



Zimbabweans support free media as watchdog, question media's effectiveness and integrity

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 108 | Stephen Ndoma and Richman Kokera

Summary

Although Zimbabwe's Constitution explicitly stipulates that every citizen is entitled to "freedom of the media," press freedom has had a tenuous existence in Zimbabwe. While recent decades have not seen the direct censorship common before independence (Press Reference, 2016), the public's right to free and unfettered information has suffered from government interference with the print and broadcast media, harassment and arrests of journalists, self-censorship by editors, and media laws that are widely viewed as impeding media freedom (Mudadigwa, 2016). In a statement released to mark World Press Freedom Day (May 3), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (2016) described the situation as a "media minefield."

Ordinary Zimbabweans have been targeted on charges of criminal nuisance and undermining the authority of President Robert Mugabe on social networking platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The media-rights group MISA-Zimbabwe notes with concern that the government's plans to enact laws that will hinder online activity under the guise of preventing cyber-crimes will have a negative impact on citizens' right to free expression and access to information (MISA-Zimbabwe, 2016).

Advocates of media freedom find strong support among Zimbabwean citizens. According to the latest Afrobarometer survey in the country, a majority of citizens say the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control. There is also widespread agreement that the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption. However, Zimbabweans are divided in their assessments of how effective the news media is in revealing government mistakes and corruption. Further, many Zimbabweans believe that the country's media often abuses its freedom by publishing lies and does not provide fair coverage to all candidates during election campaigns.

Survey findings show that radio remains the most common source of news for Zimbabweans, though regular use of radio, TV, and newspapers as news sources has declined. Consumption of Internet news has increased slightly, though use of the Internet and social media remain low.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 2,400 adult Zimbabweans in November 2014. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2012.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Zimbabweans (61%) want the news media to report without any government control, and a similar majority (60%) say the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
- But Zimbabweans are nearly evenly divided as to whether the news media is effective in its watchdog role, and nearly half (47%) of all citizens believe that the country's media "often" or "always" abuses its freedom by printing or saying things that it knows are not true.
- Only about one-fourth (27%) of citizens say the media "often" or "always" provides fair coverage of all candidates during the country's elections.
- Radio remains Zimbabweans' leading news source: About six in 10 respondents say they get radio news "a few times a week" (28%) or "every day" (33%). But regular use of radio for news has dropped by about half since 1999.
- Fewer than one in five Zimbabweans regularly use the Internet (19%) and/or social media (17%) as a source of news.

Support for a free media

Six in 10 Zimbabweans (61%) support the media's right to publish any views and ideas without government control, while about one-third (35%) believe that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things inimical to society. A free media finds greater support in urban communities (66%) than in rural areas (57%) (Figure 1). More men (63%) than women (58%) agree with the need for the media to be free of government restrictions.

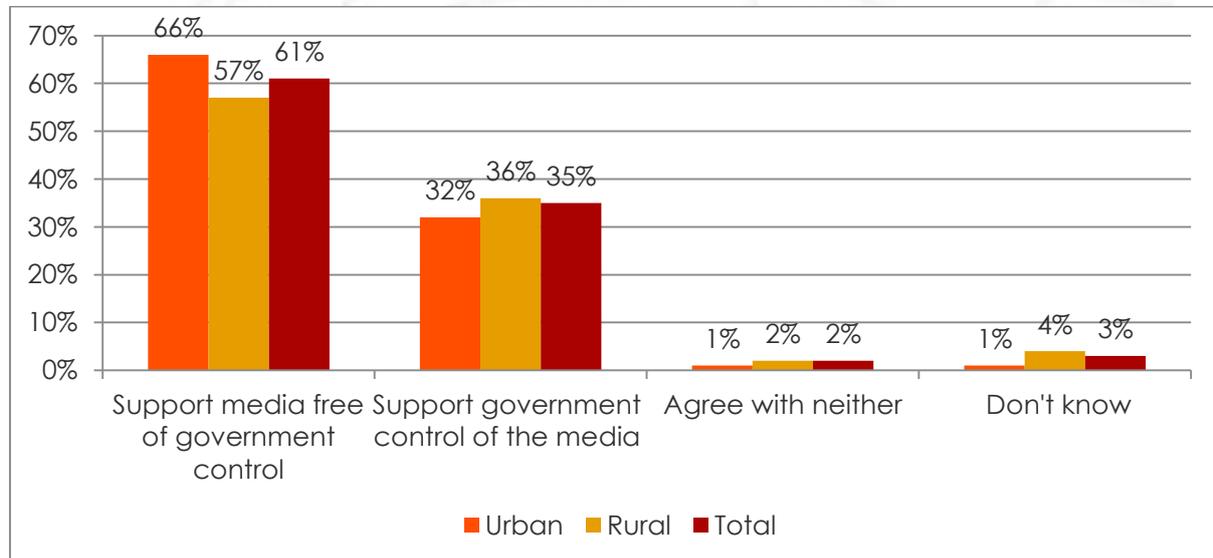
Support for a free media increases with respondents' level of education, from 44% among those with no formal education to 75% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Attitudes toward a free media in Zimbabwe also vary by age: Younger citizens (aged 18-30) are more likely to support a free media (65%) than their elders (Figure 2).

As Figure 3 reveals, political party affiliation¹ is also a predictor for support for free media: MDC-T supporters are more likely than ZANU-PF supporters to reject government control of the media, 82% vs. 45%.

Support for a free media was significantly higher in surveys conducted in 2005 (79%) and 2009 (88%) than in more recent surveys (Figure 4).

¹ Political party affiliation is determined based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that?"

