

Ugandans see social media as beneficial and want unrestricted access, but are wary of its use to spread fake news

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 480 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny

Summary

In Uganda, restrictions on Internet and social media use are becoming common. Since 1 July 2021, Internet users have begun paying a 12% tax on Internet data, in addition to an 18% valued added tax (Mwesigwa, 2021). The Internet tax replaces the over-the-top tax, popularly known as the “social media tax,” which the government imposed in 2018 in a bid to restrict access to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other platforms.

Although the government presents the new tax as an opportunity to raise more revenue, critics see it as an attack on freedom of speech and an ill-considered move during a pandemic when many services can only be accessed online (Economic Times, 2021).

Taxes are not the government's only way of restricting Internet usage. On the eve of Uganda's 2021 presidential election, the government imposed an Internet blackout (DW, 2021; Netblocks, 2021). A similar Internet blackout was imposed on the day of the 2016 presidential election, a move that President Yoweri Museveni defended as a “security measure to avert lies” (BBC, 2016; CNN, 2016).

Activists, opposition leaders, and several human-rights groups describe such government crackdowns on Internet and social media use as an attempt to restrict freedom of expression and suppress dissent (Access Now, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021; Anguyo, 2021).

These recurring Internet and social media shutdowns also hurt businesses in the formal and informal sector, education, health care, the media, civil society groups, and many others increasingly dependent on digital platforms (Daily Monitor, 2021a). The five-day shutdown during the 2021 election, for instance, is estimated to have cost the country about USD 9 billion (Bhalla & McCool, 2021).

Another threat to Uganda's digital landscape comes from within: the proliferation of fake news. Despite government vows to prosecute anyone who spreads falsehoods on social media, false information continues to circulate on digital platforms. Misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines is widespread, and social media users have even announced – falsely – Museveni's death (Xinhuanet, 2020; East African, 2021).

Findings from the Round 8 Afrobarometer survey show that a majority of Ugandans want unrestricted access to the Internet and social media, and see the overall effect of social media usage as more positive than negative. However, most are concerned about the use of social media to spread falsehoods.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that has provided reliable data on experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

Eight rounds of surveys in up to 39 African countries have been conducted since 1999. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

With financial support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 22 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 in 300 enumeration areas across 110 districts. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 11th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda.

Key findings

- Daily news consumption via social media (11%) and the Internet (9%) has doubled in Uganda since 2015, though these platforms still lag far behind television (27%) and radio (54%) as daily news sources.
- Six in 10 Ugandans (60%) say they are aware of social media.
 - Awareness is less widespread among women, rural residents, and older and less educated citizens.
- Among Ugandans who have heard of social media, large majorities say it makes people more aware of current happenings (89%) and helps people impact political processes (74%).
 - On the other hand, majorities also say it makes people more likely to believe false news (70%) and more intolerant of others with different political opinions (58%).
- Overall, 58% of citizens who are aware of social media rate its effects on society as positive, while only 13% see them as negative.
- A majority (56%) of Ugandans “agree” or “strongly agree” that access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be unrestricted. A quarter (26%), however, say the government should be able to regulate access.

How do Ugandans get their news?

Radio is the dominant source of news for Ugandans. More than half of citizens (54%) say they listen to radio news every day, and three in 10 (31%) use radio “a few times a month” or “a few times a week” (Figure 1).

