

# African publics back rights, responsibilities of media watchdogs

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 27 | Thomas Bentley, Kangwook Han, and Mina Okuru**

## Summary

Journalists have little doubt that a free and effective news media is a cornerstone of democracy and development. But do their customers – everyday citizens and consumers of news – agree with them, and thus help provide the backing that journalists need to gain or maintain their independence?

World Press Freedom Day, celebrated on May 3 each year, offers an opportunity to assess the state of press freedom worldwide, as well as a chance for media professionals to reflect on issues of media independence and professional ethics. In observance of World Press Freedom Day 2015, Afrobarometer highlights everyday Africans' news habits and attitudes regarding media freedom, media trustworthiness, and the effectiveness of the media in holding governments accountable.

Afrobarometer survey results representing more than three-fourths of the continent's population show that Africans express support for an independent media and expect the press to play an active watchdog role by monitoring their governments and reporting on poor performance and corruption. On average, they believe that the media is doing a good job in filling these roles.

However, support for media freedom is not consistently high across the continent – some countries and regions are more willing to tolerate government control than others. Less educated citizens are less likely than their better-educated compatriots to support a free news media that holds governments accountable.

Finally, in a direct challenge to the media itself, significant proportions – and in some countries large majorities – of citizens say the news media abuses its freedom by publishing lies.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014/2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents. Samples of this size yield country-level results with a margin of error of between +/-3% (for n=1,200) and +/-2% (for n=2,400) at a 95% confidence level.

Findings presented here are based primarily on data from 34 countries collected from 51,605 respondents in 2011/2013 during Afrobarometer Round 5. Comparisons over time are based on 16 countries where attitudes have been tracked since Round 2 (2002/2003).

## Key findings

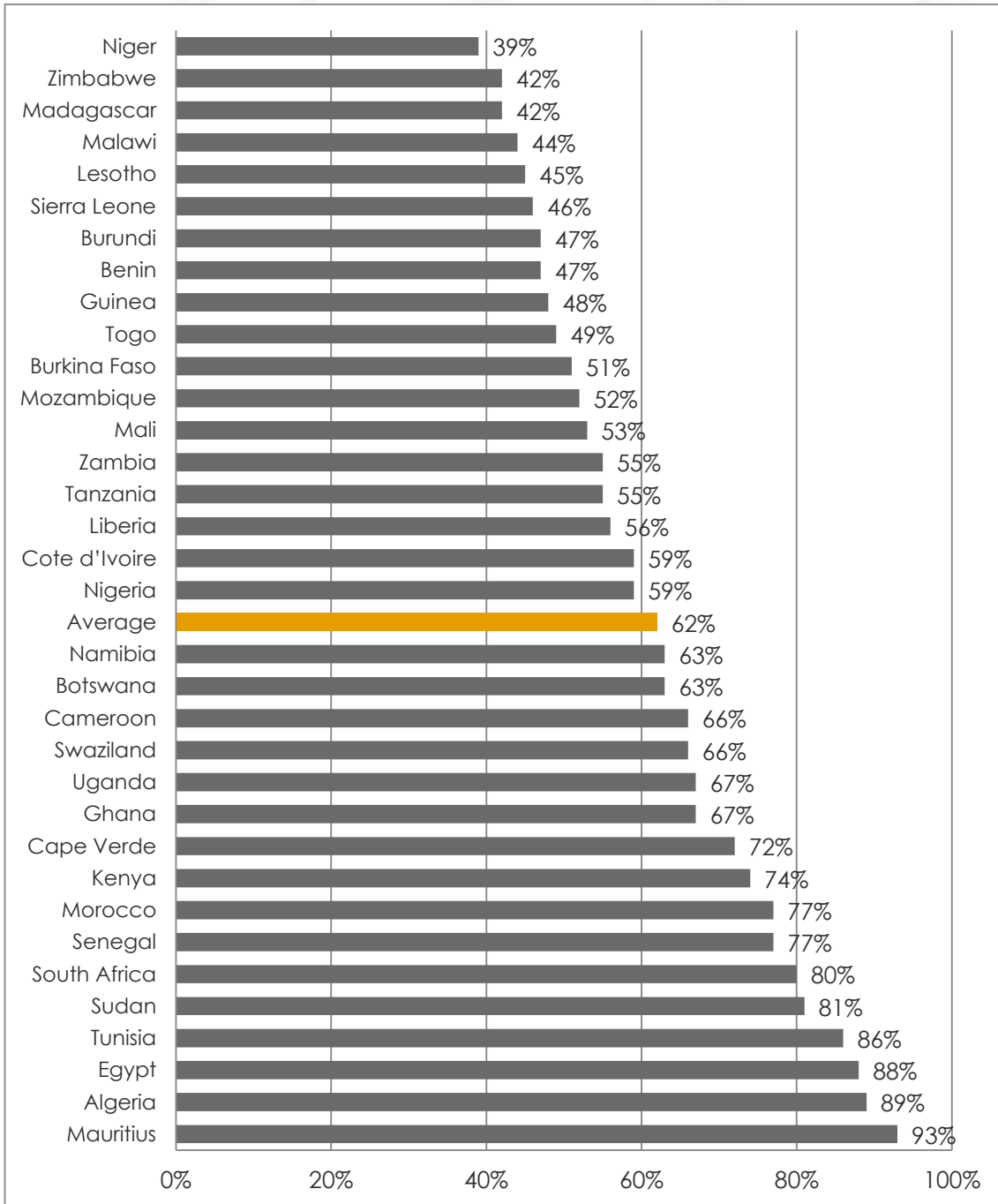
- Six in 10 respondents (62%) access news media daily. Radio remains the leading source of news but is declining in importance as television and the Internet build their audiences.
- A solid majority (57%) of Africans demand press freedom, endorsing the media's right to publish what it wants without government interference.
- Africans also support an active "watchdog" role for the press: On average, 69% believe that the media should exercise this role.
- Similarly, a majority (64%) believe the media is effective in exposing government mistakes and corruption.
- More than one-third (36%) of respondents say the media "often" or "always" publishes things it knows are not true. In some countries, this perception is shared by large majorities of citizens.