Figure 1: Attitudes toward government control of the media | by urban-rural residence and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014



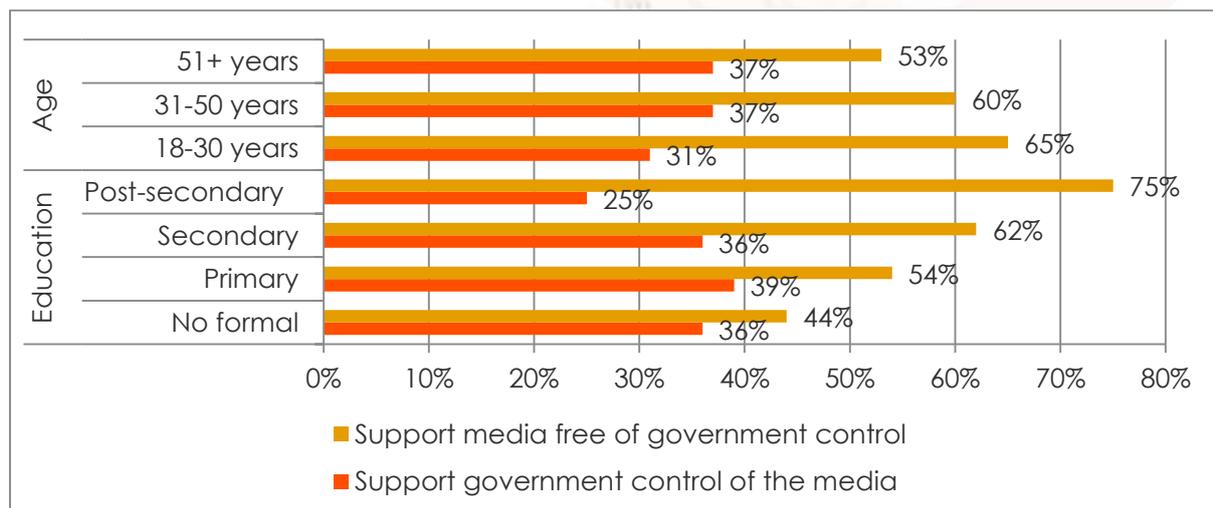
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

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.

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

Figure 2: Attitudes toward government control of the media | by age and education | Zimbabwe | 2014



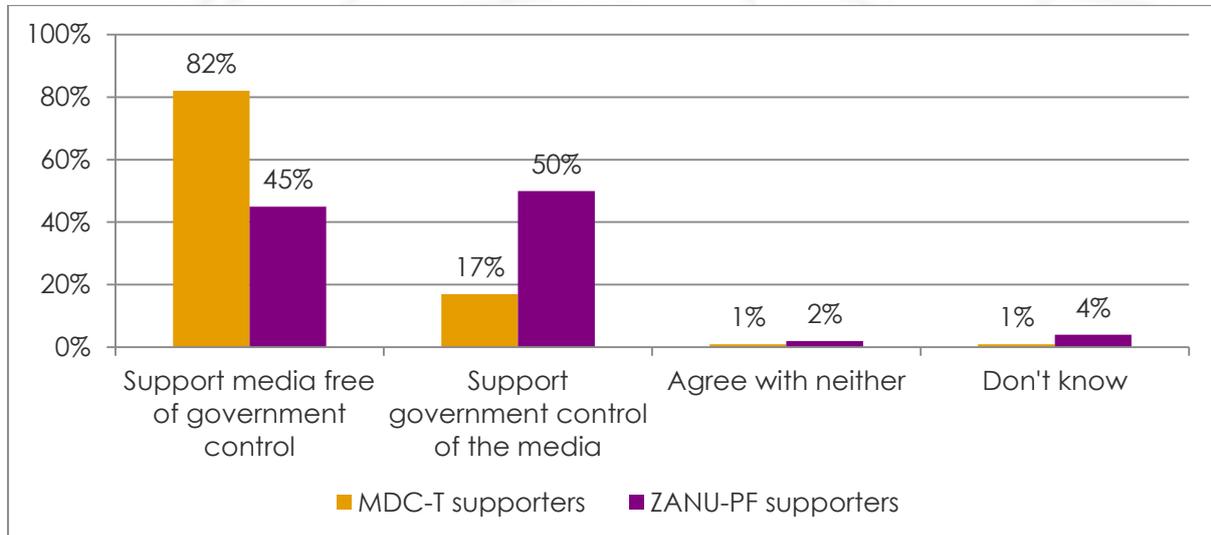
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Figure 3: Attitudes toward government control of the media | by political party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2014



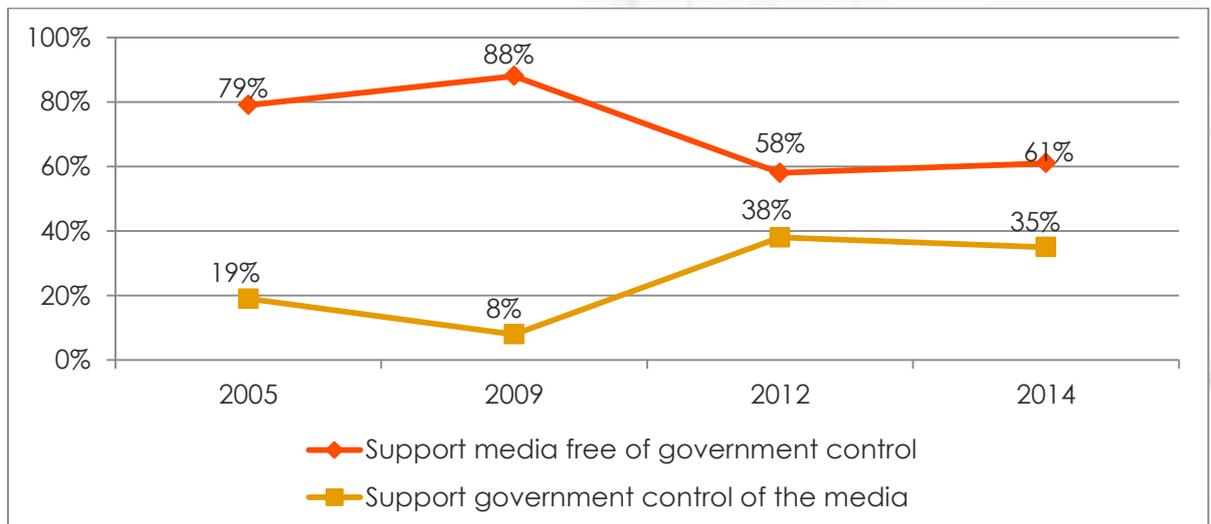
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Figure 4: Trend in attitudes toward government control of the media | Zimbabwe | 2014