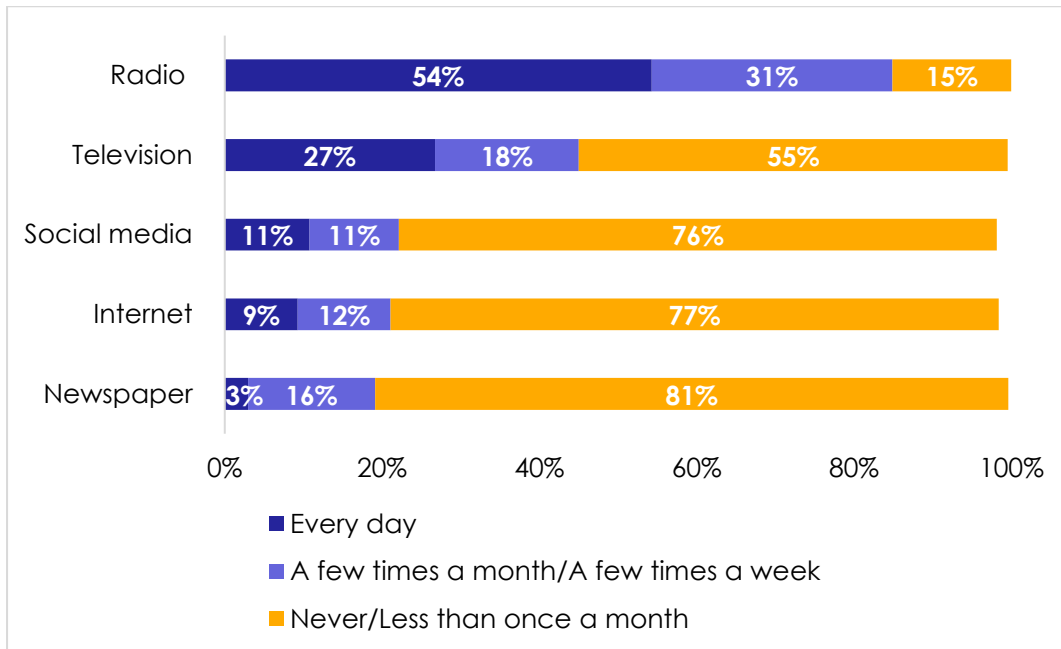
About a quarter (27%) say they consume television news daily, and one in six (18%) get their news from television “a few times a month” or “a few times a week.”

One in 10 get their news from social media (11%) and the Internet (9%) daily. Among 18 African countries surveyed between late 2019 and mid-2020, Uganda had among the lowest rates of Internet and social media news consumption (see Conroy-Krutz & Koné, 2020).

Newspapers are the least popular source of news in Uganda; fewer than one in 20 citizens (3%) say they read newspapers every day, and eight in 10 (81%) rarely or never read them.

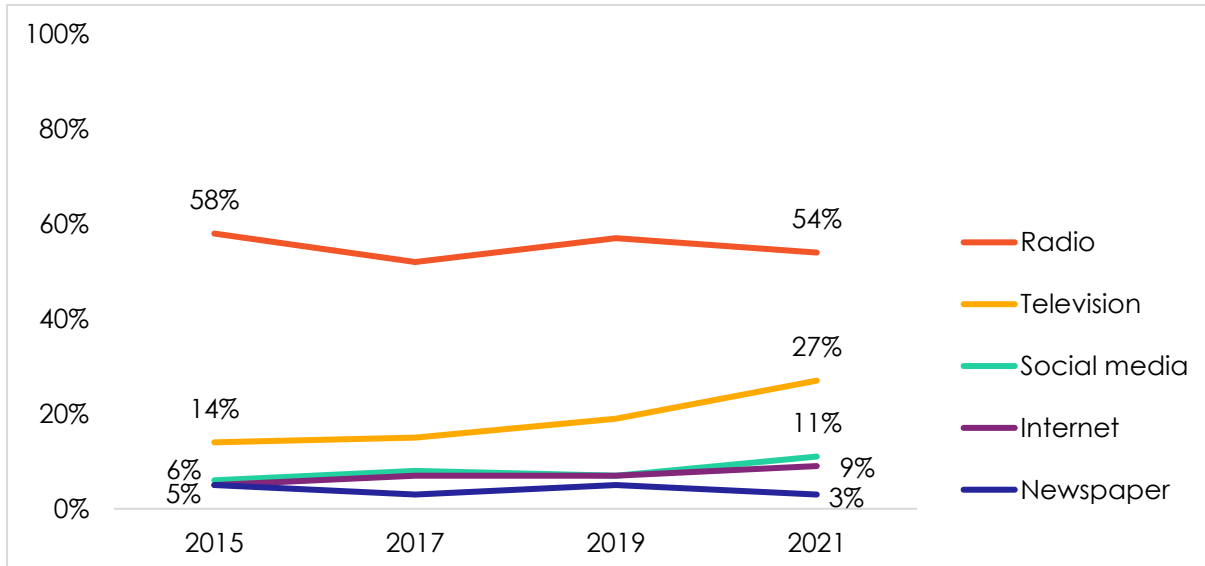
While radio maintains a 2-to-1 lead over television as a daily news source, it has experienced a marginal decline since 2015 (from 58% to 54%) (Figure 2). Meanwhile, daily news consumption has roughly doubled for television (from 14% to 27%), social media (from 6% to 11%), and the Internet (from 5% to 9%).

