

Double-edged sword? Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 366 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey

Summary

Like many other countries, Ghana has been grappling with its share of fake news about COVID-19. On the one hand, rumors that the “foreign disease” targets only whites and the affluent (Pedroncelli, 2020) heighten nonchalant attitudes toward fighting the disease. On the other hand, scaremongering, prescription of various local remedies, and false case counts (Arthur, 2020; News Ghana, 2020) create confusion and undermine public education efforts.

The spread of misinformation, hoaxes, lies, and false claims is of course neither new nor limited to pandemics. Fake news is as old as the concept of “news” itself, but has come into intense focus through the widespread use – and abuse – of social media.

It is particularly common during elections. The Media Foundation for West Africa (2016) found, for instance, that more than half of the 98 claims by 2016 electoral campaign participants that it fact-checked were completely false, half-truths, or misleading. Considering that 2020 in Ghana is both an election year and a pandemic year, the country could be in for a perfect storm of misinformation.

In Ghana, the dissemination of false information is a criminal offense punishable by a fine of GHS 36,000 (about \$6,250) and up to five years' imprisonment, according to Section 76 of Ghana's Electronic Communications Act (2008). Ignorance of the fact that the information is false is not an excuse, as the act explains that “a person is taken to know that a communication is false or misleading if that person did not take reasonable steps to find out whether the communication was false, misleading, reckless or fraudulent.”

Some independent fact-checking organizations and media houses in Ghana are working to identify and correct fake news (Ghanaweb, 2020; Media Foundation for West Africa, 2020), and the government has arrested or pursued some social media users accused of spreading misinformation about COVID-19 (Modern Ghana, 2020; Myjoyonline, 2020). Still, opportunities for misinforming seem almost endless, especially on social media.

Findings from Afrobarometer's most recent survey in Ghana, conducted in September-October 2019, show that social media is becoming an increasingly common source of news for Ghanaians, even though they trust it less than traditional media. They are also clear-eyed about social media's negative as well as positive effects on society. Supporters of unrestricted access to social media and the Internet outnumber opponents, but a majority want the government to be able to fight the spread of false information, hate speech, and other problematic content.

Afrobarometer survey

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 2019/2020 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.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 2,400 adult Ghanaians between 16 September and 3 October 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- The Afrobarometer survey conducted in late 2019 shows that although radio and television remain the most dominant news sources, daily news consumption via social media (by 22% of Ghanaians) and the Internet (19%) is steadily increasing.
- Social media is less trusted as a source of information – only 39% of Ghanaians say they trust it “somewhat” or “a lot” – than private and public media (55% each) and government sources (54%).
- Close to eight in 10 Ghanaians (78%) say politicians and political parties spread information that they know is false. But smaller majorities also blame government officials, journalists, social media users, and activists and interest groups.
- Although an overwhelming majority (92%) of Ghanaians who have heard of social media think social media usage makes people more aware of current happenings, almost as many (86%) say it makes people more likely to believe fake news.
- One-third (32%) of Ghanaians support government regulation of access to the Internet and social media, but close to half (48%) prefer unrestricted access.
- Large majorities of Ghanaians “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government should be able to limit or prohibit the sharing of false news (77%), hate speech (69%), and news and opinions that criticize or insult the president (57%). Close to half (48%) also say the government should be able to limit the spread of information it disapproves of.

Steady increase in Internet use and digital news consumption

The Afrobarometer survey conducted in late 2019 shows that more than nine in 10 Ghanaians either personally own a mobile phone (87%) or have access to one owned by someone else in the household (6%) (Figure 1). Similarly, about eight in 10 personally own a

radio and television or can access them through someone else in the household.

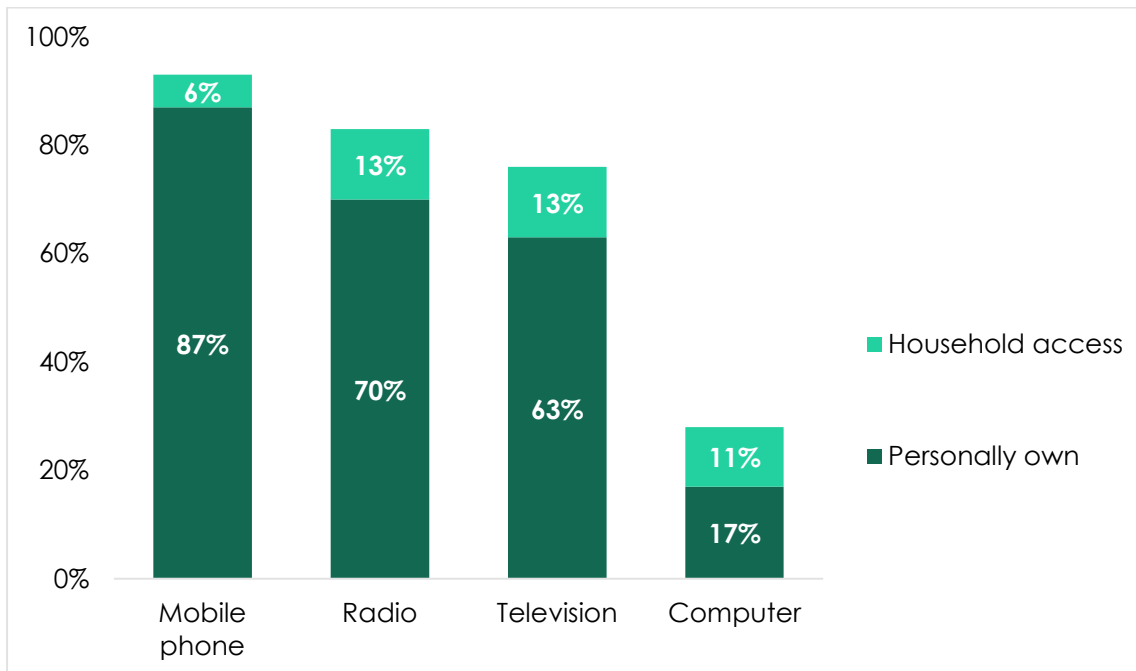
Only a quarter of Ghanaians either personally own a computer (17%) or live in a household where someone has one (11%).