## Primary news sources

Across 34 African countries surveyed during Round 5 (2011/2013), on average 62% of respondents get news every day from at least one media source (Figure 1). Radio remains the dominant source of daily news (46%), followed by television (37%), newspapers (9%), and the Internet (7%).

But there are notable shifts in the media environment (Figure 2a-c). Across 16 countries tracked since 2002, daily use of radio to obtain news has dropped markedly, from 61% in 2002/2003 to 49% in 2011/2013. Daily use of newspapers is also down, from 13% to 9% over the same time period. Television, in contrast, is gaining audience, climbing from 26% to 33%. The Internet claimed 7% of the population as daily consumers in 2011/2013, though its growth has not yet been tracked over time.

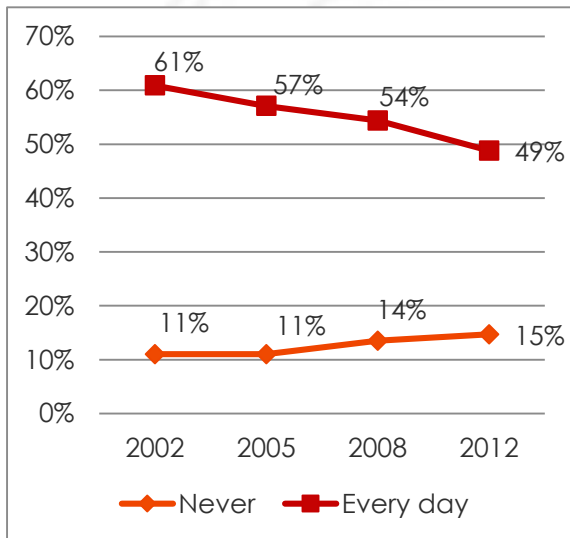
**Figure 1: Daily news consumption | by country | 2011/2013**



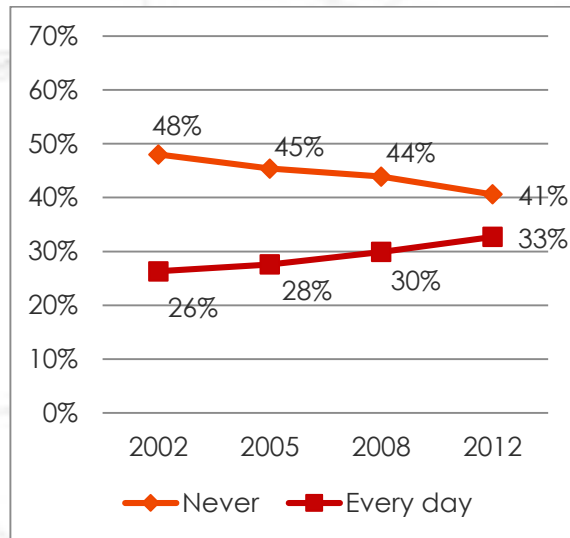
**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources: (a) Radio? (b) Television? (c) Newspapers? (d) Internet? (% who say they get news "every day" from at least one of these sources)