Figure 1: News media consumption | Uganda | 2021



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

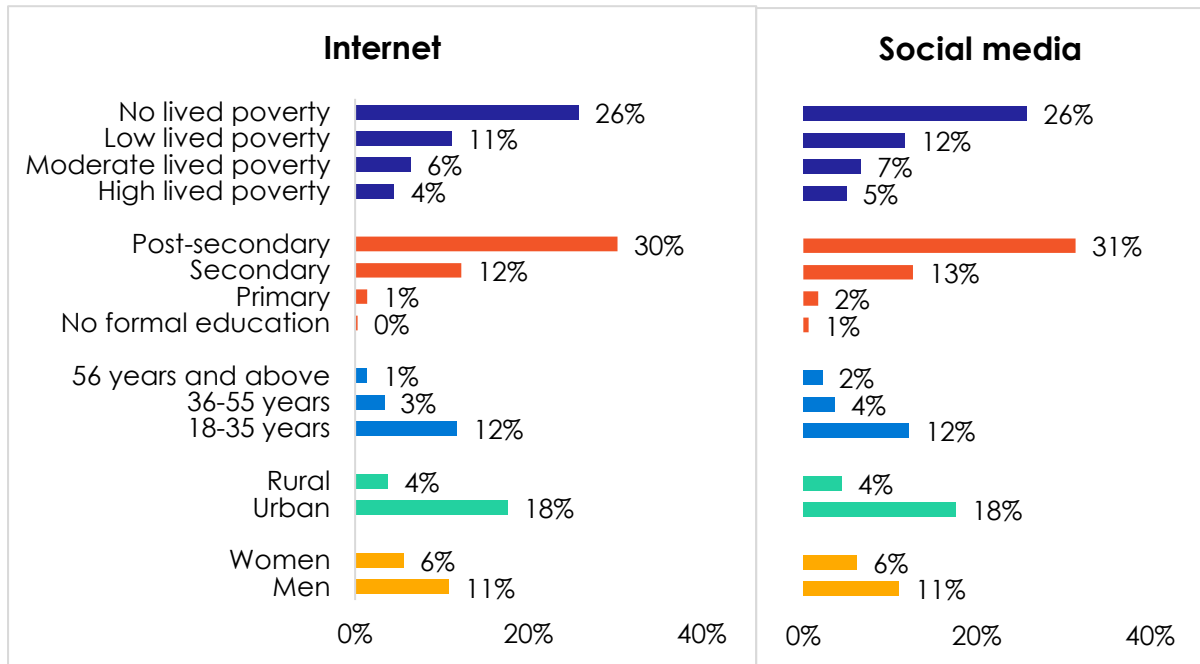
Figure 2: Daily news media consumption | Uganda | 2015-2021



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

Economically well-off citizens (those experiencing no lived poverty) are about five times as likely as the poor (those with high lived poverty) to consume news daily on the Internet (26% vs. 4%) and social media (26% vs. 5%) (Figure 3). Internet and social media news consumption also increases with citizens' level of education – a ratio of about 30-to-1 between those with post-secondary qualifications and those with no formal schooling. Young adults, urban residents, and men are also more likely to consume Internet and social media news than older citizens, rural residents, and women.