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Support for the media's role as a watchdog

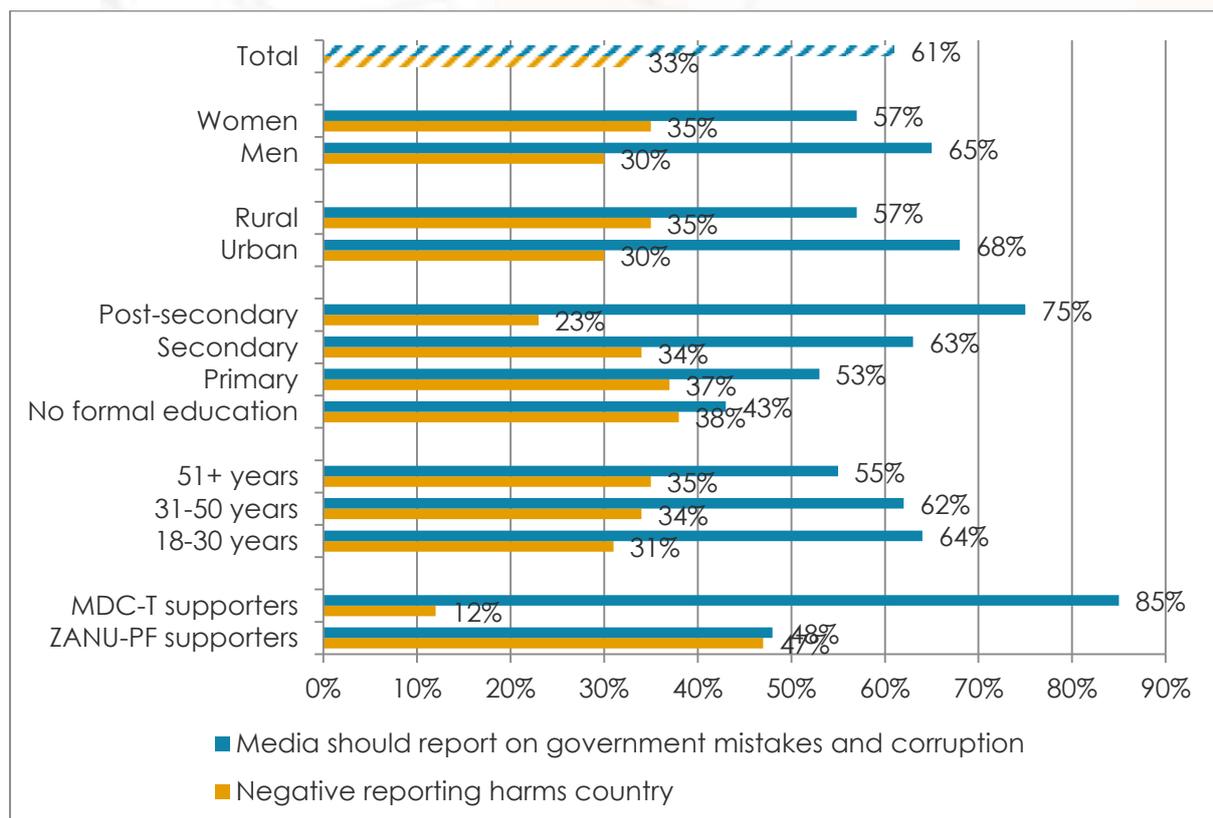
A majority (61%) of Zimbabweans "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the news media should "constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption," while one-third (33%) say that "too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country" (Figure 5). Urban residents (68%) and men (65%) are more likely than rural residents (57%) and women (57%) to support the news media's watchdog role.

Support for media checks on government varies with respondents' educational level, ranging from 43% among those with no formal education to 75% among post-secondary graduates. Younger citizens are somewhat more likely to favour a watchdog media (64% among those aged 18-30) than older respondents (55% among those aged 51 and older).

MDC-T supporters (85%) are far more likely than ZANU-PF supporters (48%) to favour media checks on government.

