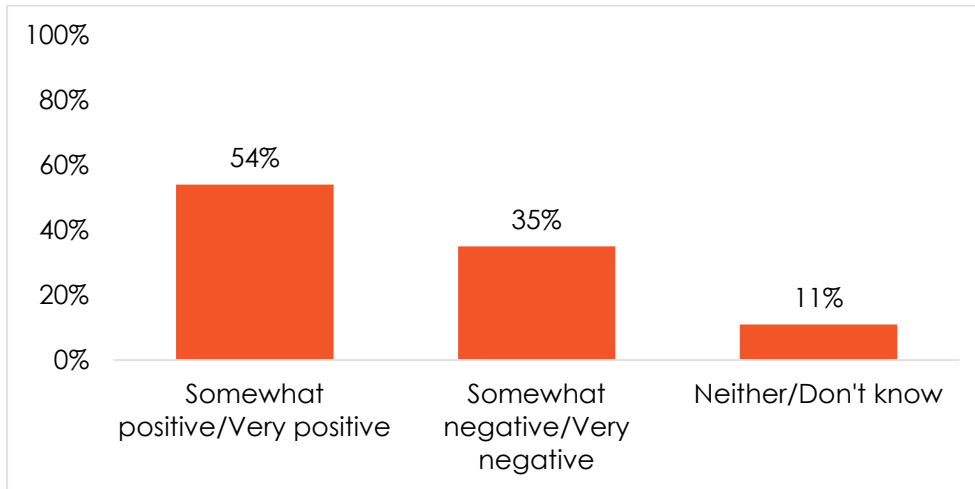
**Figure 14: Heard about social media? | Ethiopia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about social media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp?

Among those who have heard about social media, more than half (54%) say it has “somewhat positive” or “very positive” effects on society, while about one-third (35%) see its impacts as largely negative (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Overall effect of social media: positive or negative? | Ethiopia | 2020**

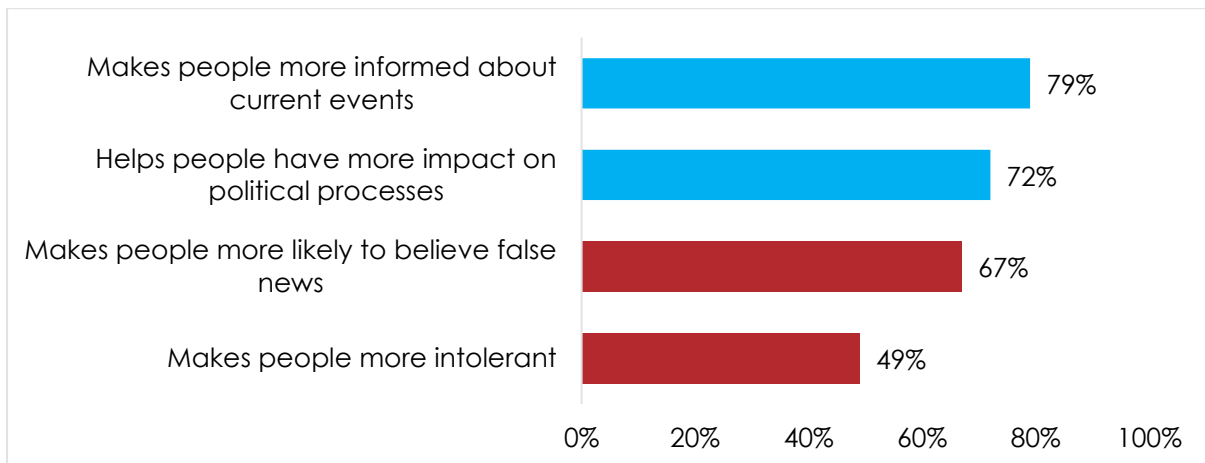


**Respondents who said they had heard about social media were asked:** Overall, do you think the effects of social media on society are mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who had not heard about social media are excluded.)

More specifically, large majorities among those familiar with social media say it makes people more informed about current events (79%) and helps them have more impact on political processes (72%) (Figure 16).

At the same time, however, two-thirds (67%) believe that social media makes people more likely to believe false news, and half (49%) say it makes people more intolerant of those with different political views.