Figure 3: Daily media consumption | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2021



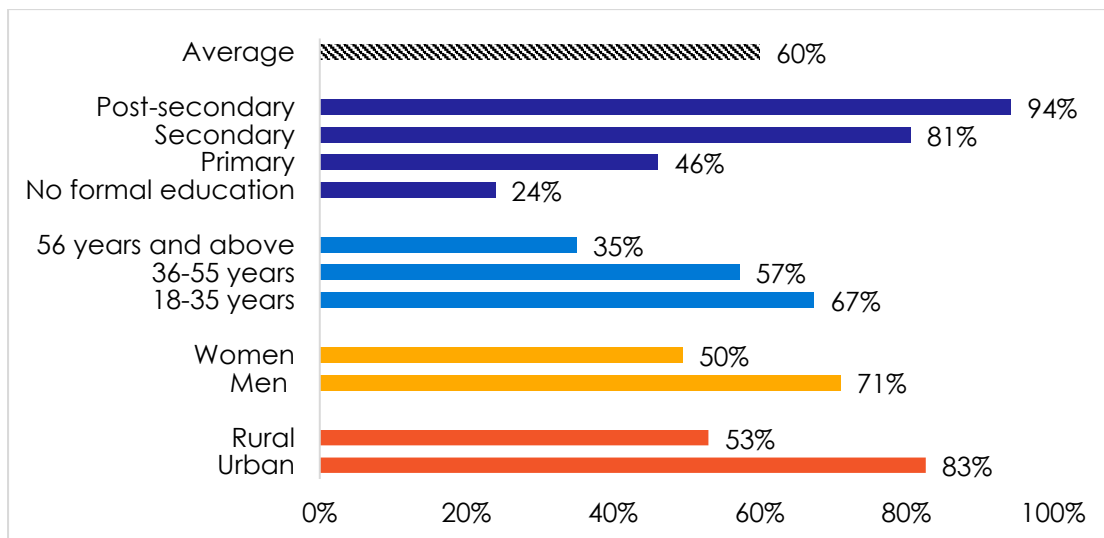
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources? (% “every day”)

Awareness of social media

Six in 10 Ugandans (60%) say they have heard of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Figure 4). Ugandans with post-secondary education are almost four times as likely as those with no formal schooling to have heard of social media (94% vs. 24%).

Young adults (67%) are almost twice as likely as older citizens (35%) to be aware of social media. Awareness is also higher among urban residents (83%) and men (71%) than among rural residents (53%) and women (50%).

Figure 4: Heard of social media | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp? (% “yes”)

Perils and promises of social media

In Uganda, social media has become increasingly important in promoting social connections, business advertising and marketing, electoral campaigns, citizen journalism, and civic engagement, as well as in keeping the general public informed about current events in the country and around the world.

At the same time, there are serious concerns about the use of social media in promoting misinformation, trolling, cyber-bullying, and invading personal privacy (East African, 2021; Daily Monitor, 2021b).

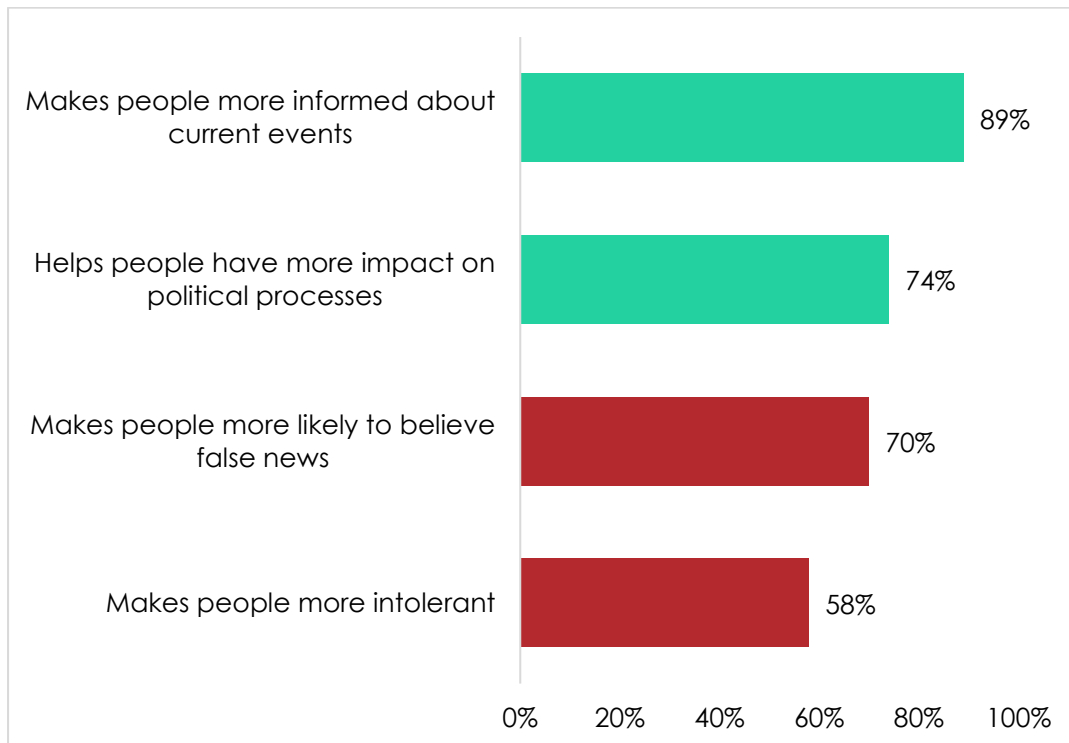
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Afrobarometer findings show that Ugandans are well aware of both the advantages and dangers of social media. Among those who have heard of social media, large majorities say it makes people more aware of current events (89%) and helps people impact political processes (74%) (Figure 5). On the other hand, majorities also believe it makes people more likely to believe false news