**Figure 2: Trends in sources of news** | 16 countries | 2002-2013

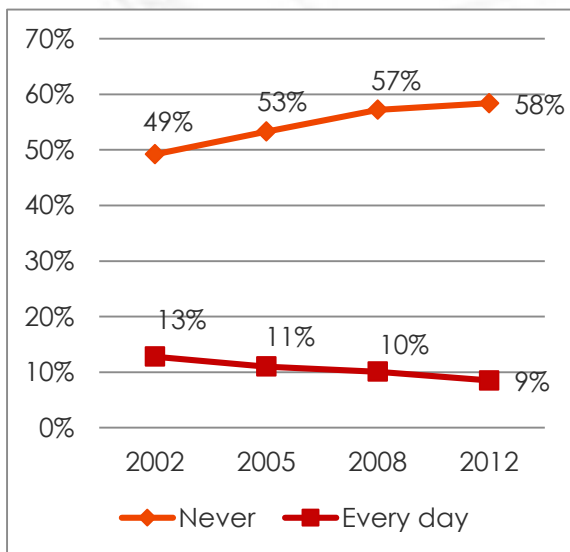
**2a: Radio**



**2b: Television**



**2c: Newspaper**



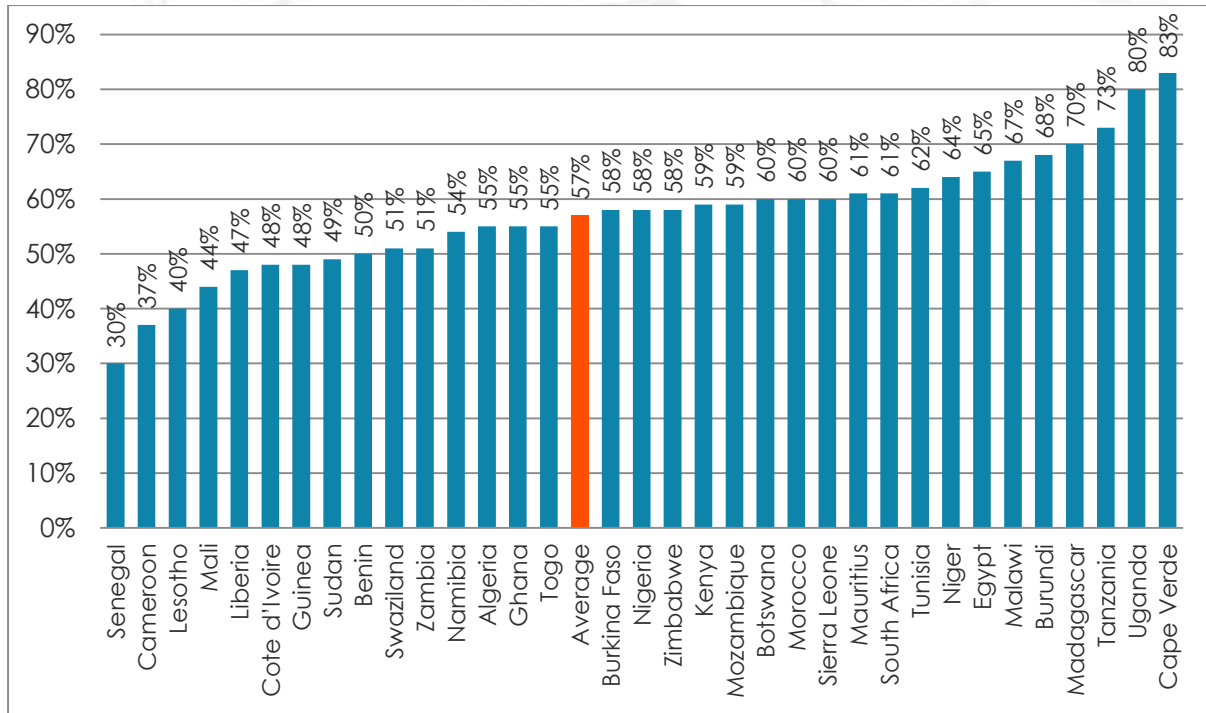
**Support for media freedom**

To provide the public with accurate information about public affairs, the media must be free to report without government interference. Yet governments are often reluctant to tolerate the challenge that an unfettered media can present. In some countries, the media continues to face attacks, shuttering of critical news outlets, and restrictive media laws that seek to curtail journalists' ability to gather and report the news.

Across 34 countries, a majority (57%) of citizens "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the news media should have the right to "publish any views and ideas without government control" (Figure 3a). Cape Verdeans are the strongest advocates of media freedom (83%), followed by Ugandans (80%) and Tanzanians (73%). In contrast, just 30% of respondents from Senegal, 37% from Cameroon, and 40% from Mali favour a media free of government

control. Across the regions, 62% of respondents in East Africa support media freedom, followed by Southern Africa (58%), North Africa (58%), and West Africa (53%) (Figure 3b).

