



# Free to Express?

## Ugandan citizens' views and experiences of the media and freedom of expression

### 1. Introduction and Summary

The media plays a vital role in any society, most particularly in democratic contexts. When the media are strong and independent, citizens' views are more likely to be heard and their interests more likely to be taken into account by decision makers. The media also help to ensure government is held to account for its obligations to citizens. A core component of this is freedom of expression – both for the media as a whole and for citizens themselves. Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”<sup>1</sup>

However, in practice, this right is often contested. A senior Ugandan government figure recently threatened, publicly, to “crush” journalists who “abuse” him. Uganda fell seven places in the most recent World Press Freedom Index<sup>2</sup>, to 132 out of 180 countries, below Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, and only a few points above Rwanda.

This brief presents data on Ugandan citizens' experiences and views on the media and freedom of expression. Which forms of media do citizens consume most, and which do they trust most? Do they trust information provided by public officials? Do they value their right to freedom of expression, and do they feel that this right is respected in practice? How do citizens feel the media performs

1 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

2 <https://rsf.org/en/index>. Uganda ranked 132 out of 180 in 2022, and 125 out of 180 in 2021.

in practice, and would they personally feel comfortable being interviewed by a journalist?

Data for the brief come from Twaweza's *Sauti za Wananchi*, a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone panel survey. Information on the overall methodology is available at [www.twaweza.org/sauti](http://www.twaweza.org/sauti), and more detail on panel members can be found in the brief introducing the second panel<sup>3</sup>. For this brief, data were collected from 2,749 respondents in the fourth round of calls to the second *Sauti za Wananchi* panel, conducted between 10 January and 3 February 2023.

The key findings are:

- Radio is declining as citizens' primary source of information, but remains well ahead of other forms of media
- Media habits vary considerably across demographic groups
- Ugandans have most trust in information heard on the radio
- Ugandans are most likely to trust information from religious leaders, and least likely to trust it from opposition party figures
- Almost all citizens agree that citizens should be free to criticise MPs and national leaders, but many don't feel that this right is respected in practice
- Public support for freedom of expression and access to information is consistently high, and rising
- Ugandans believe the national media play a valuable and constructive role in national life
- Ugandans are consistently positive about radio and radio journalists in Uganda, and somewhat uncertain about other forms of media
- Most Ugandans would be comfortable being interviewed by a journalist

## 2. Nine insights on citizens' opinions and experience on the media and freedom of expression

### **Insight 1: Radio is declining as citizens' source of information, but remains well ahead of other forms of media**

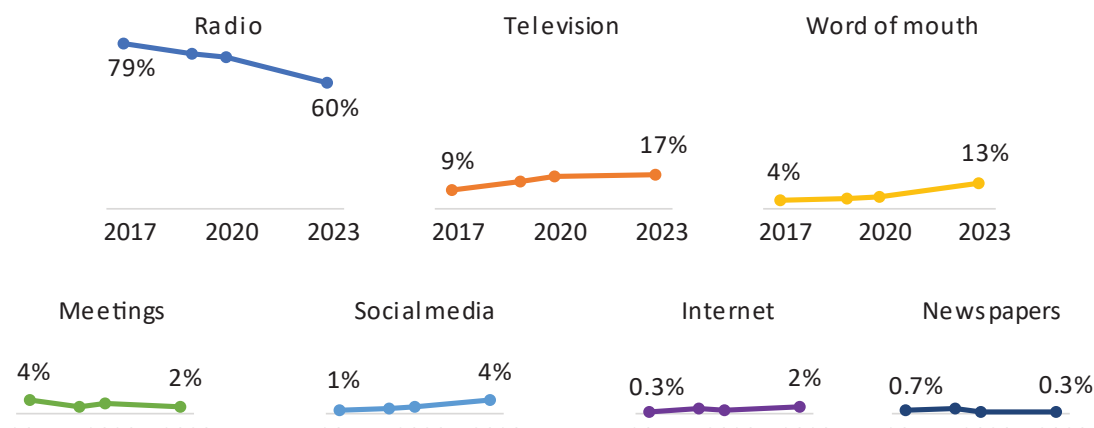
Six out of ten citizens (60%) cite radio as their main source of information, well ahead of any other form of media. Nevertheless, citizens using radio has declined from eight out of ten (79%) just six years ago. Over the same period, the number of citizens citing TV as their main source has doubled, from 9% to 17%, and the number citing word of mouth has tripled.