(70%) and more intolerant of others with different political opinions (58%).

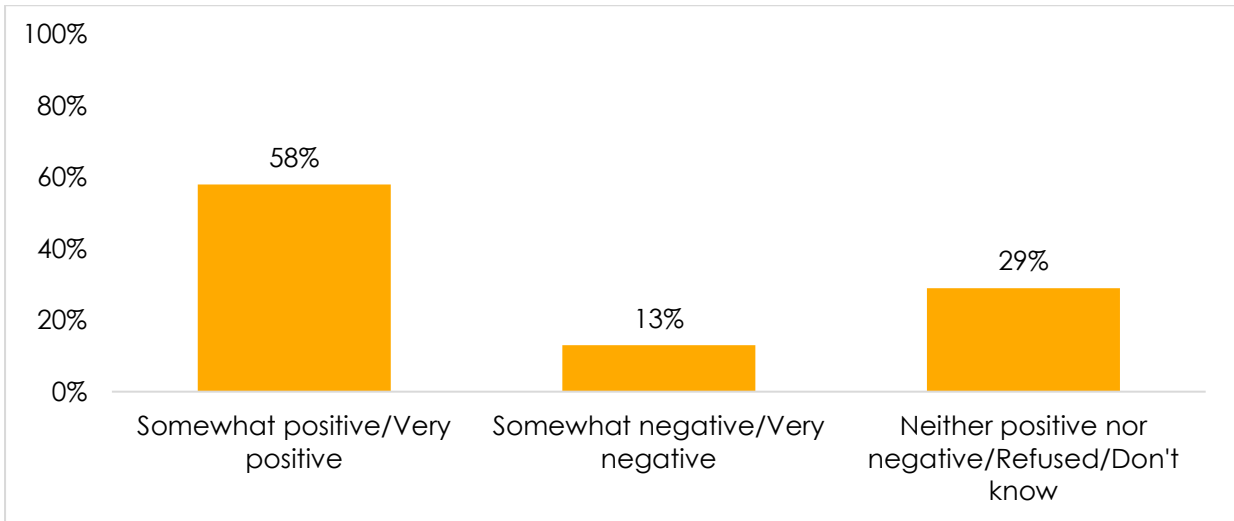
Overall, Ugandans see the effects of social media as more positive than negative. Almost six in 10 (58%) who are aware of social media assess its effects on society favourably, while only 13% see them as negative (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Effects of social media usage | Uganda | 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]. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”) (Note: Responses exclude those who have not heard about social media.)