Nonetheless, use of the Internet has multiplied over the past decade. A quarter of Ghanaians (24%) now use the Internet

daily, 12 times the proportion recorded in 2008 (2%) (Figure 2). But six in 10 Ghanaians still say they “never” use the Internet.

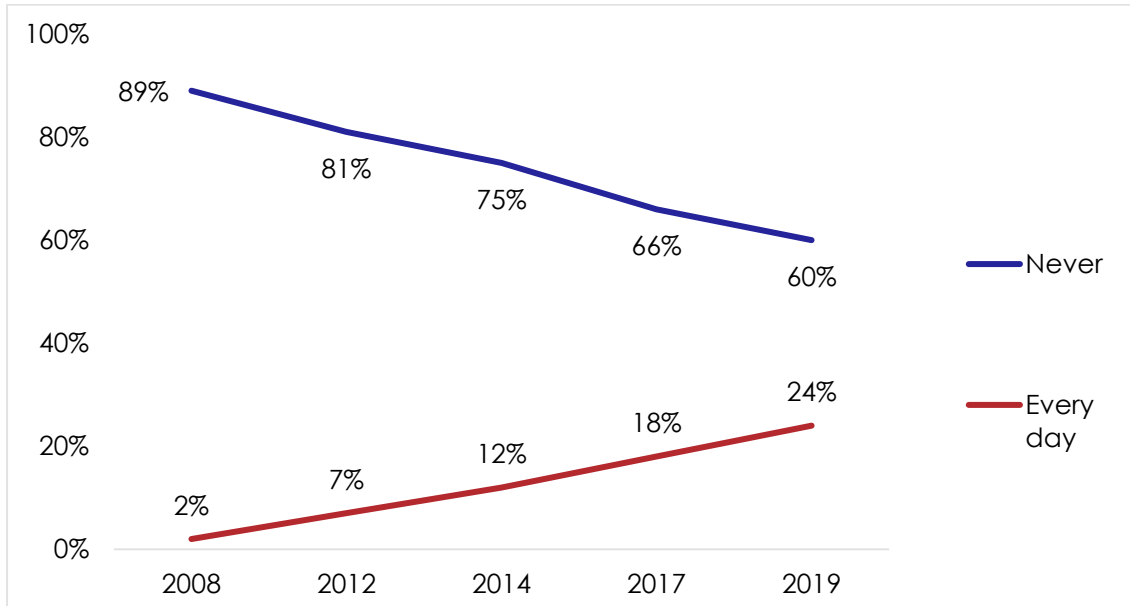
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Figure 1: Access to radio, television, computer, mobile phone | Ghana | 2019