The level of support for media checks on government is higher than in 2012 (55%) but far weaker than in 2009 (73%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Support for media checks on government | by gender, urban-rural residence, education, age, and political party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2014



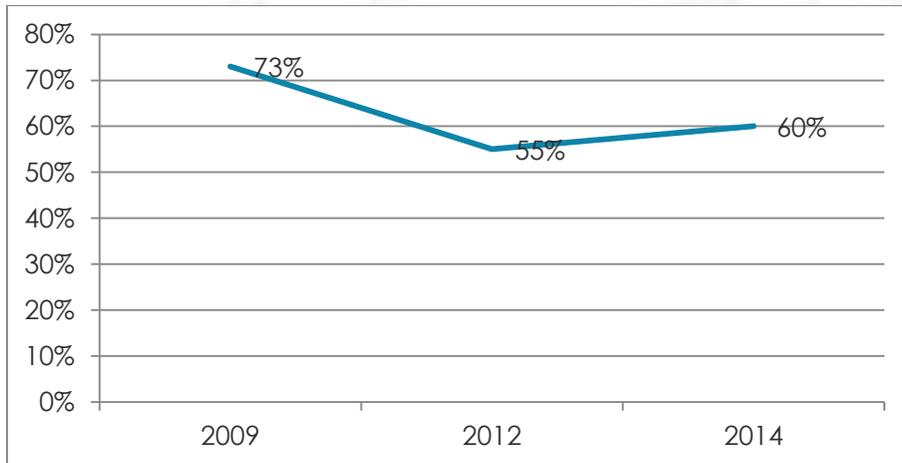
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

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 "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 6: Trend in support for media checks on government | Zimbabwe | 2009-2014



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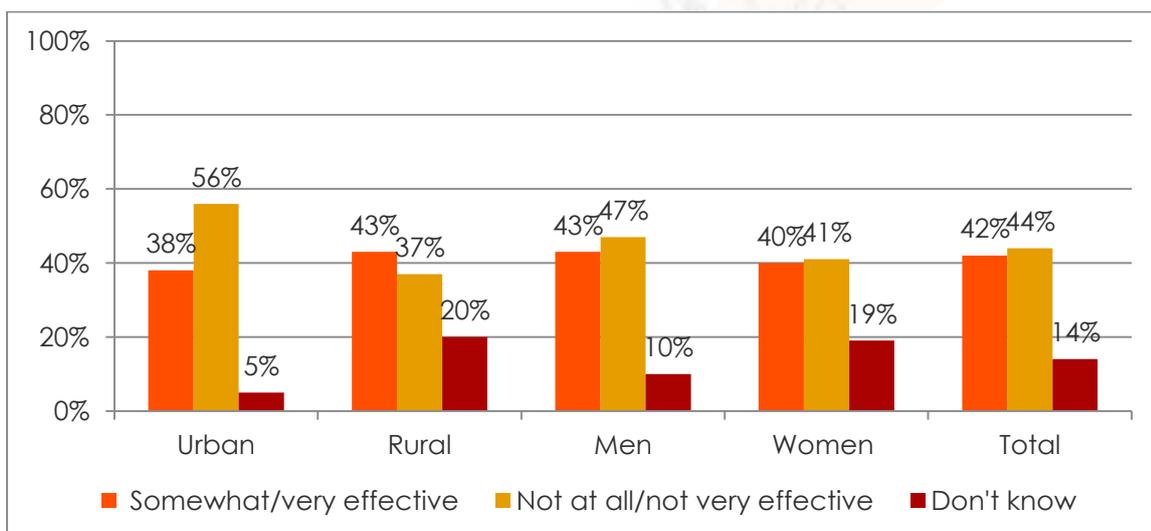
Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

Zimbabweans are divided as to how effective the news media is in revealing government mistakes and corruption: About four in 10 say the media is "somewhat effective" (33%) or "very effective" (9%), while a similar proportion say it is "not very effective" (30%) or "not at all effective" (14%) (Figure 7). Urbanites are more critical of the media than rural dwellers, with 20% vs. 11% saying the media is "not at all effective." A significant proportion (14%) of survey respondents profess ignorance on the matter.

Figure 7: Media effectiveness in revealing government mistakes and corruption | by urban-rural residence and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014

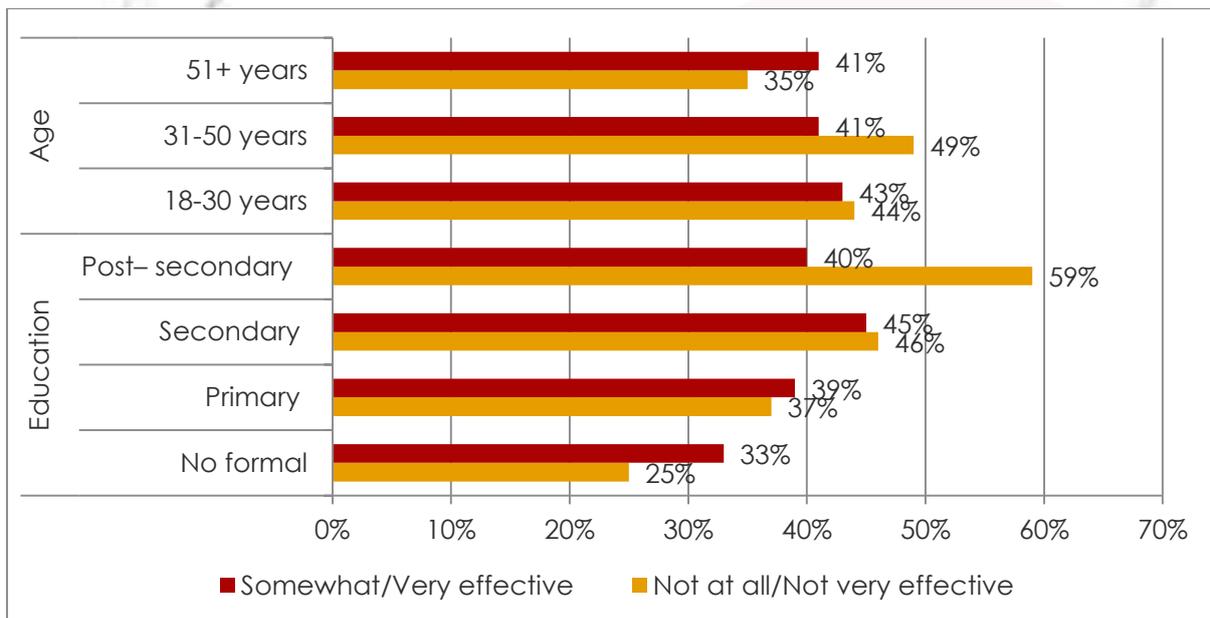


Respondents were asked: In this country, how effective is the news media in revealing government mistakes and corruption?