**Figure 3a: Support for media freedom | 34 countries | 2011/2013**



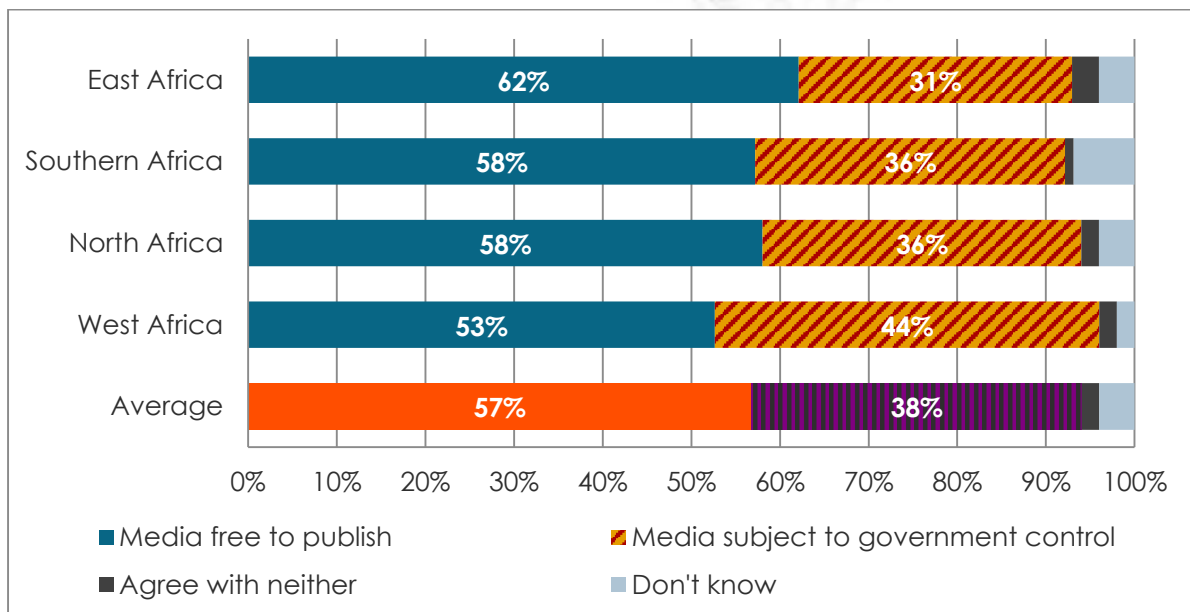
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

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 Statement 1)

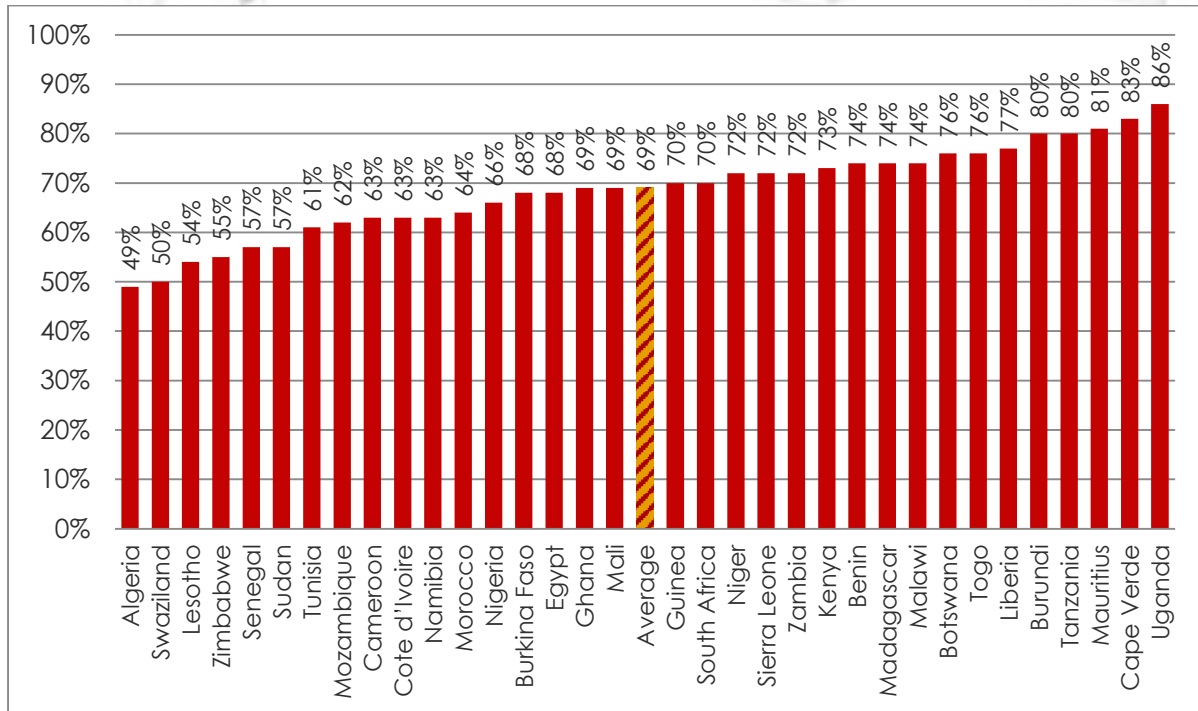
**Figure 3b: Support for media freedom | by region | 2011/2013**



## Media's 'watchdog' role

Africans also endorse a “watchdog” role for the media: 69% agree that the media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption” (Figure 4). Here, too, Ugandans (86%) and Cape Verdeans (83%) are the strongest supporters, followed by Mauritians (81%). In contrast, this is a minority position in Algeria (49%), and bare majorities support an investigative media in Swaziland (50%) and Lesotho (54%).