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

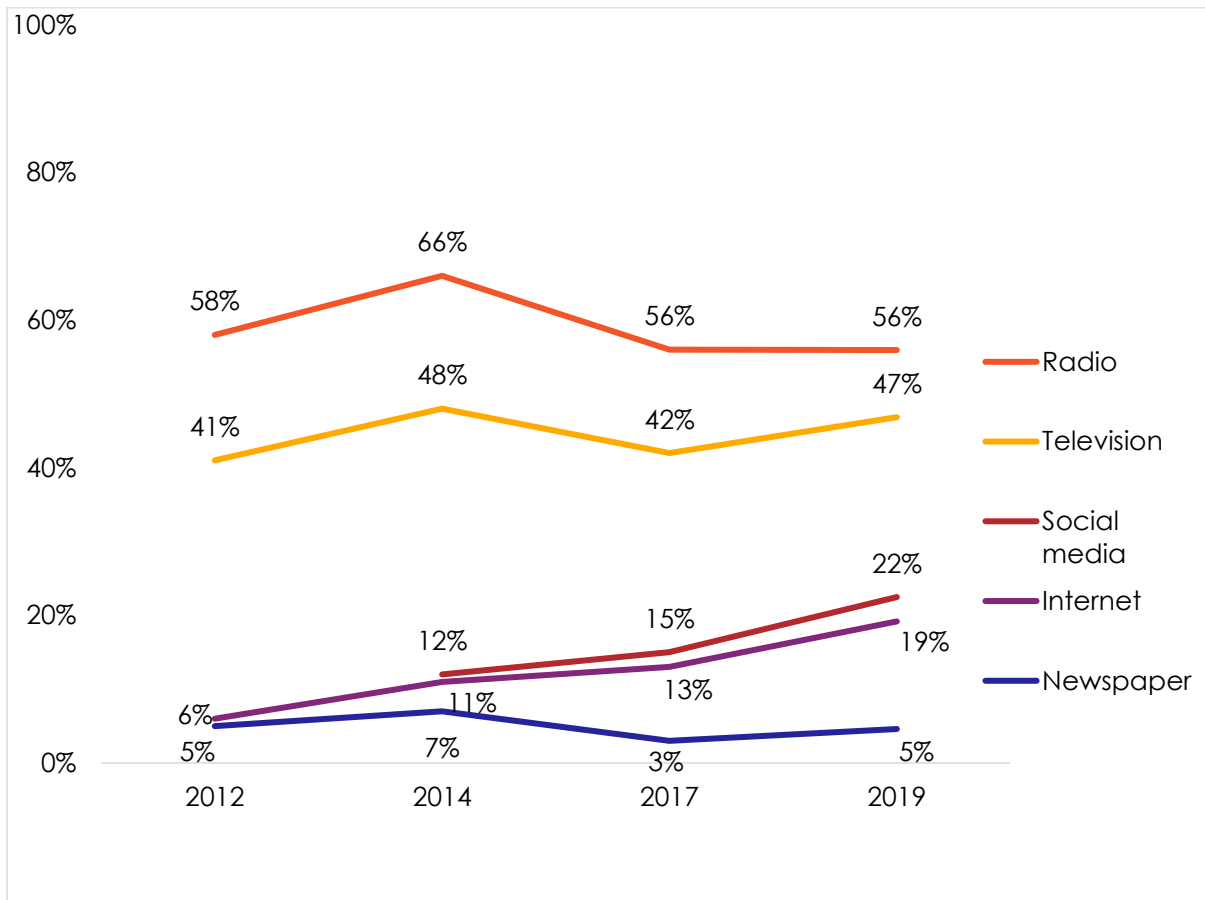
Figure 2: Frequency of Internet use | Ghana | 2008-2019



Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet?

Reliance on the Internet and social media as news sources is growing steadily. While radio and television remain the most dominant news sources (used daily by 56% and 47% of Ghanaians, respectively), daily news consumption via the Internet has tripled since 2012 (from 6% to 19%). And use of social media as a news source has almost doubled since 2014 (from 12% to 22%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Daily news consumption | Ghana | 2012-2019



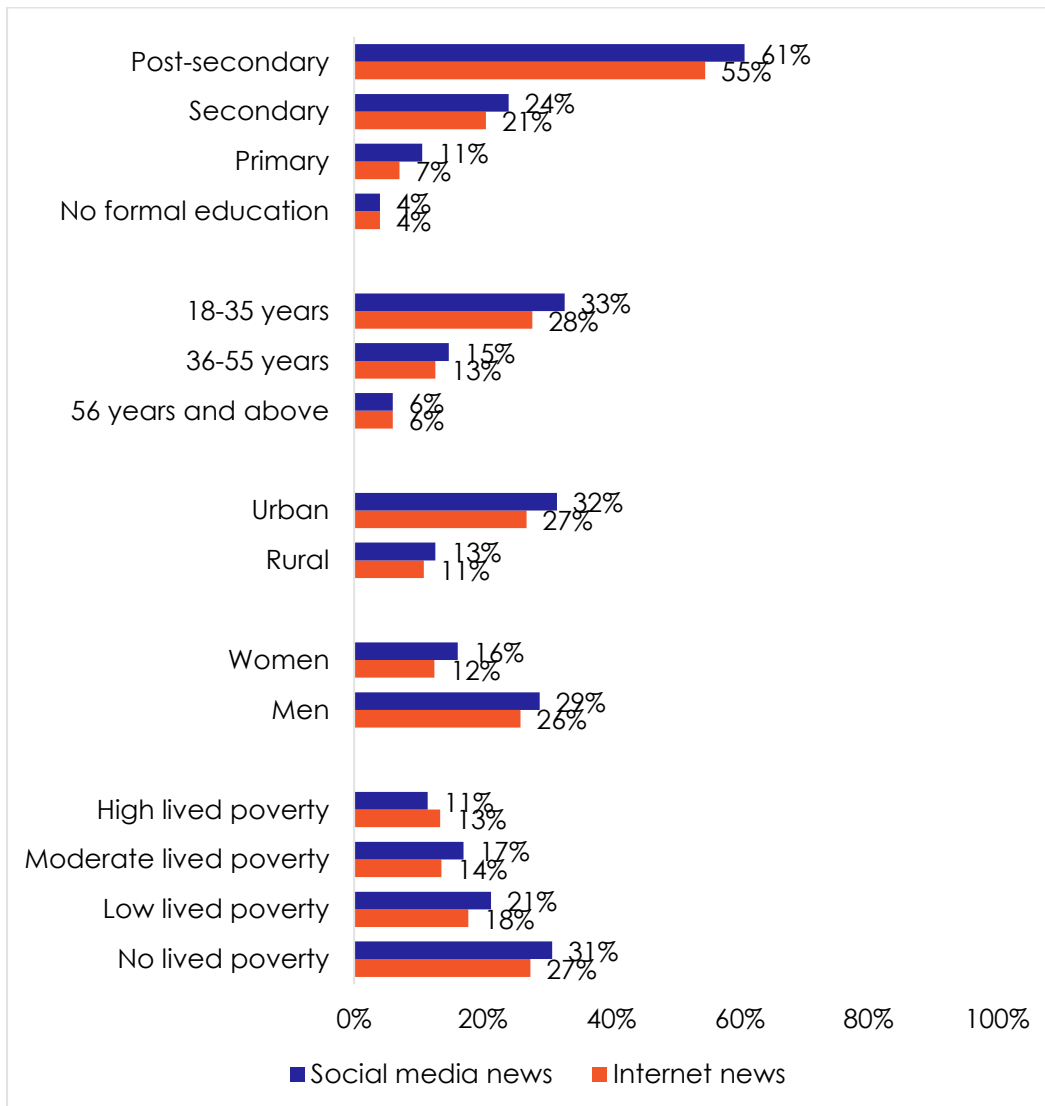
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