Other forms of media are the main source of information for very small numbers, including social media (4%), the internet (2%), meetings (2%) and newspapers (under 1%).

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3 <https://twaweza.org/download/voices-of-the-people-introducing-the-second-sauti-za-wananchi-panel/>

**Figure 1: Which media is your main source of information?**



**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
**Base:** all respondents; n=2,749

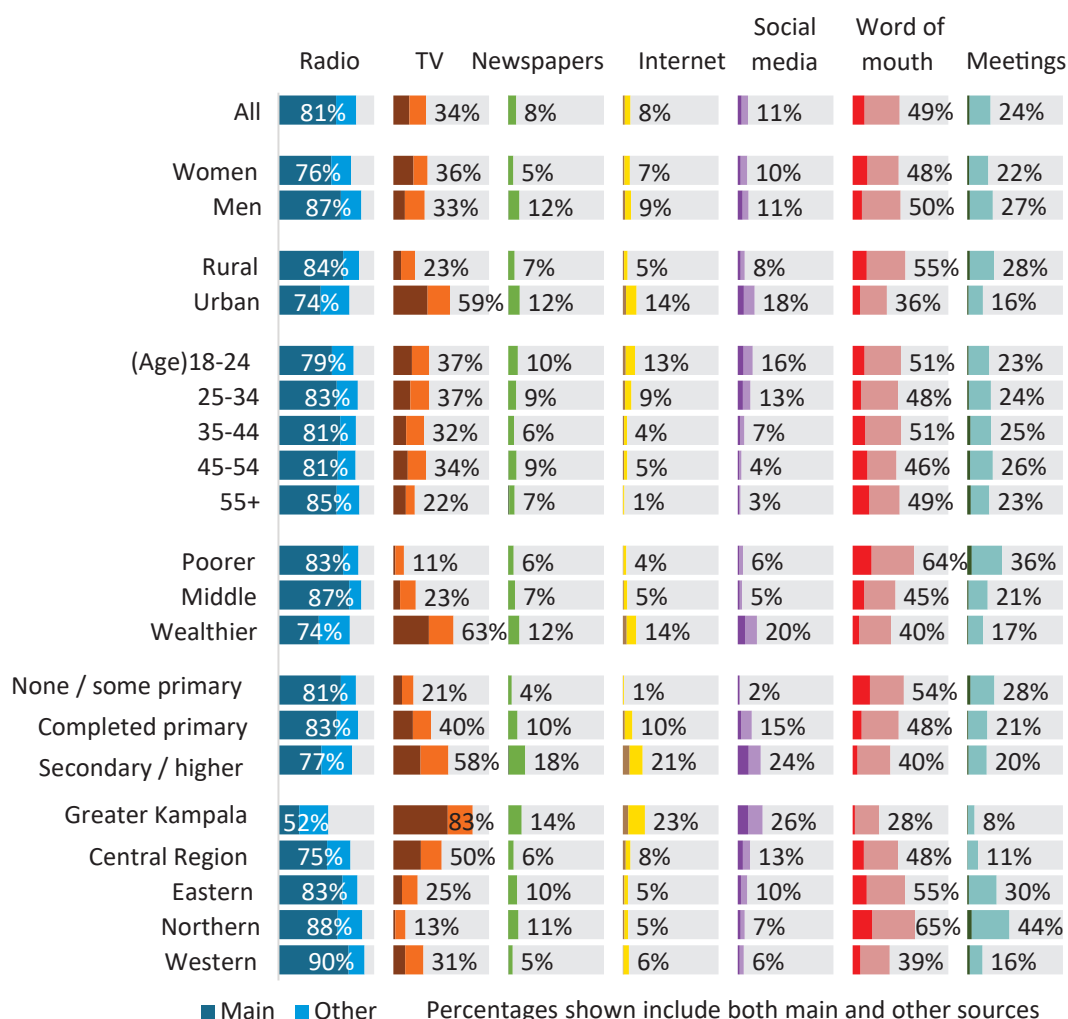
## Insight 2: Media habits vary considerably across demographic groups

Radio is the dominant source of information for all major demographic groups, with one exception: residents of Greater Kampala region, where TV ranks higher.