The sentiment that the media is “not very” or “not at all” effective in exposing government mistakes and corruption increases with respondents’ education level, ranging from 25% of citizens with no formal education to 59% of holders of post-secondary qualifications (Figure 8). Among those with no formal schooling, 42% say they “don’t know” whether the media is effective.

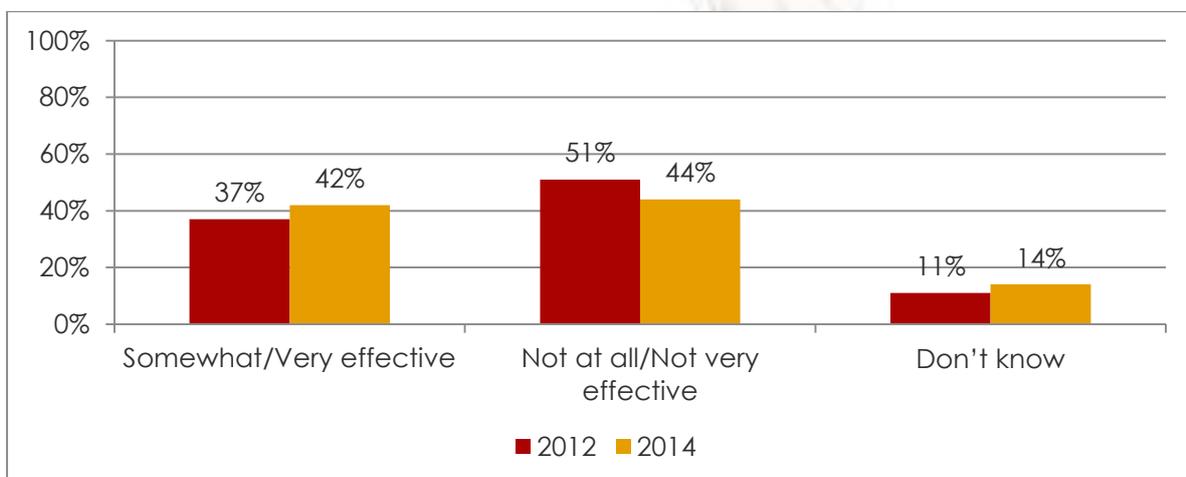
The proportion of Zimbabweans who see the media as “somewhat” or “very” effective increased by 5 percentage points between 2012 and 2014 (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Media effectiveness in revealing government mistakes and corruption | by age and education | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how effective is the news media in revealing government mistakes and corruption?*

Figure 9: Trend in perceptions of media effectiveness in revealing government mistakes and corruption | Zimbabwe | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how effective is the news media in revealing government mistakes and corruption?*

Does the media abuse its freedom?

Almost half of adult Zimbabweans (47%) believe that the country's media "often" or "always" abuses its freedom by printing or saying things that it knows are not true. Only about one-third (32%) say the media "rarely" or "never" abuses its freedom by publishing lies, while fully one-fifth (20%) – and in rural areas one-fourth (27%) – say they "don't know."

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

In urban areas, critics of the media are in the majority (61%, compared to 39% in the countryside). More men (52%) than women (44%) accuse the media of knowingly publishing lies (Figure 10).

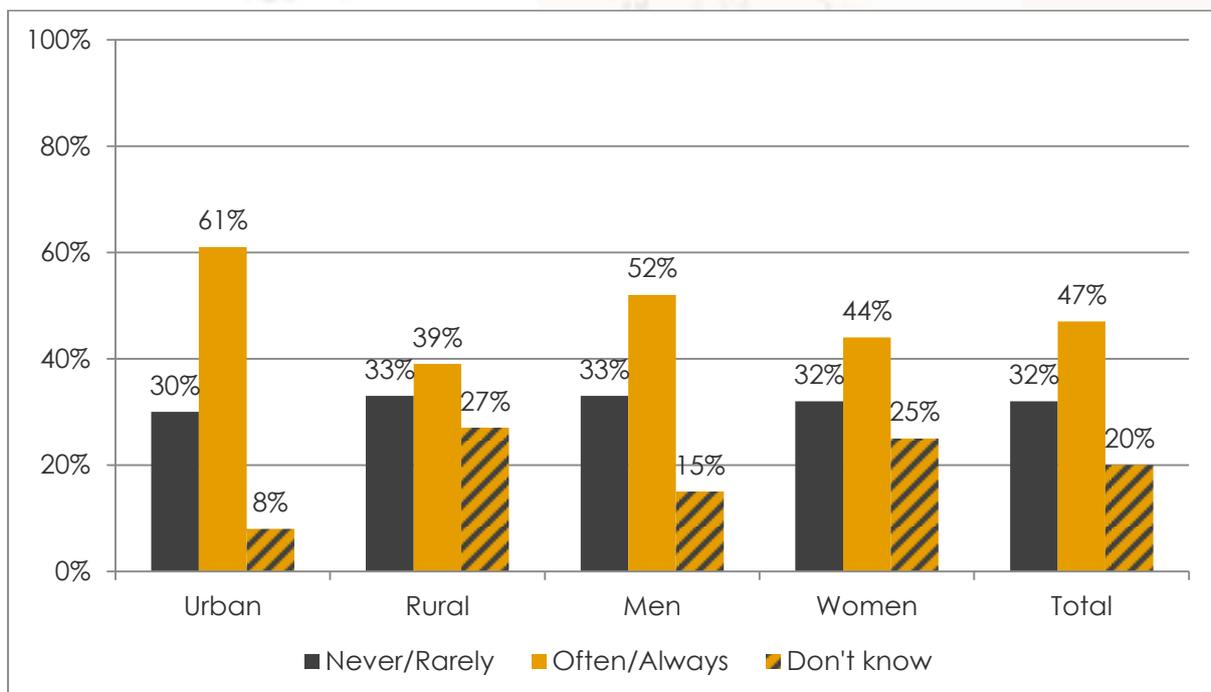
The proportion of Zimbabweans who believe that the media "often" or "always" abuses its freedom by publishing falsehoods increases with respondents' education level,

from 29% of those with no formal education to 67% for post-secondary graduates. Almost half (45%) of those with no formal education say they "don't know."