**Figure 4: Support for media's watchdog role | 34 countries | 2011/2013**



**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 Statement 1)

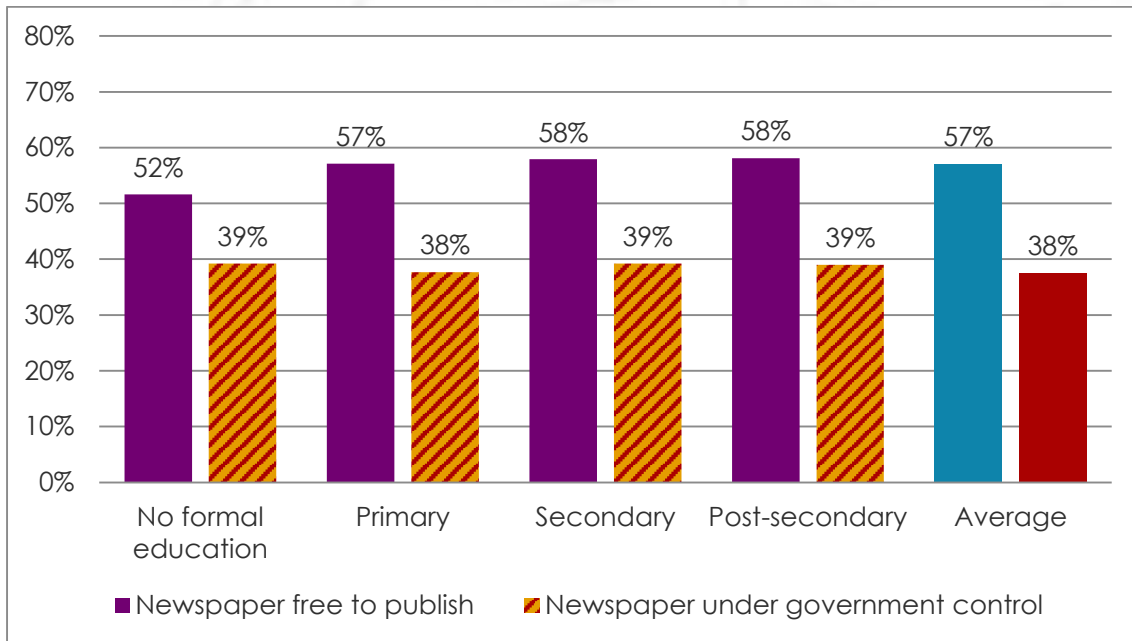
## Education and attitudes about the role of the media

Education appears to play an important role in shaping citizen attitudes about the relationship between media and government. Higher levels of education are associated with stronger support for both media freedom and a watchdog role for the press.

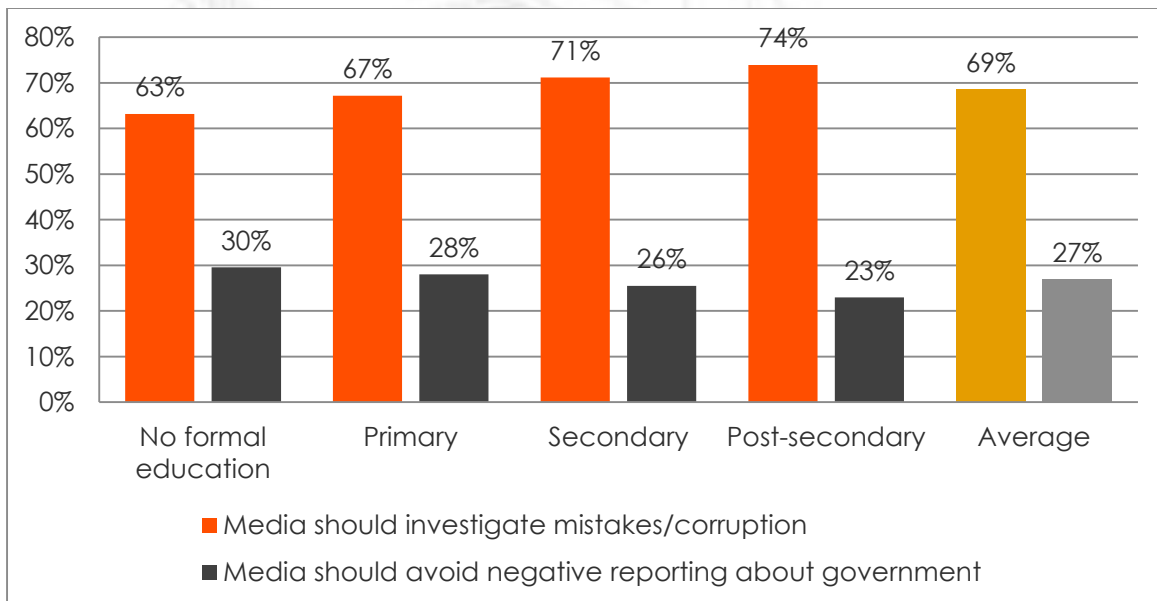
When it comes to support for media freedom, the key distinction is between those with no formal education (22% of all respondents), among whom only a slim majority (52%) express support for a free media, and those with formal education, where support stands at 57%-58% across all levels (Figure 5a).

