



Crisis communication: Radio tops Zimbabweans' news sources – except for 'other people'

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 367 | Anyway Chingwete and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In a crisis, the ability to disseminate information rapidly and effectively can be a matter of life and death. During the COVID-19 pandemic, accurate, timely, and trusted information about the number of cases, ways to prevent infection, government curfew and lockdown orders, and reasons why they're important can help reduce transmission, dispel rumors, prevent panic, limit the use of dangerous quack "treatments," facilitate planning for a stay-at-home period, and improve compliance, ultimately reducing the impact of the virus.

What are the best ways of informing Zimbabweans about COVID-19 and other issues of critical importance? How do traditional media compare to new media platforms? What are the most trusted voices and the most effective channels?

Afrobarometer data from 2017 and 2018 show that radio remains the leading source of media news for Zimbabweans, although television dominates in urban areas. More citizens own mobile phones than radios or televisions, but most of those phones don't have access to the Internet, and use of digital media is still limited.

Importantly, there's one source of news that's accessed more frequently than any media channel: other people. During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this highlights the importance of responsible information-sharing, backed whenever possible by fact-checking, to avoid spreading rumors and misinformation, whether on social media or in everyday conversation. The data also show that religious leaders are the most trusted institution in the country, making them a potentially valuable conduit for COVID-19 information on any channel.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 (2019/2020) surveys 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 most recent full survey in Zimbabwe was conducted in January-February 2017 by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI). The sample of 1,200 adult Zimbabweans yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

More recently, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's core partner for Southern Africa, commissioned two pre-election surveys in April-May and June-July 2018. Also led by MPOI, each survey interviewed 2,400 adult citizens, yielding country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

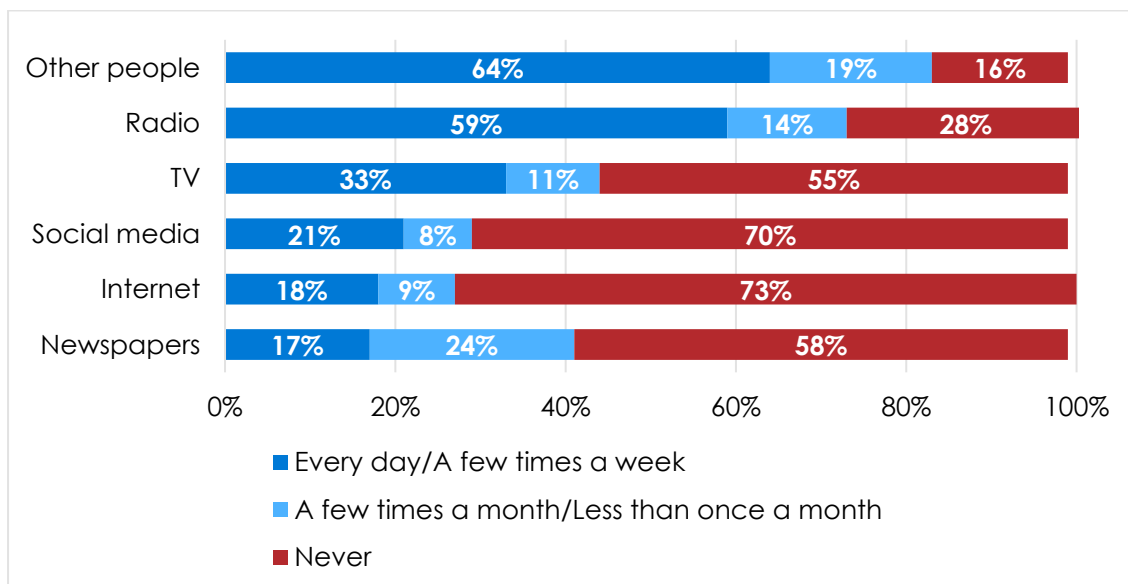
Key findings

- Radio remains the leading source of media news for adult Zimbabweans. Six out of 10 citizens (59%) said they get news regularly (“every day” or “a few times a week”) via the radio, compared to 33% for television and 17% for newspapers. About one in five citizens get news regularly from social media (21%) and the Internet (18%).
 - But “other people” surpass all media channels as a regular source of news, cited by almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents.
- News habits have changed little in Zimbabwe in recent years. Only social media shows significant recent growth as a regular news source.
- Urban and rural residents differ sharply in their news habits. For example, while television beats out radio in cities (69% vs. 63%), only 12% of rural inhabitants regularly get TV news.
- Most Zimbabweans (95%) own a mobile phone or live in a household where someone else owns one. But only 43% of those phones have access to the Internet.
- About three-fourths (73%) of citizens own or have access to radios, compared to 48% for televisions and 23% for computers. Poor citizens are less likely to own communications devices and to access the Internet than their better-off counterparts.
- Religious leaders are the most trusted institution in Zimbabwe, making them a potentially valuable conduit for information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sources of news

The most commonly used news media channel in Zimbabwe is radio: About six in 10 citizens (59%) say they listen to the radio news regularly (“every day” or “a few times a week”). Only one-third (33%) regularly watch the news on television, while about one in five say they get news regularly from social media (21%), the Internet (18%), and newspapers (17%) (Figure 1). Importantly, majorities say they “never” get news from any media channel other than radio.