Other than radio, a similar pattern applies to each of the other major forms of media. Residents of urban areas, younger citizens, wealthier citizens and those with higher levels of education are much more likely than other citizens to watch TV, use the internet or social media, and to read newspapers. In the case of the internet and social media, the difference is most marked. A quarter of those with secondary education or higher (24%) cite social media as a source of information, compared to almost none (2%) among those who did not complete primary education. A similar difference applies to use of the internet. In effect, these four forms of media – TV, newspapers, the internet and social media – are almost exclusively used by a small minority of citizens: wealthier and better-educated residents of urban areas, Kampala in particular.

There are also differences in media consumption between men and women, though these differences are smaller. Women are a little more than men likely to cite TV as a source of information, while men are slightly more likely than women to cite radio or newspapers. There is no significant difference between women and men in terms of use of the internet, social media, word of mouth and meetings as sources of information.

**Figure 2: Which media do you use to get information? Which is your main source?**



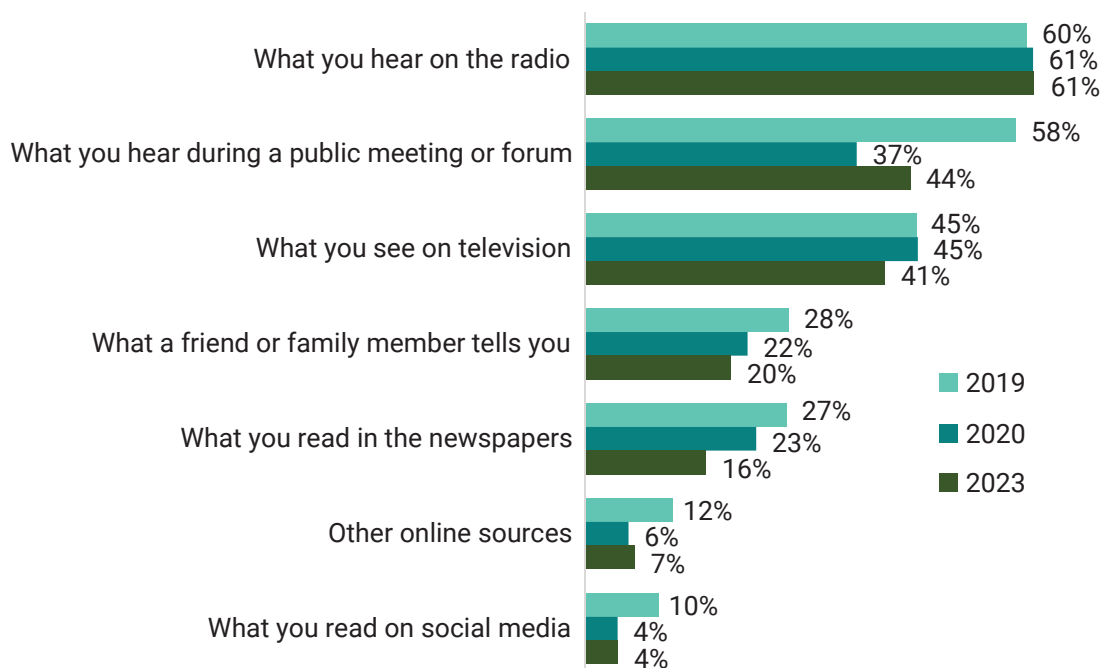
**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

### Insight 3: Citizens have most trust in information they hear on the radio

Six out of ten citizens (61%) say they trust completely information they hear on the radio, more than other forms of media. This is followed by information heard at public meetings (44%) or seen on TV (41%).

Trust has declined in several of these sources of information in recent years, including newspapers, public forums, word of mouth, and social media and other online sources.