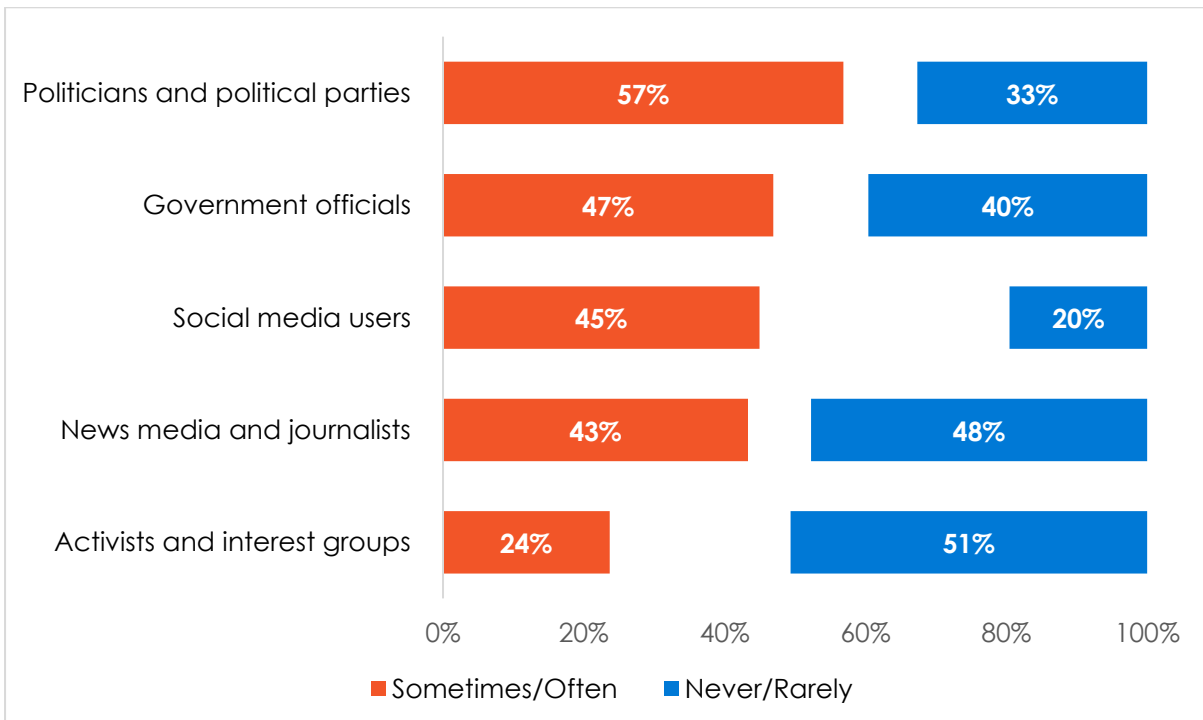
Figure 6: Overall effects of social media: Positive or negative? | Uganda | 2019



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.)

As for the proliferation of fake news, Ugandans are most likely to blame politicians and political parties (57%), followed by government officials (47%), "social media users" in general (45%), and journalists (43%) (Figure 7). Only a quarter (24%) see activists and interest groups as knowingly spreading false information.