Figure 1: Information sources | Zimbabwe | May 2018

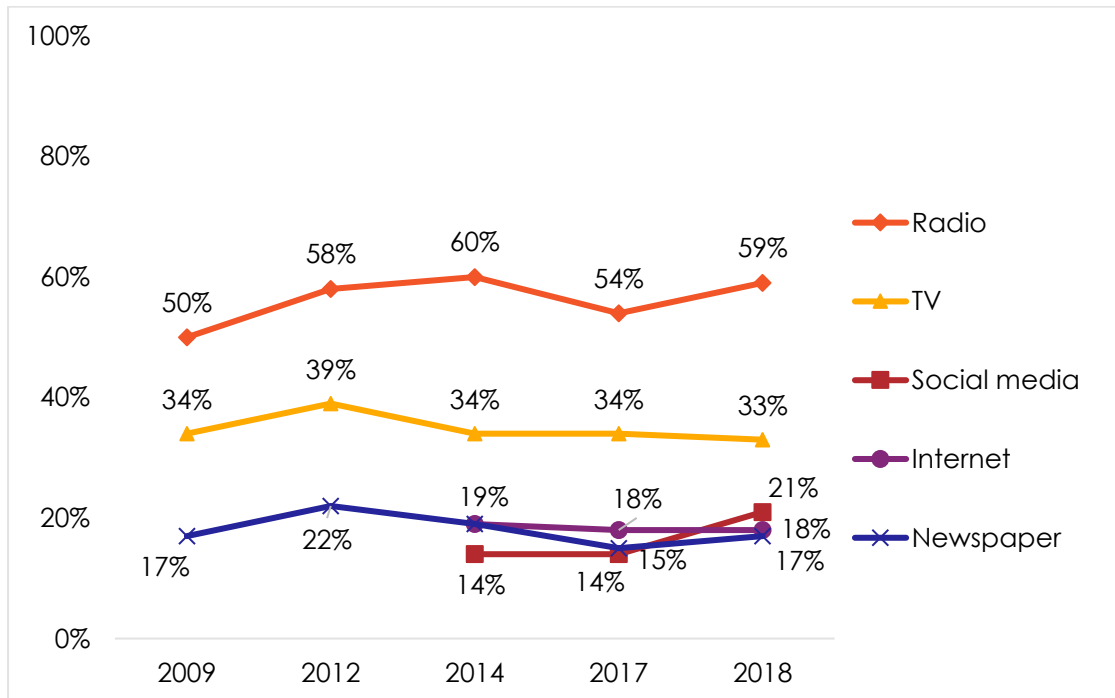


Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources?

But we also note that there's a source of news that surpasses all news media channels: other people. Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents say they get news "every day" or "a few times a week" from people they talk to.

Zimbabweans' news habits appear to change little over time. Regular use of radio, TV, newspaper, and even the Internet have remained fairly stable in recent years (Figure 2). Only use of social media as a news source shows significant growth, from 14% in 2014 and 2017 to 21% in 2018.

Figure 2: Trends in news consumption | Zimbabwe | 2009-2018



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

Patterns are evident in media use by different demographic groups. In general, men, urban residents, younger citizens, and the better-educated obtain news from all sources more than

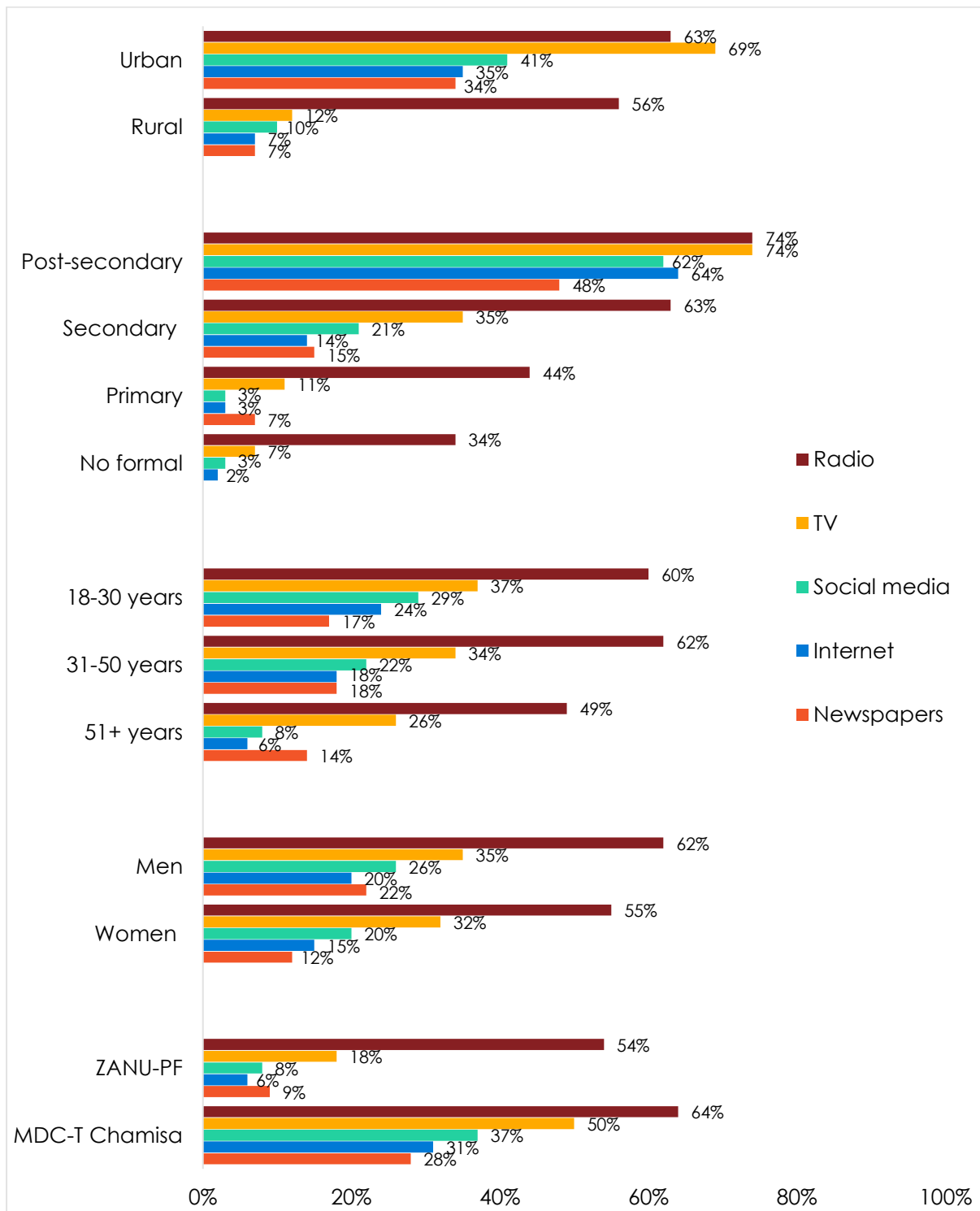
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women, rural dwellers, older people, and the less educated (Figure 3). The gaps are generally narrower with respect to radio. The urban-rural divide is stark for television, newspapers, the Internet, and social media. For example, television is the most common source of news for urban residents (69%, surpassing 63% who use the radio), but only 12% of rural dwellers regularly tune in to TV news. The gaps between men and women

are generally modest. A partisan divide is also evident, with more MDC-T supporters than ZANU-PF adherents reporting that they consume news on a regular basis from all five media sources.¹

¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 3: News media consumption | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe
 | May 2018

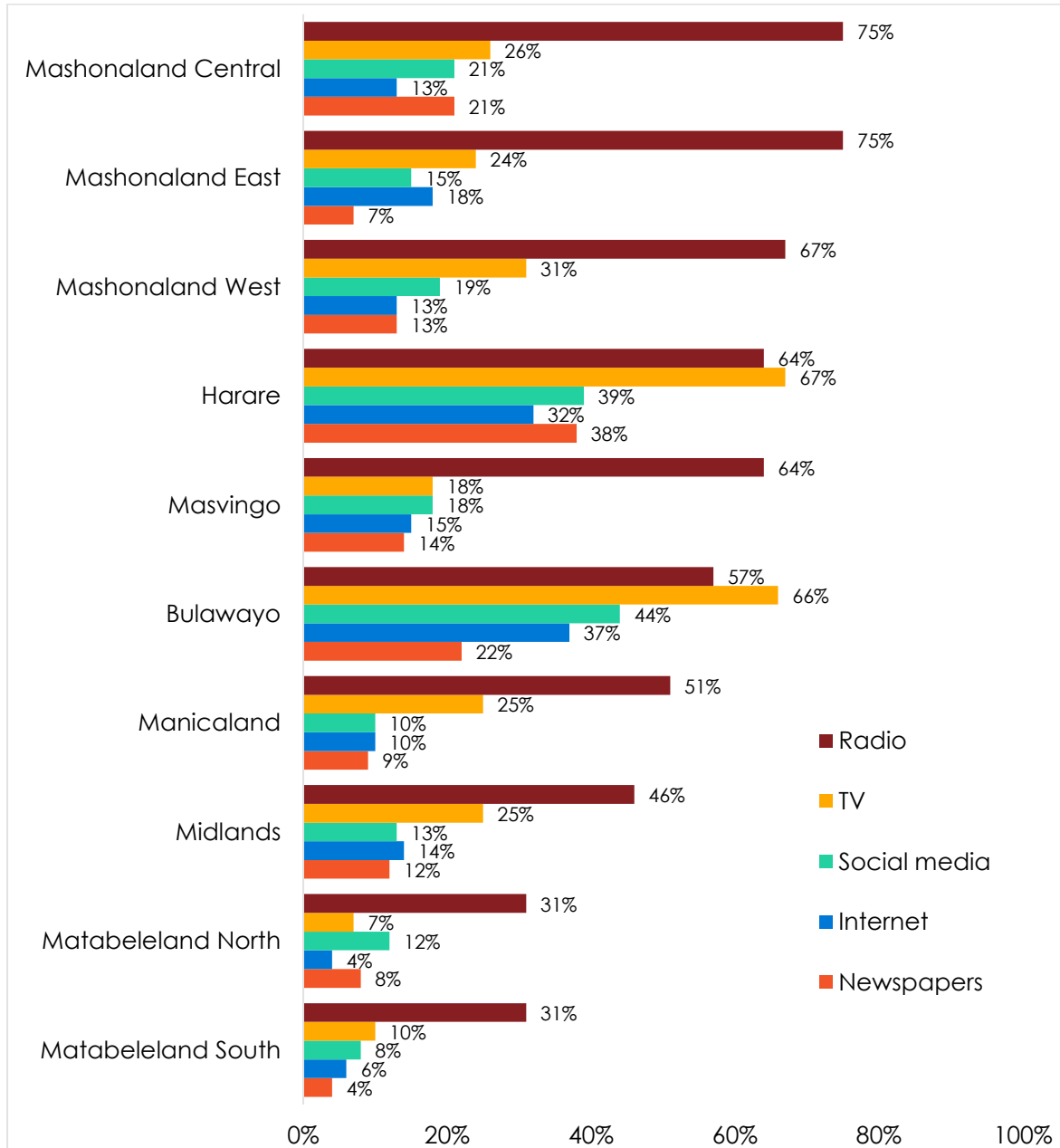


Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “a few times a week” or “every day”)

Geographically, regular consumption of news is generally most common in the two metropolitan provinces of Harare and Bulawayo. But radio is most widely used as a regular news source in Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland East, where three-fourths (75%) say

they get news from the radio at least a few times a week (Figure 4). Residents of Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South – largely rural provinces with weak TV and digital infrastructure – are least likely to regularly obtain news from the radio (31% each) as well as most other channels.