**Figure 3: Percent who trust completely the information obtained from the following sources:**



**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

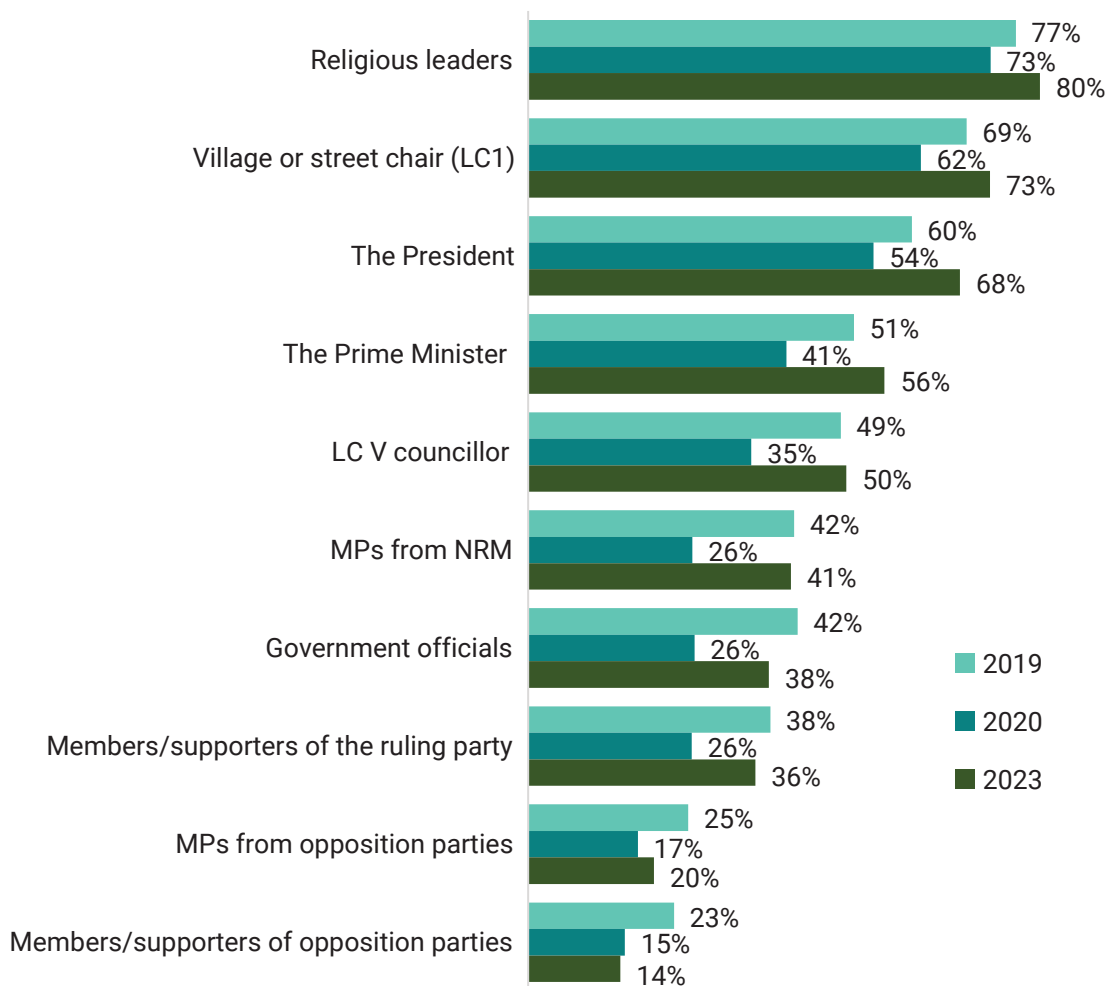
#### **Insight 4: Citizens are most likely to trust information from religious leaders, and least likely to trust information from opposition party figures**

Eight out of ten citizens (80%) say they trust information from religious leaders a lot, more than any other public figures. Seven out of ten have a lot of trust in information from their village / street chairperson (LC1) (73%) and the President (68%).

They have lower trust in information from government officials (38%), MPs from the ruling party (41%) and supporters of the ruling party (36%), and lower still in information from opposition party MPs (20%) and supporters (14%).

These patterns are broadly unchanged since 2019, though trust in information from all of these public figures was noticeably lower in 2020. It is unclear why this is the case, although the general uncertainty and under-preparedness around the Covid-19 pandemic might have caused citizens to lose trust in all traditional authority figures.