More MDC-T supporters (58%) than ZANU-PF sympathizers (40%) think that the news media "often" or "always" publishes lies (Figure 11).

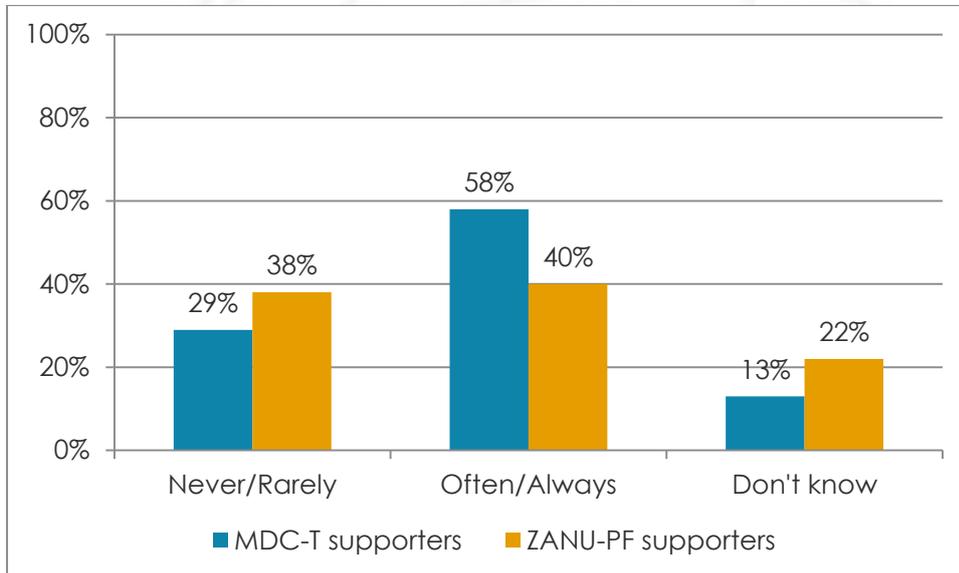
As negative as this assessment is, it nonetheless reflects an improvement from 2012, when a majority (55%) of Zimbabweans said the news media was prone to abusing its freedom (Figure 12).

Figure 10: Does the media abuse its freedom? | by urban-rural residence and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014



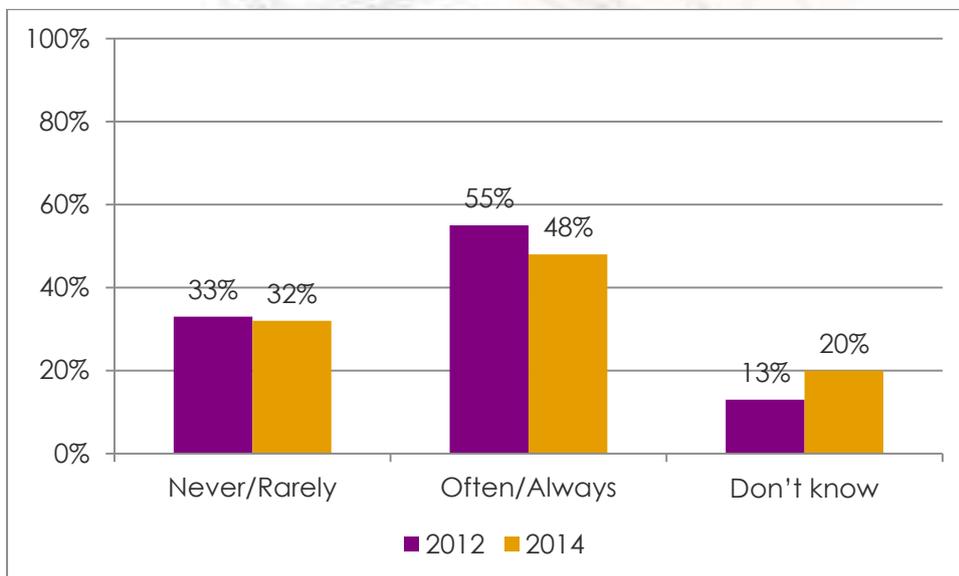
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the news media abuse its freedoms by printing or saying things it knows are not true?*

Figure 11: Does the media abuse its freedom? | by political party affiliation
 | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the news media abuse its freedoms by printing or saying things it knows are not true?*

Figure 12: Trend in perceptions of the media's abuse of its freedom | Zimbabwe
 | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the news media abuse its freedoms by printing or saying things it knows are not true?*