The education effect is stronger when it comes to the media's watchdog role. Among those with no formal education, 63% support media checks on government, but this climbs steadily with education to a high of 74% among respondents with post-secondary education (Figure 5b).

**Figure 5a: Education and support for media freedom** | 2011/2013



**Figure 5b: Education and support for media checks on government** | 2011/2013



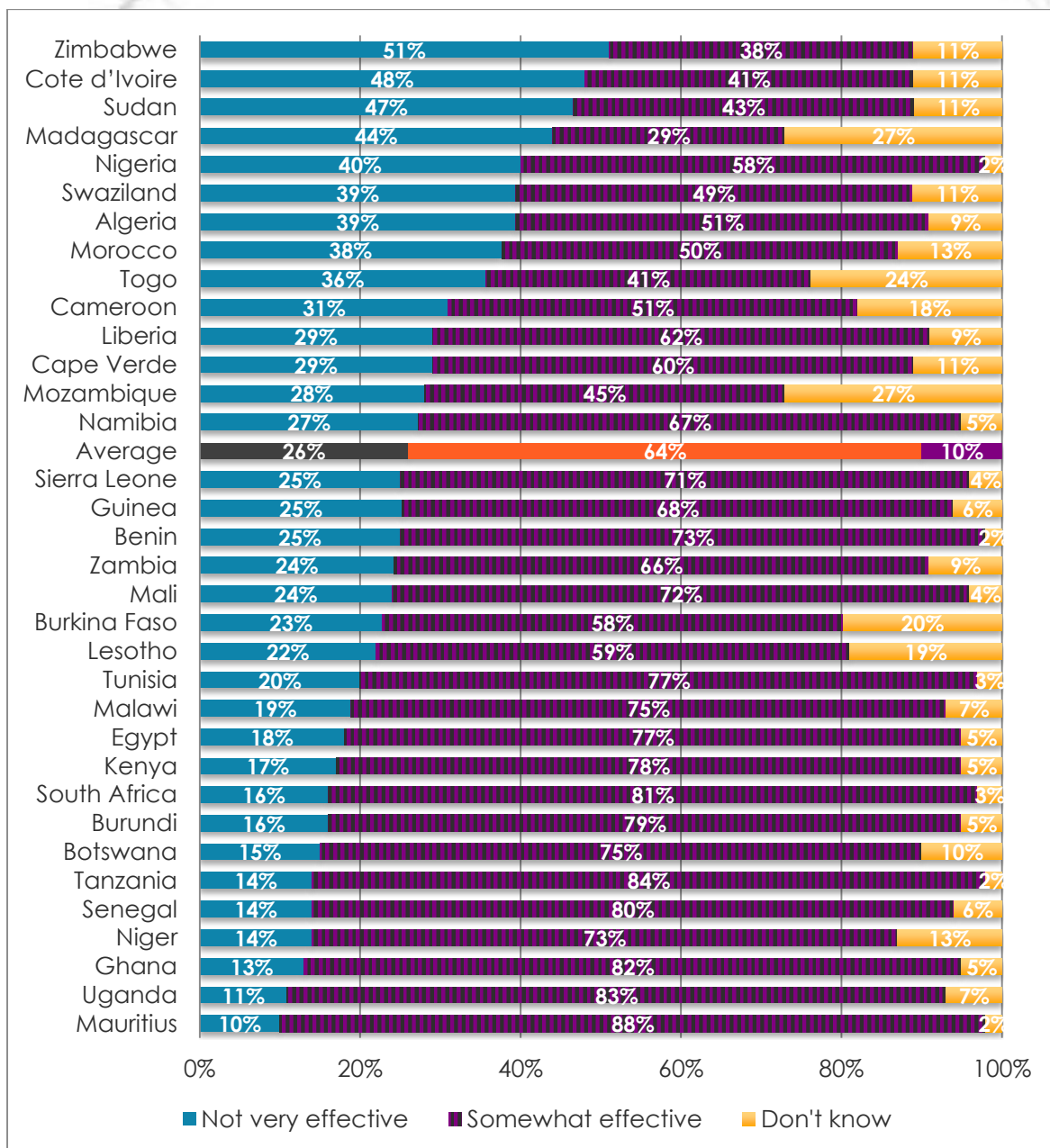
### Media performance

“Journalism can only thrive by playing the role of a fearless and honest watchdog committed to truth, equality, and freedom,” Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir said in a speech during UNESCO’s World Press Freedom Day 2015 events. How effective is the media in playing this watchdog role? Public assessments of media effectiveness are critical to understanding whether the media has the support it needs to function freely, fairly, and independently.