Figure 7: Who spreads false information? | Uganda | 2019

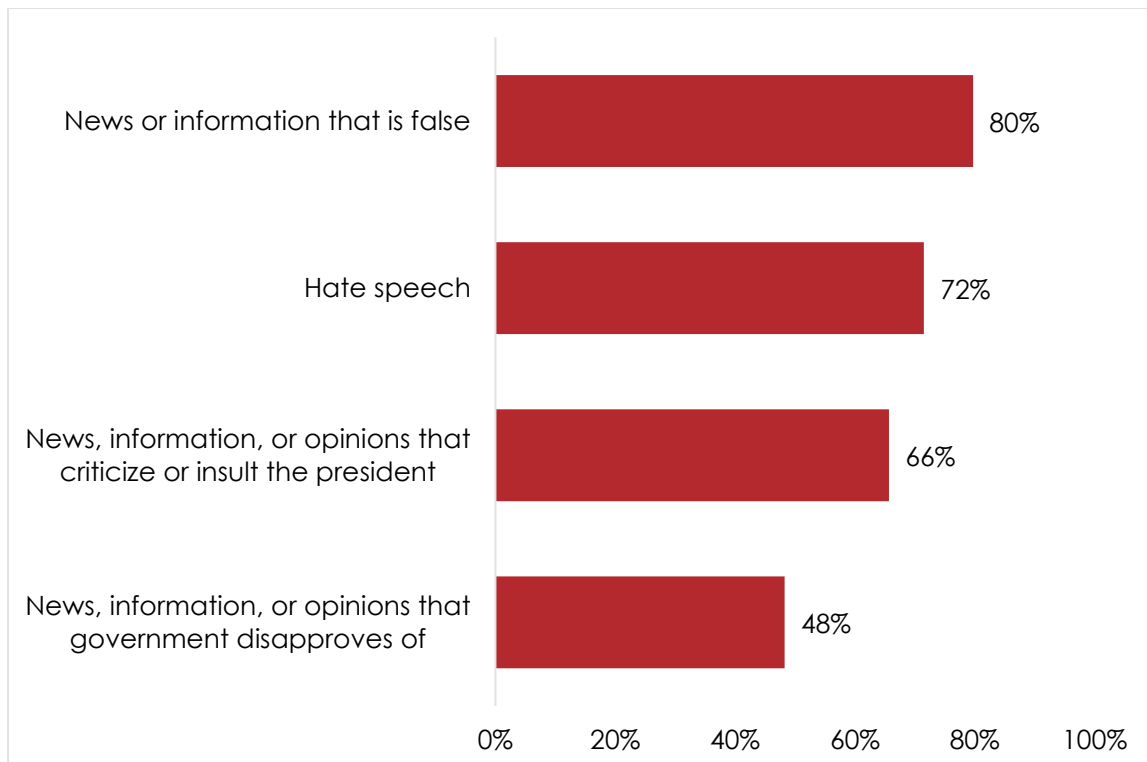


Respondents were asked: Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false.

Government restrictions

Most Ugandans say the government should be able to limit or prohibit the spread of false news or information (80%) and of hate speech (72%) (Figure 8). Two-thirds (66%) also endorse the government's right to limit or prohibit the spread of opinions that criticize or insult the president. But fewer than half (48%) say the government should be able to restrict information it disapproves of.

Figure 8: Support for government restrictions on information | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of:

News or information that is false?

News, information, or opinions that the government disapproves of?

News, information, or opinions that criticize or insult the president?

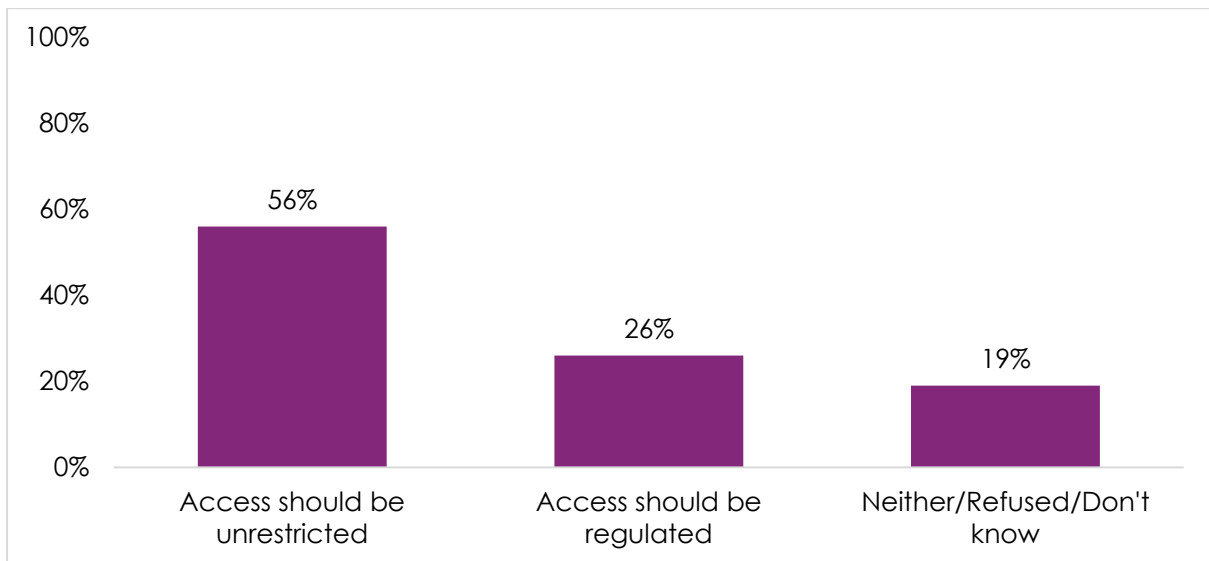
Hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society?