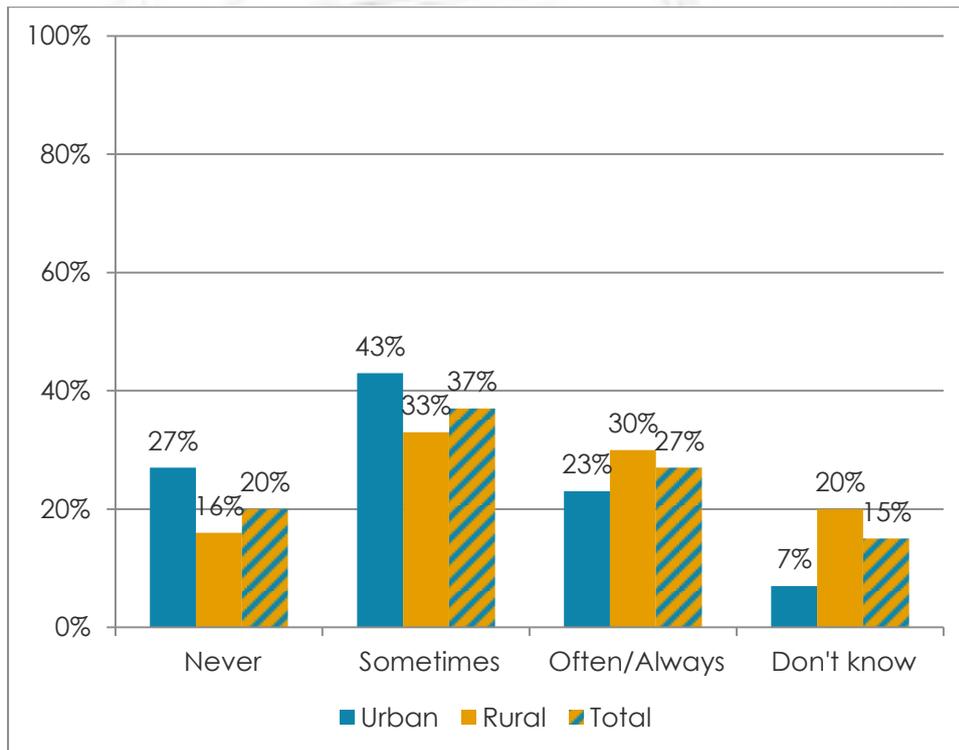
Media provision of fair coverage in elections

Only about one-fourth (27%) of Zimbabweans believe that the media “often” or “always” provides fair coverage of all candidates during the country’s elections. About one-third (37%) say it does so “sometimes,” while one-fifth (20%) say the media “never” provides fair

coverage of all candidates. Seven in 10 urban residents (70%) say the media “never” or only “sometimes” provides fair coverage, compared to 49% of rural inhabitants (Figure 13).

MDC-T supporters (36%) are three times as likely as ZANU-PF sympathizers (11%) to say the media “never” provides fair coverage.

Figure 13: Perceptions of fair coverage of all candidates | Zimbabwe | 2014



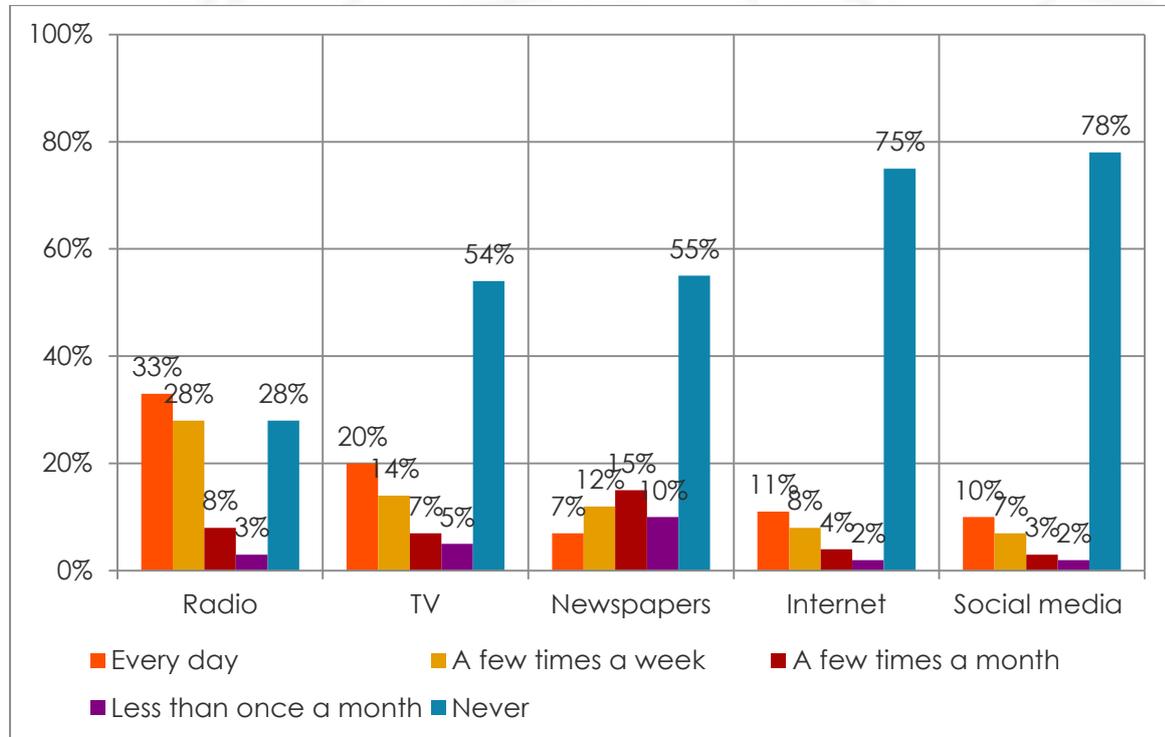
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: The media provides fair coverage of all candidates?*

Sources of news

Radio is still the leading source of news for Zimbabweans: 61% of the adult population say they depend on it for news “a few times a week” (28%) or “every day” (33%), well ahead of regular consumption of TV news (34%) and newspapers (19%). About one out of five Zimbabweans use the Internet (19%) and social media (17%) at least “a few times a week” for news, while three-fourths or more say they “never” use the Internet or social media for news (Figure 14).