Daily use of digital news sources increases sharply with respondents' education level and socioeconomic status¹ (Figure 4). Highly educated Ghanaians are more than 10 times as likely as those with no formal education to access news daily via social media and the Internet.

Young adults (aged 18-35 years) are far more likely to get news digitally every day than their elders. There are also sizeable gender and rural-urban gaps as digital news consumption is roughly twice as common among men and urban residents as among women and rural residents.

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 preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 4: Daily news consumption via Internet and social media | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2019

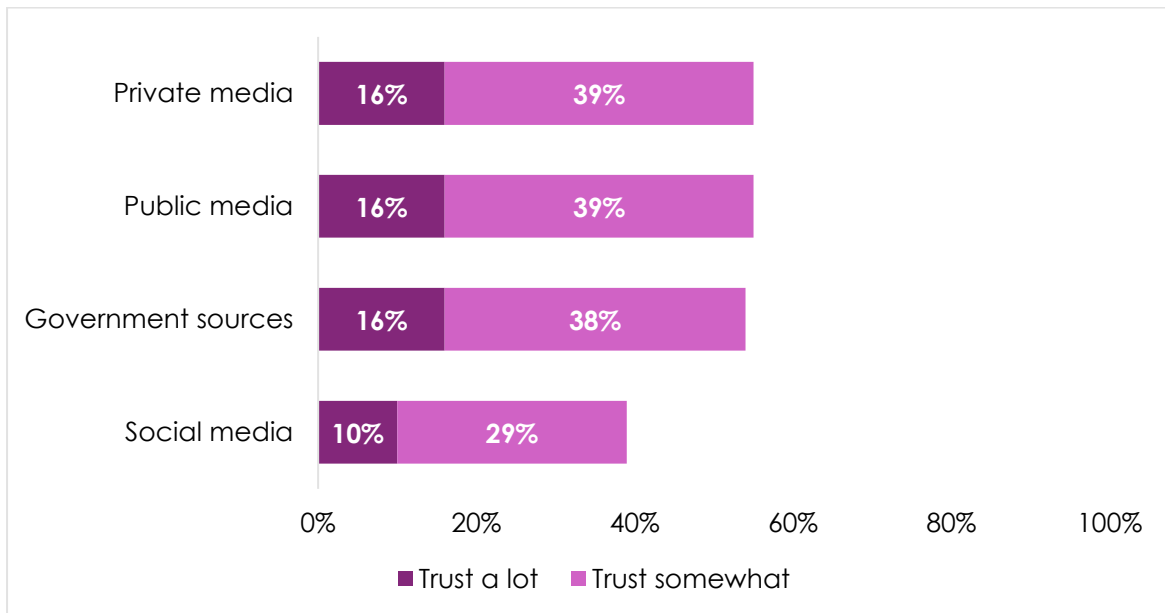


Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

Trustworthiness of information sources

While its use is growing fast, social media is less trusted than traditional news sources. Only four in 10 Ghanaians (39%) say they trust information from social media “somewhat” or “a lot,” whereas more than half say they trust private and public media (55% each) and government sources (54%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Trustworthiness of information sources | Ghana | 2019