A majority of survey respondents give the media high marks, with 64% saying that it is either “somewhat effective” or “very effective” in revealing government mistakes and corruption (Figure 5). The media gets its highest ratings in Mauritius (88%), Tanzania (84%), Uganda (83%), and Ghana (82%). In contrast, a majority (51%) of Zimbabweans rate their media as “not at all effective” or “not very effective,” as do near-majorities in Cote d'Ivoire (48%), Sudan (47%), and Madagascar (44%).

Across the regions, East Africans are significantly more likely to consider their news media somewhat or very effective (76%) than residents of West Africa (64%), Southern Africa (61%), or North Africa (60%) (Figure 6b).

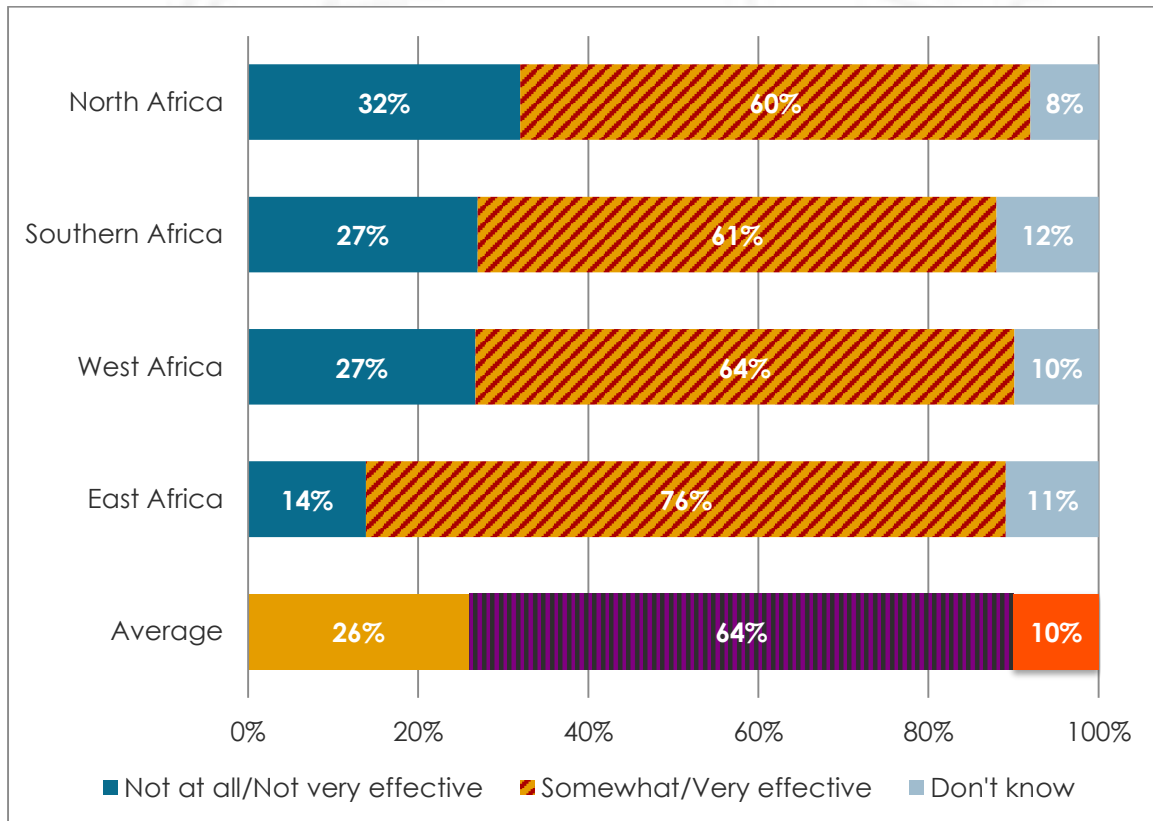
**Figure 6a: Effectiveness of news media in checking government** | 34 countries  
 | 2011/2013