Figure 4: News media consumption | by province | Zimbabwe | May 2018



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

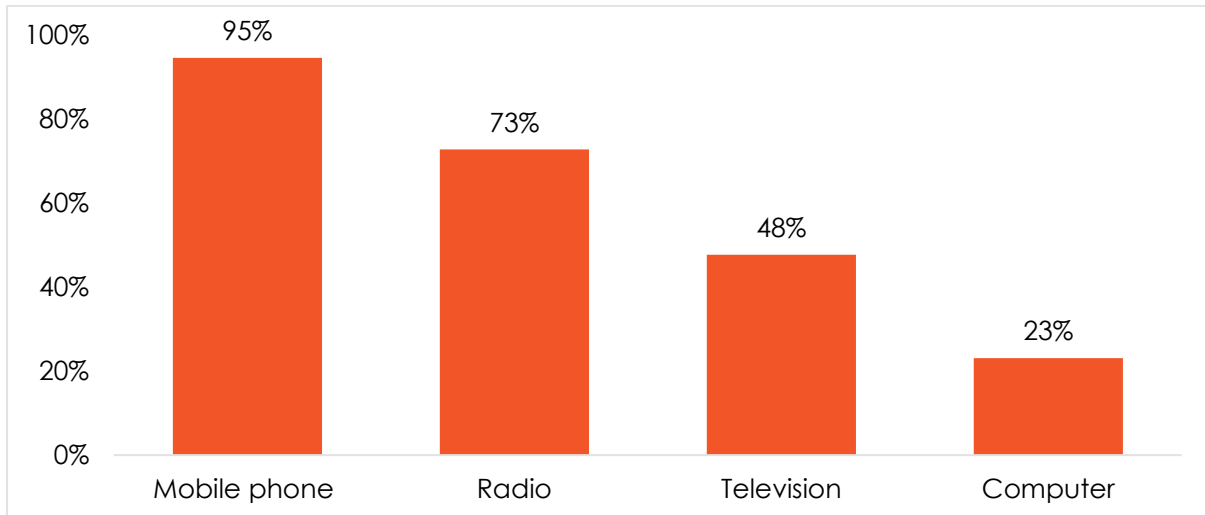
Ownership of communications devices

One obvious explanation for differences in media consumption is ownership of devices needed to access the news. While most Zimbabweans said in May 2018 that they either personally own a mobile phone (89%) or live in a household where someone else owns one

(6%), the same is true for 73% with regard to a radio, 48% for a television, and 23% for a computer (Figure 5).

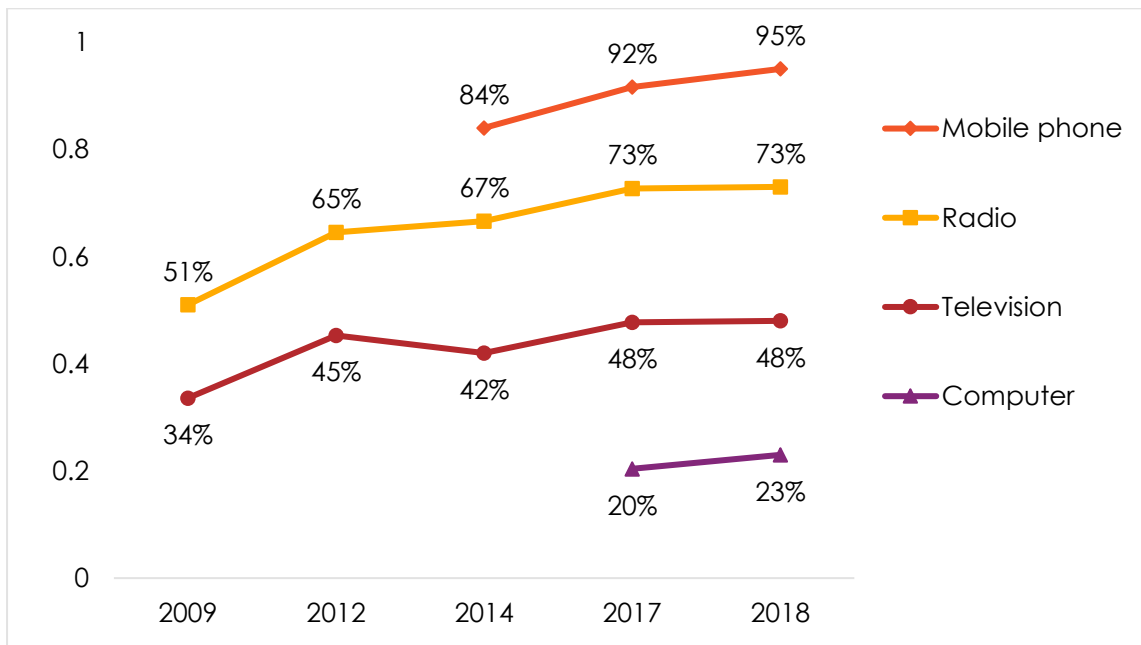
Ownership of these devices shows a steady rise over the past decade (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Ownership of communications devices | Zimbabwe | May 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own? [If no:] Does anyone else in your household own one? (% who say they personally own or live in a household where someone else owns)

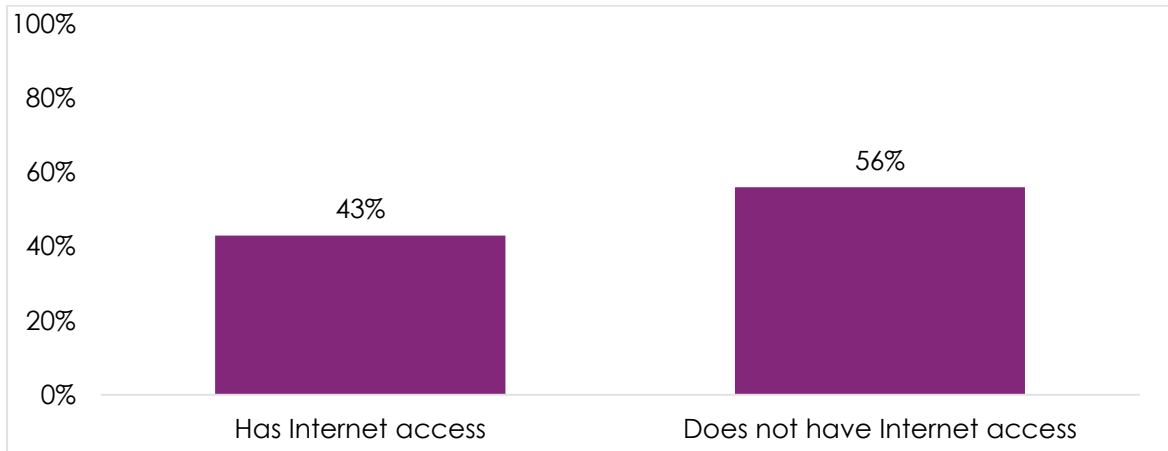
Figure 6: Ownership of communications devices | Zimbabwe | 2009-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own? [If no:] Does anyone else in your household own one? (% who say they personally own or live in a household where someone else owns)

While mobile-phone ownership is almost universal in Zimbabwe, in 2017 fewer than half (43%) of those who personally owned mobile phones said their devices could access the Internet (Figure 7).