**Figure 4: Percent who trust a lot the information obtained from each of the following groups / people:**

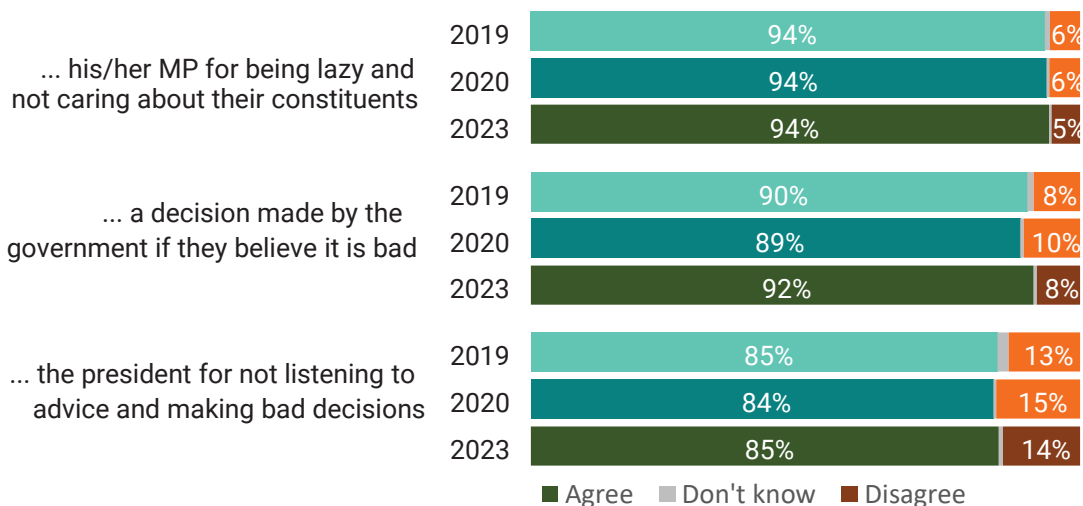


**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

### **Insight 5: Almost all citizens agree that citizens should be free to criticise MPs and national leaders, but many don't feel that this right is respected in practice**

Large majorities of citizens agree that citizens should be free to criticise MPs (94%) and the government (92%) if they believe they are not performing at a high standard. These beliefs are consistently high across recent years, showing no sign of decline.

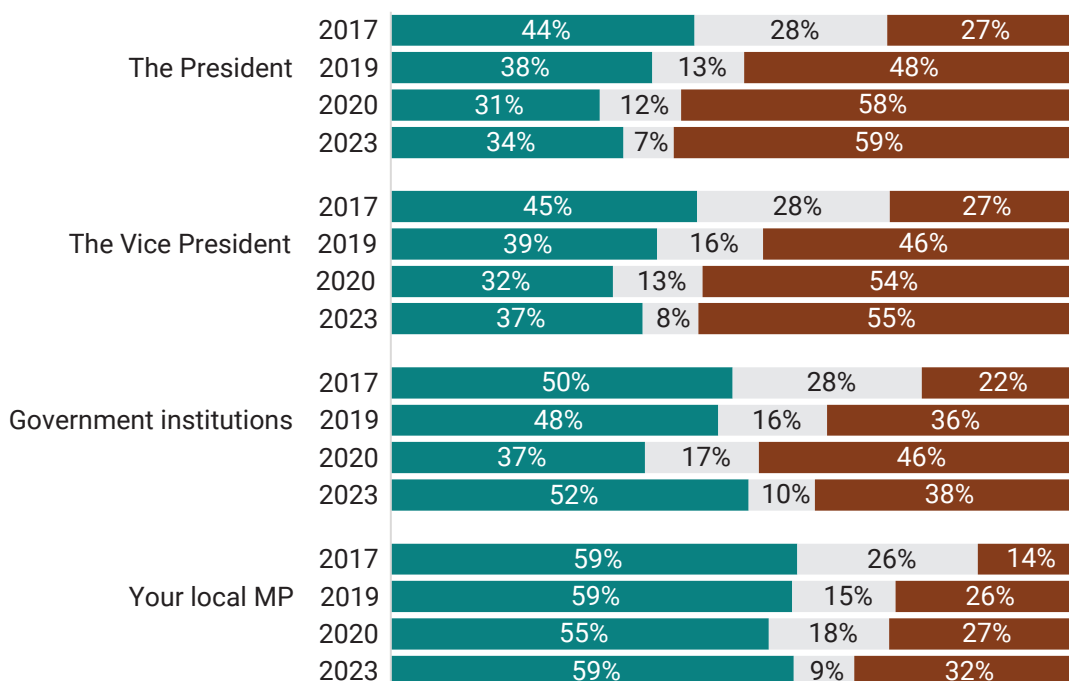
**Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree that a citizen should be free to criticise ...?**



**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

Nevertheless, in practice, citizens say that they are not free to criticize information or statements from government institutions (38%) or their local MP (32%).