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



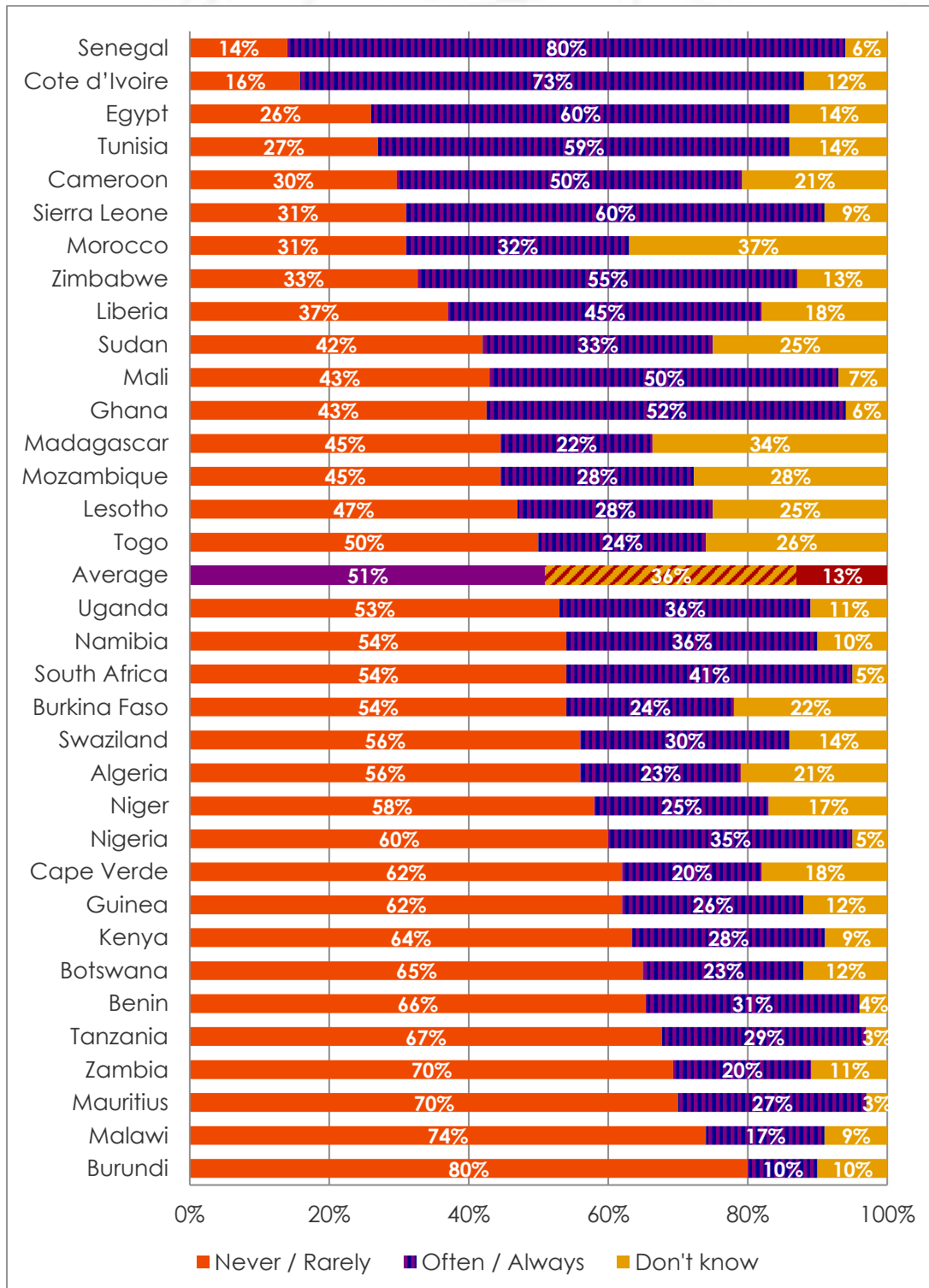
**Figure 6b: Effectiveness of news media in checking government** | by region  
 | 34 countries | 2011/2013



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

But the African media must also reckon with public concerns about abuse of its reporting privileges. While on average a slim majority (51%) believe that the media “rarely” or “never” publishes “things it knows are not true,” more than one-third (36%) believe this happens “often” or “always” (Figure 7). In some countries, citizens express overwhelming concerns about this problem, including Senegal (80% report abuse “often” or “always”) and Cote d’Ivoire (73%).

**Figure 7: How often news media abuses its freedom | 34 countries | 2011/2013**



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

A free and responsible news media can play a crucial role in the development of a country. By ensuring that citizens have accurate and timely information, the media can help them

engage in the public discourse and demand accountability from their governments. It can also serve as a mechanism for providing feedback from citizens to decision-makers.

But the media can play this role effectively only if it has the freedom to operate independently, free of government interference. As Australian journalist Peter Greste said during UNESCO's World Press Freedom Day 2015 celebration, "Free media is key to free society, free debate, free ideas." And Edetaen Ojo, executive director of Media Rights Agenda in Lagos, which works to promote freedom of expression in Nigeria: "Journalism is under relentless attack; it is being stifled all around the world. Let us give it a breath of fresh air by removing barriers to its freedom and independence."

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**For more on World Press Freedom Day 2015, please see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/world-press-freedom-day>.**

**To further explore Afrobarometer data related to media freedom, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer-online-analysis.com](http://www.afrobarometer-online-analysis.com).**

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**Thomas Bentley** is a research assistant for Afrobarometer and a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: [bentle88@msu.edu](mailto:bentle88@msu.edu)

**Kangwook Han** is a research assistant for Afrobarometer and a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: [hakawoo@gmail.com](mailto:hakawoo@gmail.com)

**Mina Okuru** is Afrobarometer communications coordinator for Anglophone West Africa, based at the Center for Democratic Development in Accra, Ghana. Email: [m.okuru@cddgh.org](mailto:m.okuru@cddgh.org)

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For more information, please visit [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

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