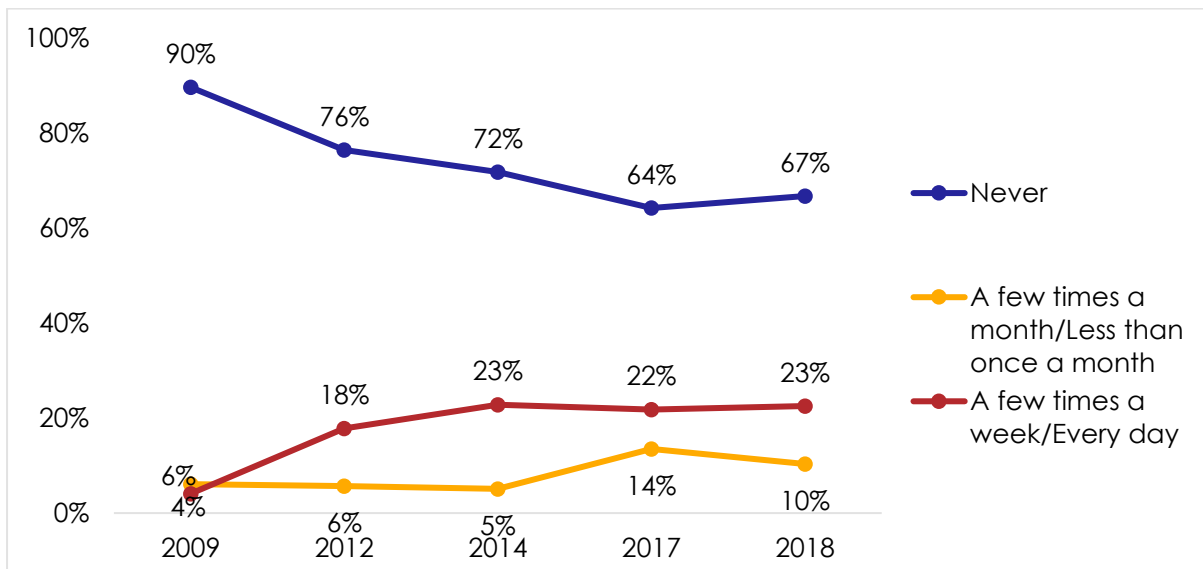
Figure 7: Does phone have access to the Internet? | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents who say they personally own a mobile phone were asked: Does your phone have access to the Internet? (Respondents who say they don't own a mobile phone are excluded.)

Further, among all respondents in 2018, not quite one in four (23%) said they use the Internet "a few times a week" or "every day," a proportion that has remained constant since 2014 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Internet usage | Zimbabwe | 2009-2018



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

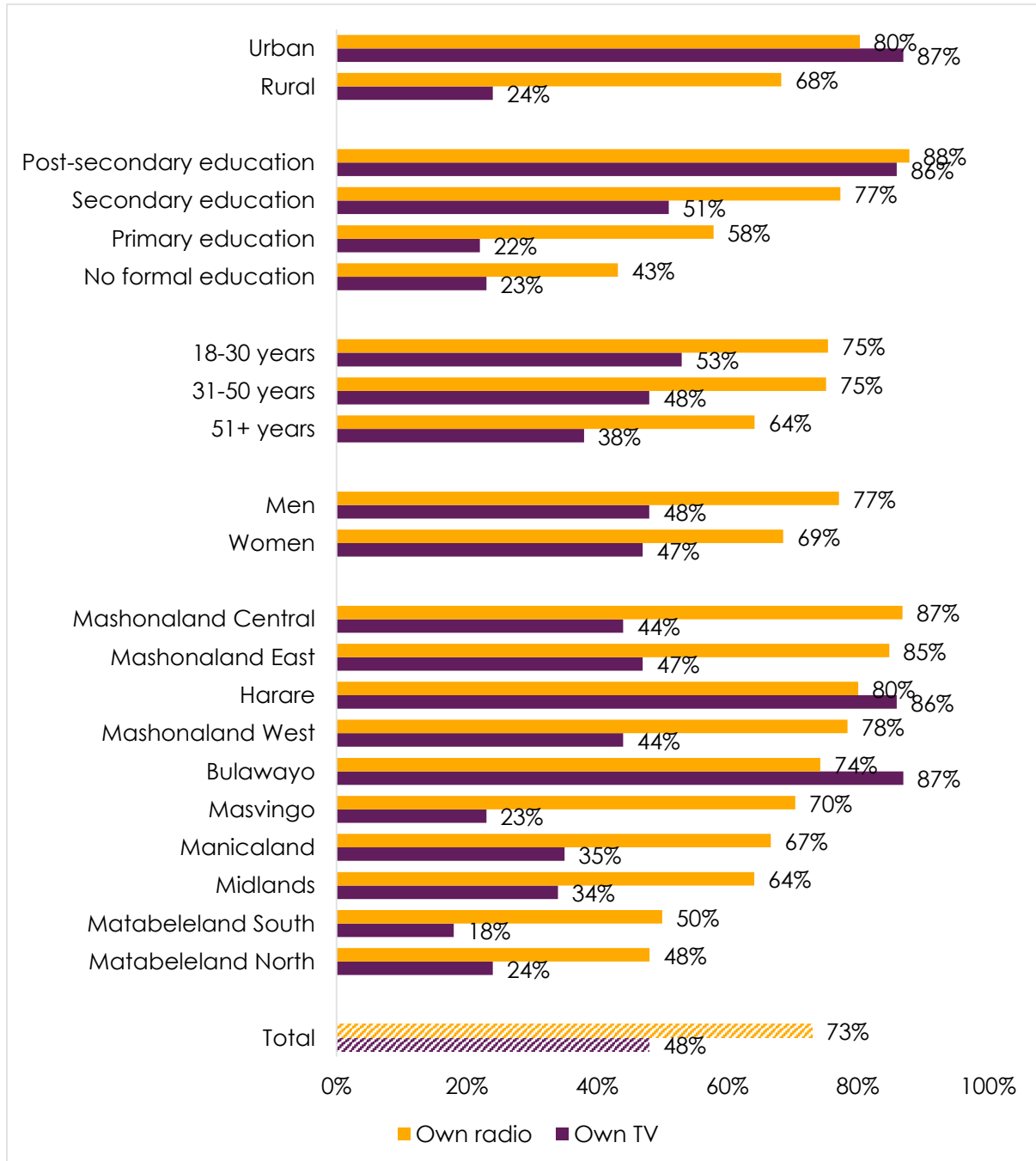
As might be expected, ownership patterns for communications devices (Figure 9) generally mirror the usage patterns shown above (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Both radio and television ownership are higher among men, urban residents, and younger and more-educated citizens than among women, rural residents, and older and less-educated respondents. Interestingly, among urban residents (including those living in Bulawayo and Harare), more people have TVs (or have access to TVs in their households) than radios (87% vs. 80%).