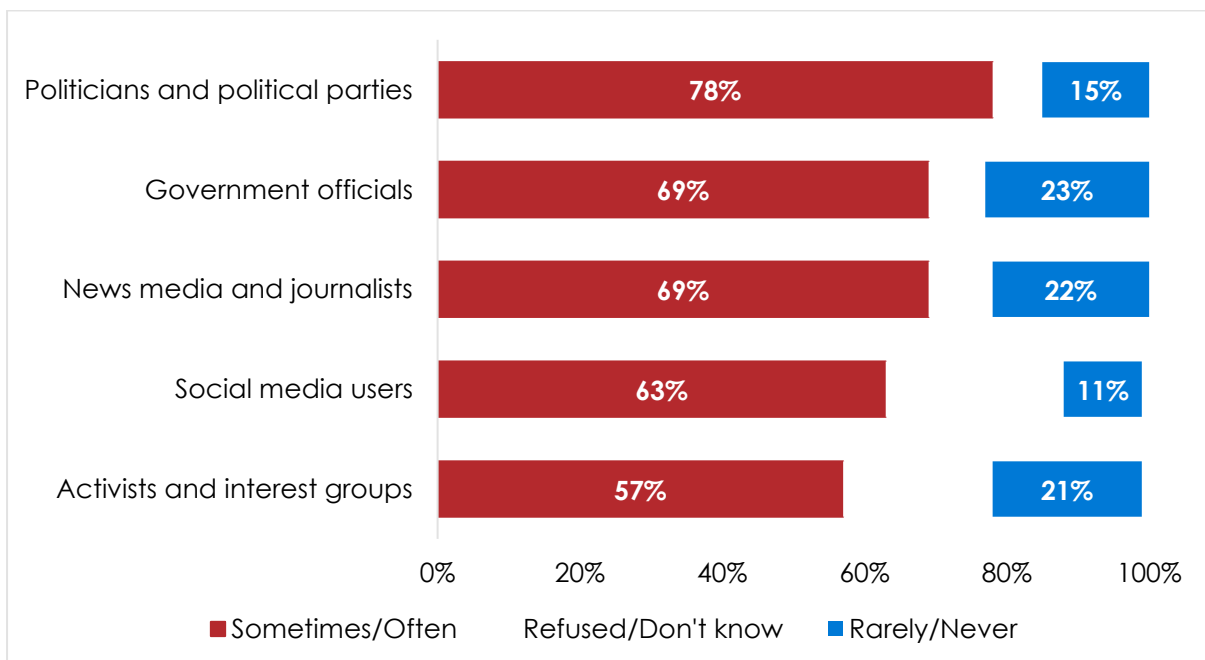


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust [information from] each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Who spreads false news?

Whether by social media or other channels, a wide range of people are culpable when it comes to disseminating false news or misinformation, according to survey respondents. Ghanaians are most likely to blame politicians and political parties (78%) for spreading fake news, followed by government officials and journalists (69% each). "Social media users" in general rank fourth (63%), just ahead of activists and interest groups (57%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Who spreads false information | Ghana | 2019



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.

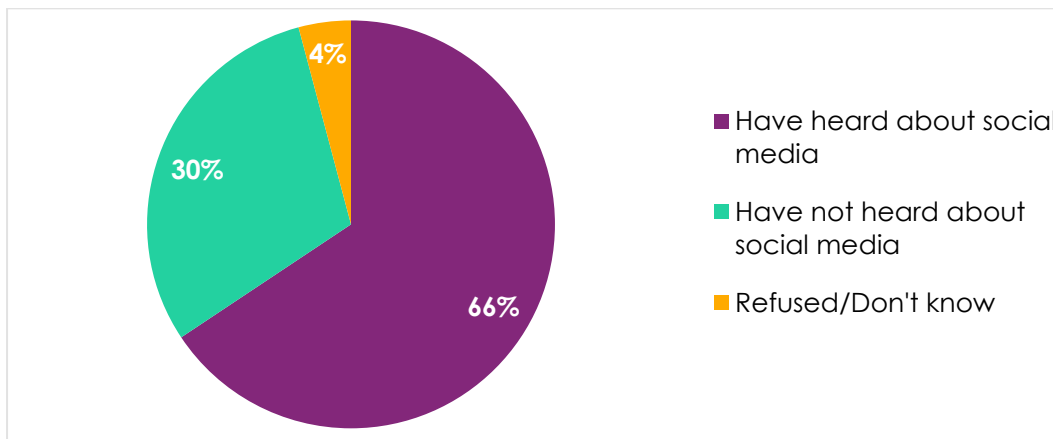
The good and bad of social media

Two-thirds (66%) of Ghanaians say they are aware of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Figure 7). But views on the effects of social media usage reflect both positive and negative perceptions. Among those who have heard of social media, nine in 10 (92%) say it makes people more aware of current happenings, but almost as many (86%) say it makes people more likely to believe false news (Figure 8).

Further, while eight in 10 (79%) say social media usage helps people have more impact on political processes, two-thirds (66%) also believe that it makes people more intolerant of those with different political opinions.