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In spite of their endorsement of the government's right to limit certain types of content, a majority of Ugandans oppose restricting access to social media and the Internet. Almost six in 10 (56%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be unrestricted (Figure 9). A quarter (26%), however, want the government to be able to regulate access.

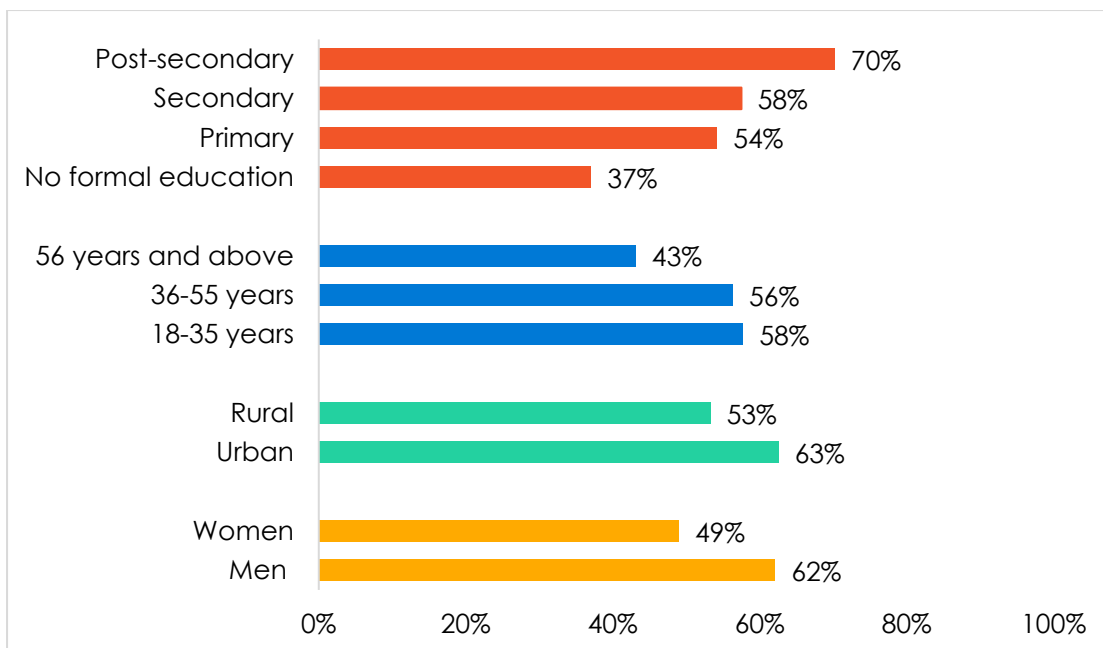
Highly educated citizens (70%) are twice as likely as those with no formal education (37%) to demand unrestricted access to the Internet and social media (Figure 10). Support for unfettered access is also stronger among men than women (62% vs. 49%) and in cities than in rural areas (63% vs. 53%). Older respondents are least likely to endorse unrestricted access (43% of those aged 56 and above).

Figure 9: Should Internet and social media access be regulated? | Uganda | 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 Uganda, so access should be regulated by government.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 10: Access to Internet and social media should not be regulated | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 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 [our country], so access should be regulated by government.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

Conclusion

In opposition to continued restrictions and partial shutdowns, a majority of Ugandans want unrestricted access to the Internet and social media and assess social media's overall impact as positive.

However, most Ugandans are also concerned about the use of social media to promote fake news and think the government should be able to curb or prohibit the dissemination of false information and hate speech.

These findings suggest a need for nuanced policies that block and/or penalize deliberate misinformation while protecting the right of ordinary citizens to unfettered access to one of the world's great resources.

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