By contrast, TV ownership is relatively rare in rural areas: Only one in four rural households (24%) have televisions, compared to two-thirds (68%) who have radios.

Men are more likely than women to have radios, but there is no gender gap in access to a television set.

Provinces vary widely in radio ownership, from more than eight out of 10 in Mashonaland Central (87%) and Mashonaland East (85%) to half or fewer in Matabeleland South (50%) and Matabeleland North (48%). Fewer than half of households have a television in all provinces except Bulawayo (87%) and Harare (86%).

Figure 9: Radio and TV ownership | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe
 | May 2018



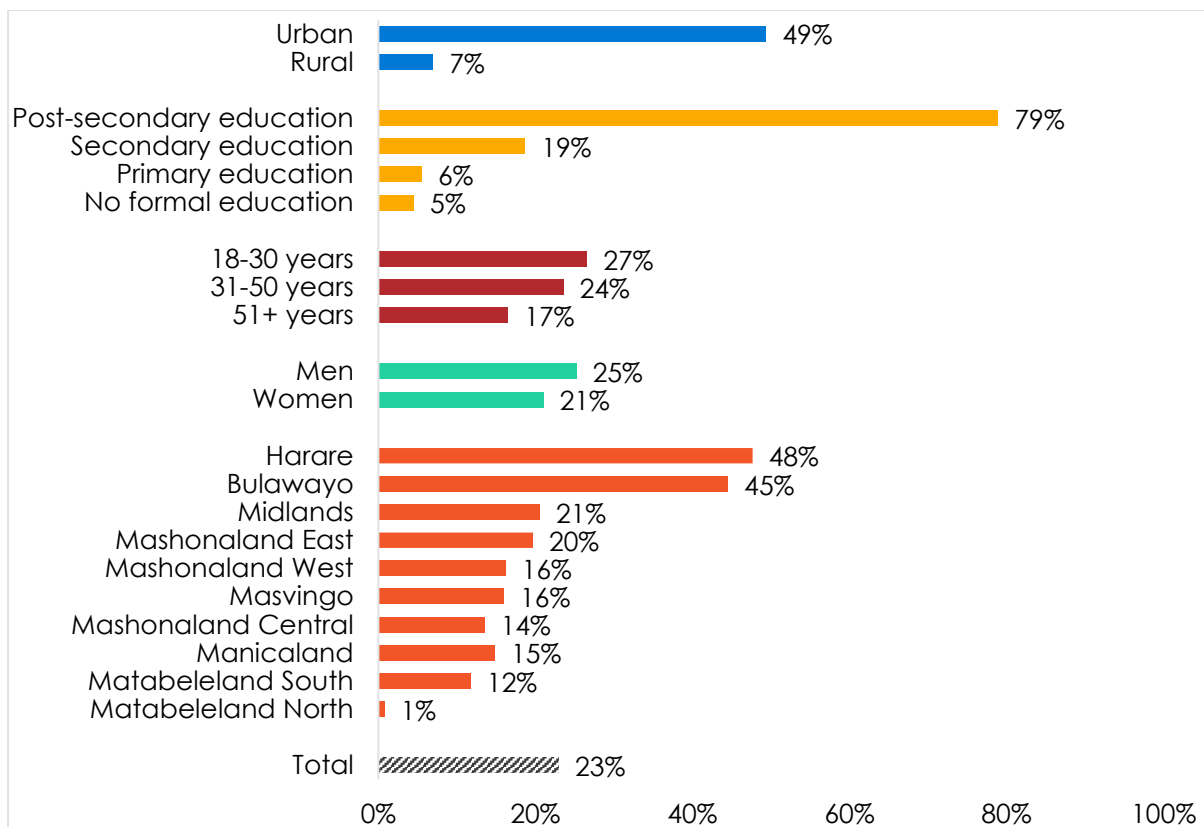
Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own? [If no:] Does anyone else in your household own one? (% who say they personally own or live in a household where someone else owns)

Similarly, ownership of computers varies widely by socio-demographic group. Urban households are seven times as likely to have a computer as rural households (49% vs. 7%), and an even larger gap separates respondents with post-secondary education (79%) from those with only primary or no formal schooling (5%-6%) (Figure 10).

Age groups and genders show more modest differences, favouring younger and male citizens.

In the country's most developed provinces, almost half of households own a computer (48% in Harare and 45% in Bulawayo), compared to fewer than one in five households in most of the other provinces, including just 1% in Matabeleland North.

Figure 10: Computer ownership | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | May 2018