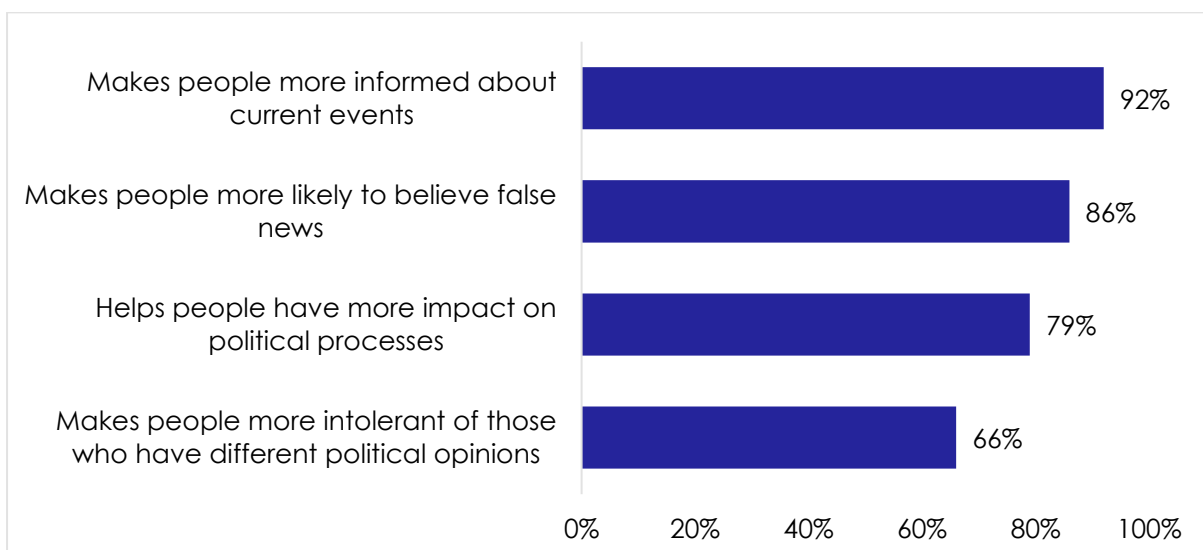
Despite this mix of favourable and unfavourable perceptions, the overall effects of social media on society are widely seen as positive. Six in 10 Ghanaians (60%) who are aware of social media think its effects are "somewhat positive" or "very positive," while only one in five (22%) consider its effects "somewhat negative" or "very negative" (Figure 9).

Figure 7: Awareness of social media | Ghana | 2019



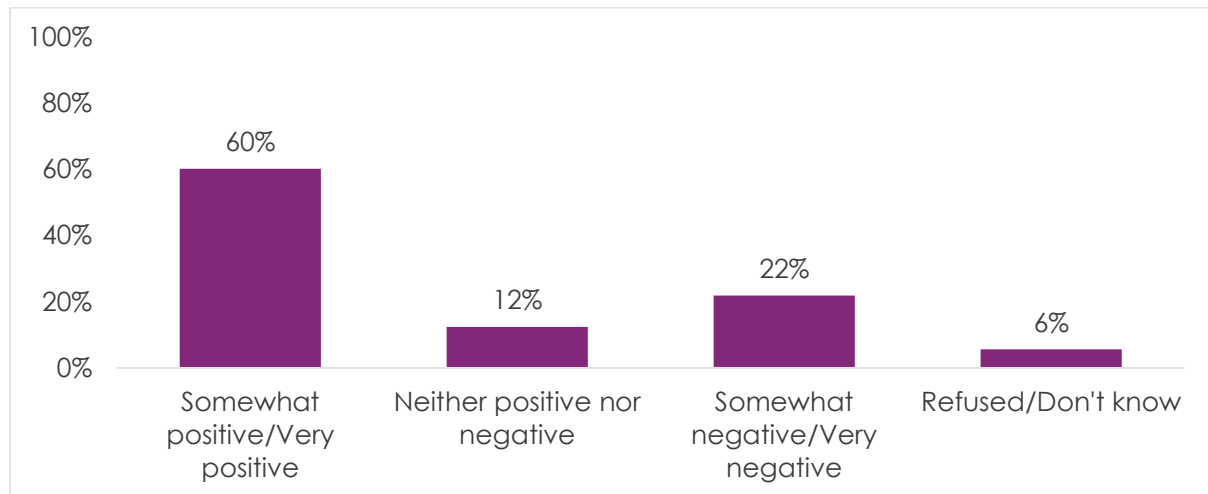
Respondents were asked: Have you heard about social media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp?

Figure 8: Effects of social media usage | Ghana | 2019



Respondents who have heard about social media were asked: Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media [has the following effects]. (Note: Responses exclude those who have not heard about social media.)