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 women, rural dwellers, older people, and the less educated (Table 1). The gaps are generally narrower with respect to radio. The urban-rural divide is stark with respect to television, newspapers, the Internet, and social media. For example, TV is a regular source of news for 73% of urban residents, compared to only 12% of rural dwellers. This aligns with Afrobarometer field team observations showing that 80% of rural residents do not own TVs, compared to 20% of urban residents. The gaps between men and women are generally modest.

Figure 14: Frequency of getting news from radio, TV, newspapers, Internet, and social media | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? Television? Newspapers? The Internet? Social media such as Facebook and Twitter?

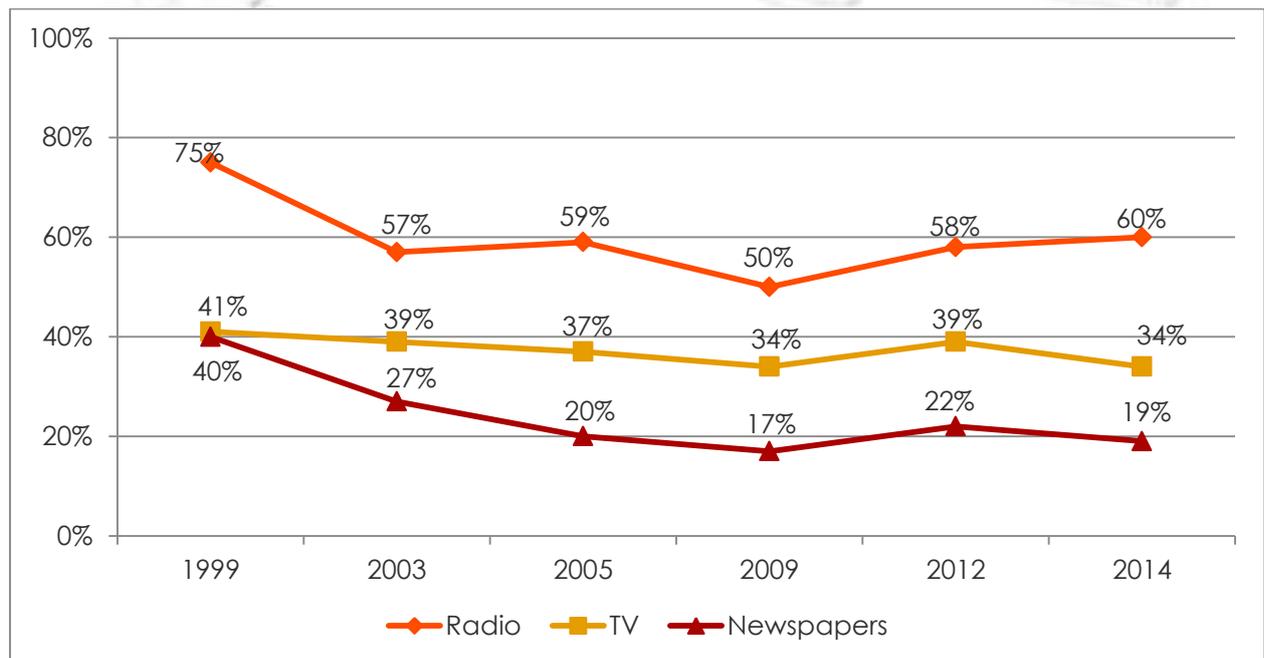
Table 1: Use of news sources “a few times a week” or “every day” | by urban-rural residence, gender, education level, and age | Zimbabwe | 2014

		Radio	TV	Newspapers	Internet	Social media
Residence	Urban	66%	73%	44%	40%	35%
	Rural	58%	12%	6%	6%	5%
Gender	Men	66%	35%	23%	23%	20%
	Women	56%	33%	15%	16%	14%
Age	18-30 years	65%	40%	25%	30%	28%
	31-50 years	62%	35%	21%	18%	14%
	51+ years	22%	22%	10%	6%	4%
Education	No formal	36%	9%	2%	0%	0%
	Primary	44%	12%	2%	2%	1%
	Secondary	66%	36%	19%	20%	18%
	Post- secondary	80%	77%	61%	57%	48%

Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? TV? Newspapers? The Internet? Social media such as Facebook and Twitter? (% who say “a few times a week” or “every day”)

Daily radio news listenership has dropped by about half since 1999, from 60% to 32%. Contrary to the trend across Africa (see Dispatch No. 85 at www.afrobarometer.org), reliance on TV for news a “few times a week” or “every day” has declined, by 7 percentage points since 1999 (Figure 15). Over time, the regular use of newspapers has declined by half, from 40% in 1999 to 19% in 2014. Regular use of the Internet as a news source grew by 4 percentage points, from 15% to 19%, between 2012 and 2014.

Figure 15: Trend in consumption of news from radio, TV, and newspapers “a few times a week” or “every day” | Zimbabwe | 1999-2014



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

Conclusion

A majority of Zimbabweans want a news media that is free of government control and that investigates government mistakes and corruption. But many citizens are critical of the media's effectiveness, integrity, and even-handedness.

Radio is still the chief source of news for Zimbabweans, though its use is declining. The country's low usage of the Internet and social media as news sources is a significant gap considering rapid changes in information and communications technologies and their centrality in spurring development.

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Stephen Ndoma is principal researcher for Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), the Afrobarometer Zimbabwe national partner, in Harare. Email: stephen@mpoi.org.zw.

Richman Kokera is research officer for MPOI. Email: richmank@mpoi.org.zw.

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.

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