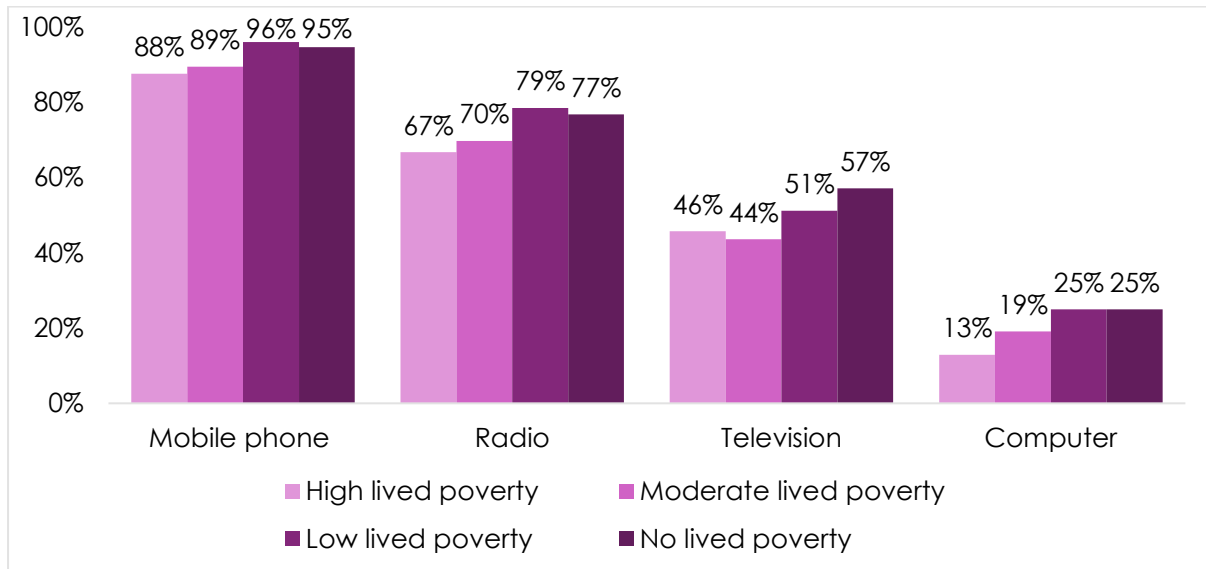
Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own? [If no]: Does anyone else in your household own one: A computer? (% who say they personally own or live in a household where someone else owns)

Lived poverty and access to news sources

Unsurprisingly, poor respondents are less likely to own communications devices than their better-off counterparts, although differences may be more modest than one might expect (Figure 11). Afrobarometer measures "lived poverty" based on how often, during the previous 12 months, respondents or their family members have gone without five basic life necessities (enough food, enough clean water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income). In general, about a 10-percentage-point gap separates the poorest households (those with "high lived poverty") from the best-off ("no lived poverty") when it comes to ownership of mobile phones, radios, and televisions. With regard to computers, the best-off households are about twice as likely to enjoy this resource as the poorest (25% vs. 13%).

While these numbers confirm that poor citizens have less access to communications devices than their better-off counterparts, the relatively modest differences also suggest that poor households – which report frequently going without enough food, medical care, and clean water – may prioritize, to the extent possible, the ownership of communications devices.

Figure 11: Ownership of communications devices | by level of lived poverty
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



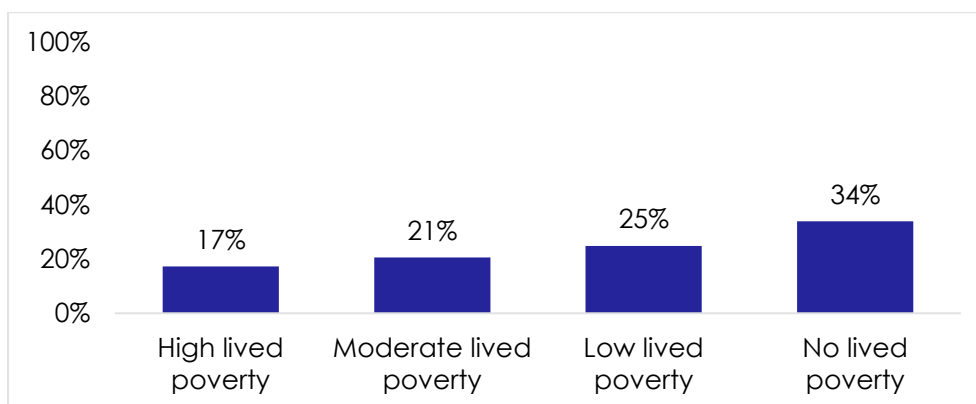
Respondents were asked:

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?

Which of these things do you personally own? [If no]: Does anyone else in your household own one? (% who say they personally own or live in a household where someone else owns)

Similarly, Zimbabweans who experienced high lived poverty are only about half as likely as the best-off respondents to use the Internet “every day” or “a few times a week” (17% vs. 34%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Regular Internet usage | by level of lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked:

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?

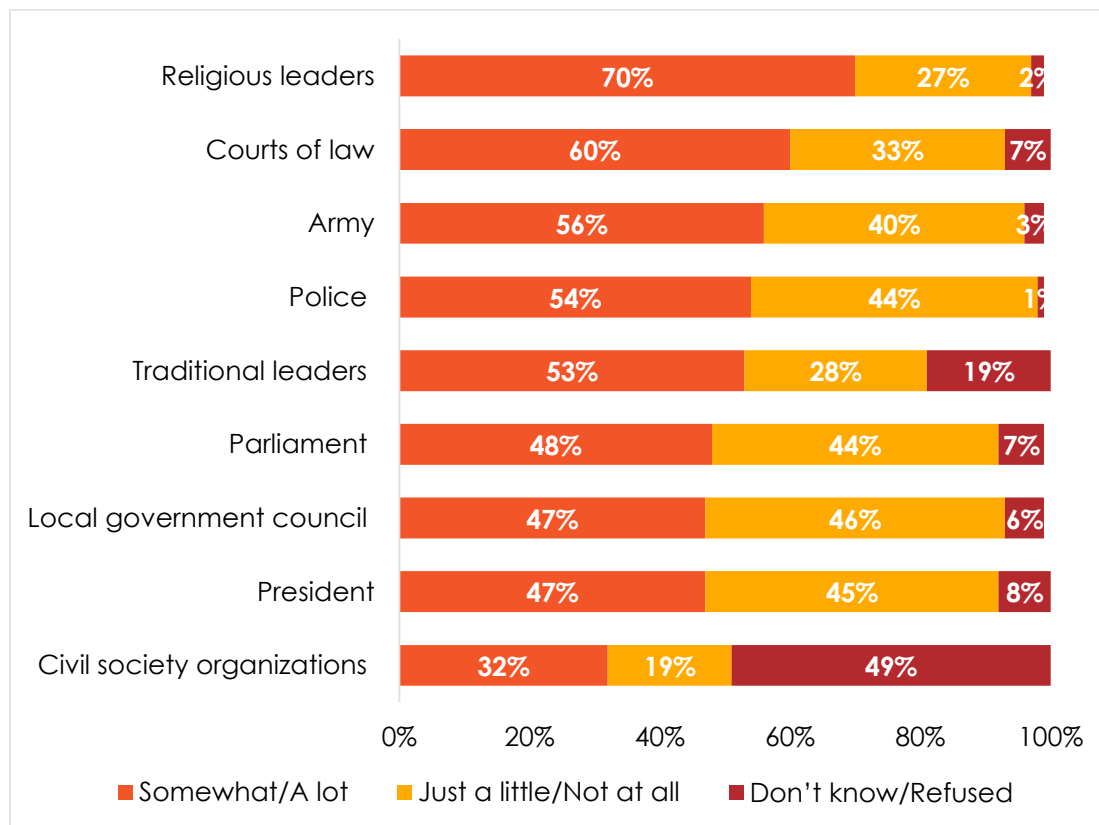
How often do you use the Internet? (% who say “a few times a week” or “every day”)