Figure 9: Overall effects of social media: Positive or negative? | Ghana | 2019

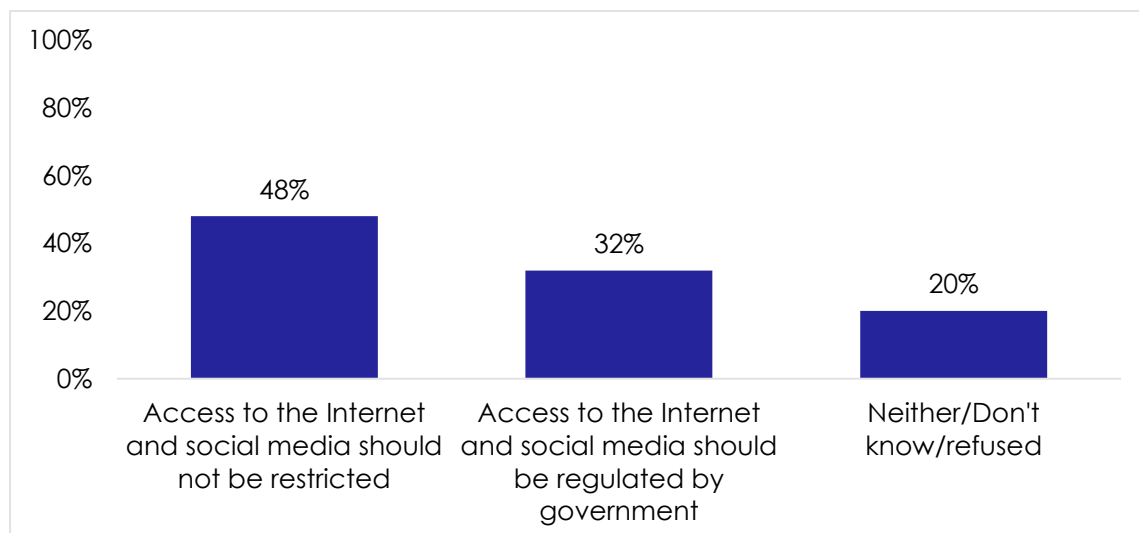


Respondents who have heard about social media were asked: Overall, do you think that the effects of social media on society are mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Note: Responses exclude those who have not heard about social media.)

Should government regulate social media access?

Before Ghana's 2016 general election, an attempt by the then-inspector general of police to shut down social media in the name of security drew strong opposition from media advocates and civil society organizations (Ad Vox, 2016; Myjoyonline, 2016). In 2019, when asked about government restrictions on social media access, almost half (48%) of Ghanaians say unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected, including 25% who feel "very strongly" about this issue. But a significant proportion (32%) of Ghanaians support restrictions on access to the Internet and social media (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Should Internet and social media access be regulated? | Ghana | 2019



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

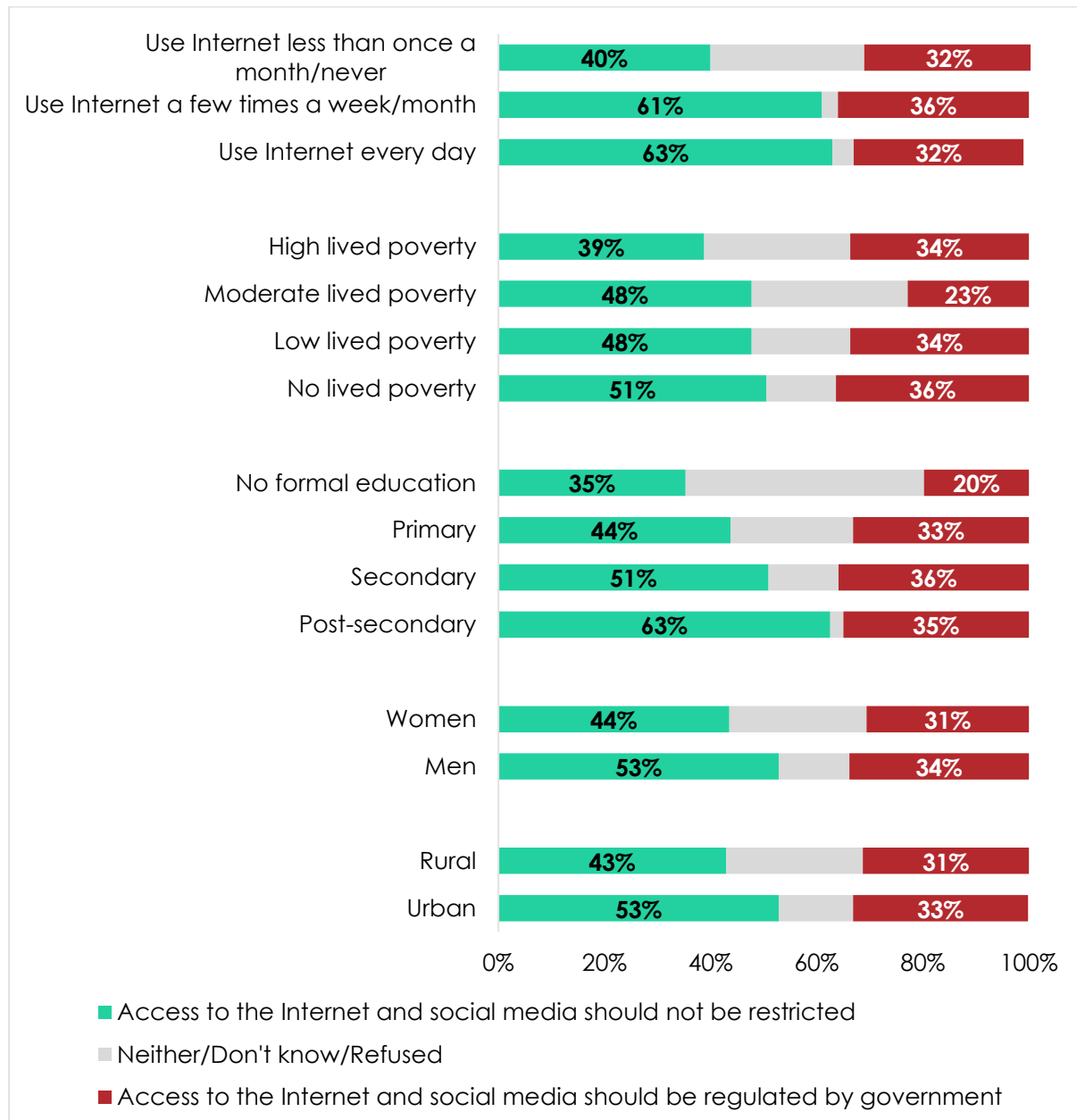
Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