**Figure 16: Specific effects of social media usage | Ethiopia | 2020**



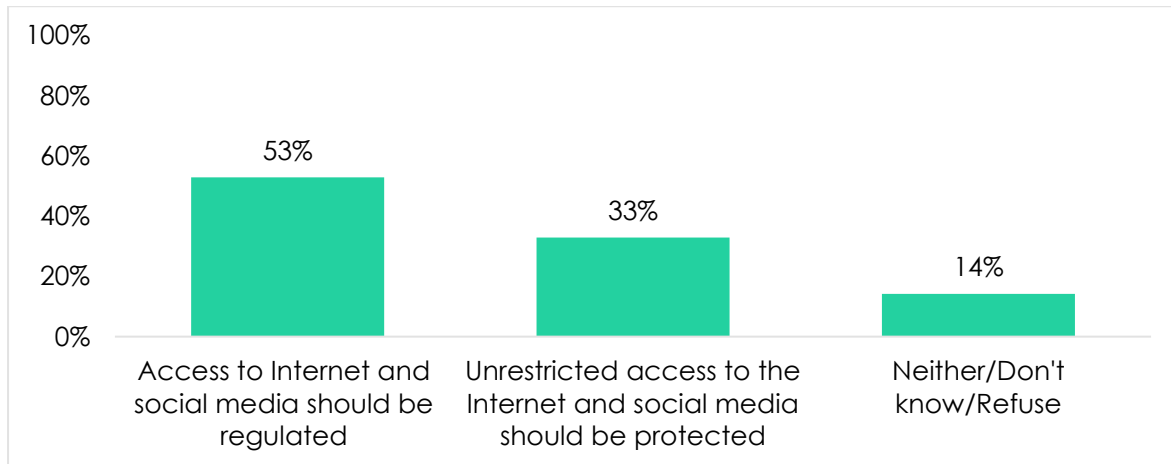
**Respondents were asked:** Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media: a) Makes people more informed about current events? b) Makes people more likely to believe false news? c) Helps people have more impact on political processes? d) Makes people more intolerant of those who have different political opinions? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Despite positive assessments by those who have heard of social media, a majority of adult citizens are not willing to give free rein as far as access to social media and the Internet is concerned. More than half (53%) of respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" that the

government should regulate access to the Internet and social media because their use “is dividing our country,” while only one-third (33%) favour unrestricted access (Figure 17).

Perhaps surprisingly, the view that access to the Internet and social media should be regulated is most common among citizens with post-secondary education (65%, compared to 51%-55% among those with less education) (Figure 18).

**Figure 17: Should access to the Internet and social media be regulated?** | Ethiopia | 2020



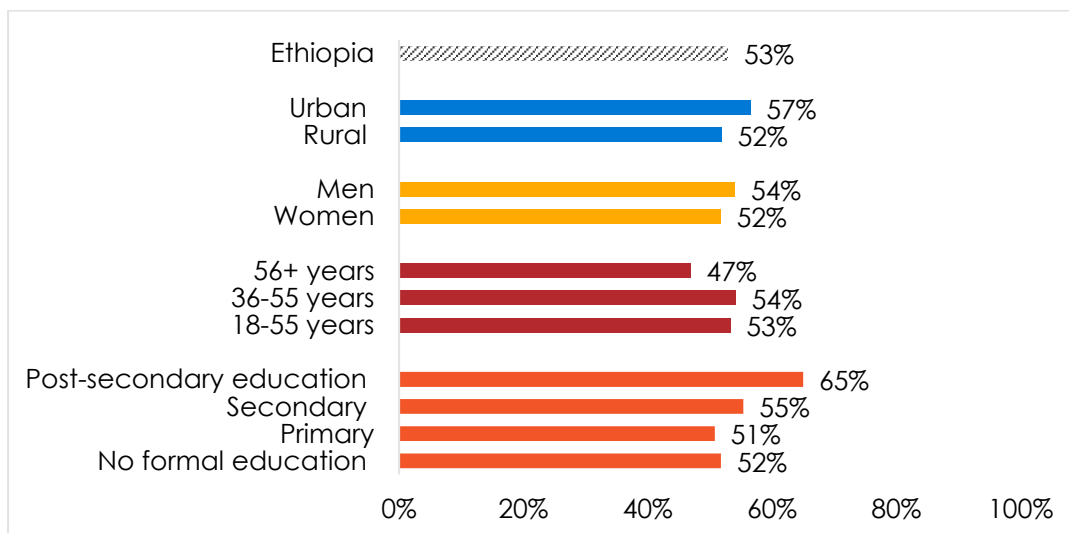
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing our country, so access should be regulated by government.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

**Figure 18: Access to the Internet and social media should be regulated** | by socio-demographic group | Ethiopia | 2020



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

Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing our country, so access should be regulated by government.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

## Conclusion

A majority of Ethiopians are supportive of media freedom and endorse the media's watchdog role in fostering government accountability.

But Ethiopians are also willing to accept government restriction on certain types of public communication, such as the sharing of false information, hate speech, and even messages that the government disapproves of. A majority say the government should regulate access to the Internet and social media because they believe that information shared on these platforms is dividing the country.

These findings will be troubling to advocates of media freedom as well as to supporters of the political opposition, as they seem to offer the government *carte blanche* to limit the media's independence and the opposition's ability to hold the government accountable. These views may reflect a lack of knowledge about the media's contributions to promotion of the common good, but they may also reflect concerns about unethical conduct by some media outlets. Advocates of media freedom should, therefore, work with the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) to ensure ethical conduct and professionalism in the media and to educate citizens about the benefits of a free media.

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