Trusted voices

While using the appropriate media channel is important for effective communication, the identity of the person delivering the information can matter, too. The July 2018 survey shows that religious leaders are the most trusted institution in Zimbabwe: Seven out of 10 respondents (70%) said they trust them “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 13). Majorities also trust courts of law (60%), the army (56%), the police (54%), and traditional leaders (53%). Fewer than half of respondents said they trust their elected officials or civil society organizations (although half (49%) said they didn’t know enough about civil society organizations to assess their trustworthiness).

These findings suggest that, whatever the media channel, religious leaders might be a good conduit through which information about COVID-19 and other crises can be disseminated in Zimbabwe.

Figure 13: Trust in leaders and institutions | Zimbabwe | July 2018

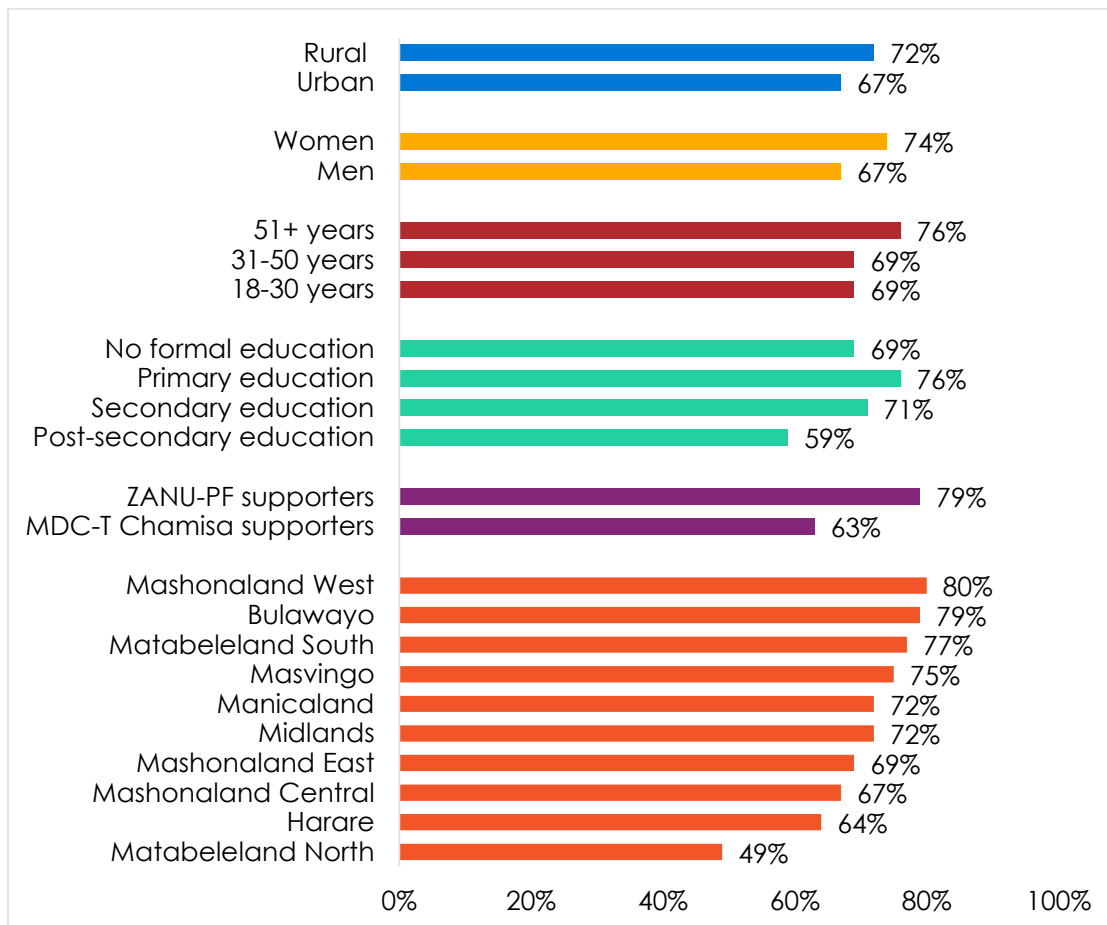


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Religious leaders command majority trust across most key socio-demographic groups (Figure 14). Popular trust was particularly strong among rural residents (72%), women (74%), older citizens (76%), and ZANU-PF supporters (79%, vs. 63% of MDC-T Chamisa supporters). Respondents with post-secondary educational qualifications were less likely to express trust in religious leaders (59%) than their less-educated counterparts.

Geographically, trust in religious leaders was highest in Mashonaland West (80%) and dropped to less than half of respondents only in Matabeleland North (49%).

Figure 14: Trust in religious leaders | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe
 | July 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Conclusion

Radio is still king when it comes to disseminating information in Zimbabwe during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. But the Ministry of Health and other officials can also use data on citizens' news habits and device ownership to target certain groups, such as urban residents (who rely more heavily on television) or particular provinces.

Aside from the best media channels to use, survey findings suggest that religious leaders enjoy high levels of popular trust, making them a potentially valuable resource for disseminating information during a crisis. And even if coronavirus-related restrictions on movement reduce social interaction, "other people" are certain to continue to be a critical source of news, making doing one's part to limit the spread of misinformation a particular responsibility during a health pandemic.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs 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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