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

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

As might be expected, support for unrestricted access is higher among Internet users (61%-63%) than among those who never or rarely use it (40%) (Figure 11). It is also about 10 percentage points higher among urbanites than rural residents (53% vs. 43%) and among men than women (53% vs. 44%). Wealthy citizens and the highly educated are more likely to oppose restrictions to access than the poor and uneducated. In fact, close to half (45%) of respondents with no formal education say they “don't know,” refused to answer, or agreed with neither of the statements.

Figure 11: Should Internet and social media access be regulated? | by socio-demographic group, Internet use | Ghana | 2019



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

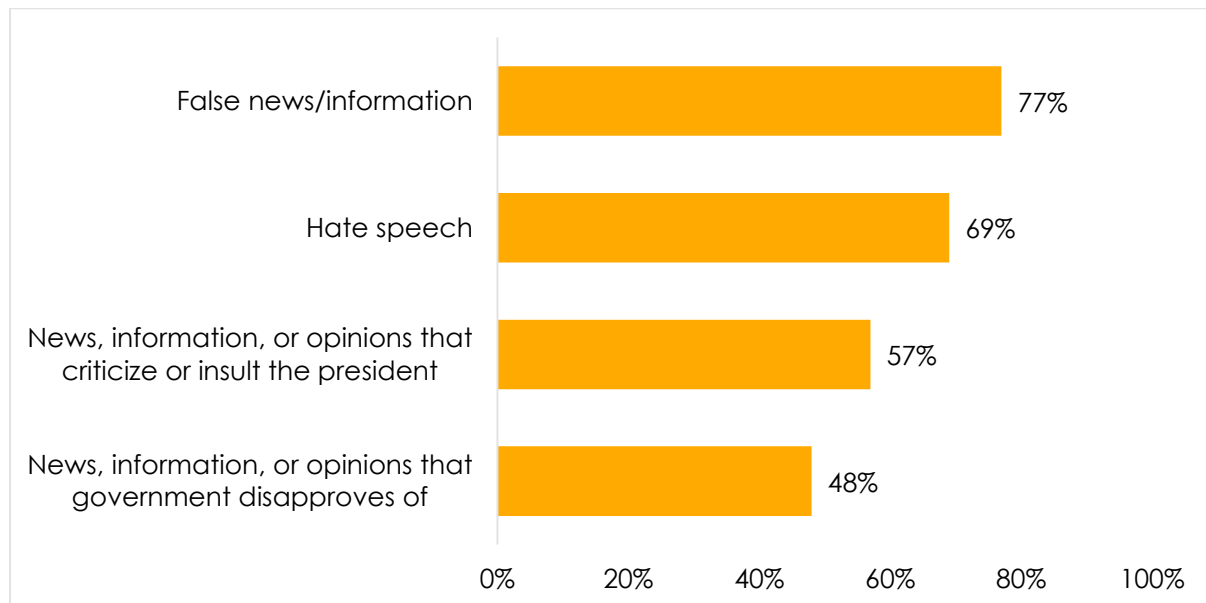
Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

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

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

Although a plurality of Ghanaians oppose restricting access to social media, most want the government to be able to stop the spread of certain types of information (Figure 12). Three-quarters (77%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government should be able to limit or prohibit the sharing of news or information that is false. In addition, majorities want the government to be able to block hate speech, i.e. information or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society (69%), as well as news and opinions that criticize or insult the president (57%). Close to half (48%) say the government should be able to limit the spread of information it disapproves of.

Figure 12: Support for government restrictions on information | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of the following. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Conclusion

While more and more Ghanaians are getting news from digital sources, they see both positive and negative effects of social media. More citizens favour unrestricted access to social media and the Internet than government regulation. But a majority want the government to be able to fight the spread of false information, hate speech, and other problematic content.

Empowering the government to regulate free speech by restricting access to digital media would violate an important tenet of democracy that Ghanaians have long fought for. Yet action is clearly desired. The government, media houses and watchdogs, and civil society can all participate in intensive public education on how to detect fake news and on the need to fact-check before sharing information. Since the spread of misinformation is not limited to social media, any intervention should address all forms and sources of false information, including government officials and politicians on the campaign trail.

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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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