**Figure 6: How free are you to criticize information or statements from the following?**



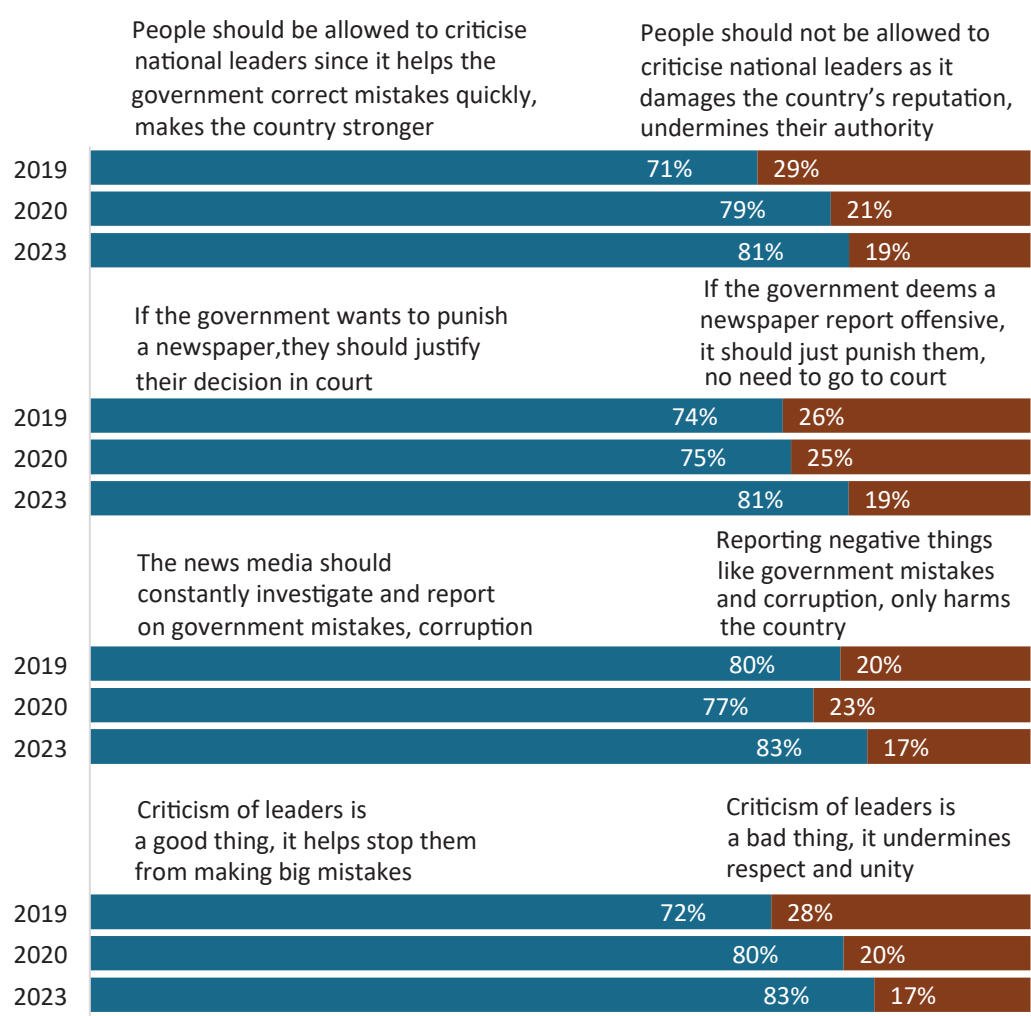
**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

# Insight 6: Public support for freedom of expression and access to information is consistently high, and rising

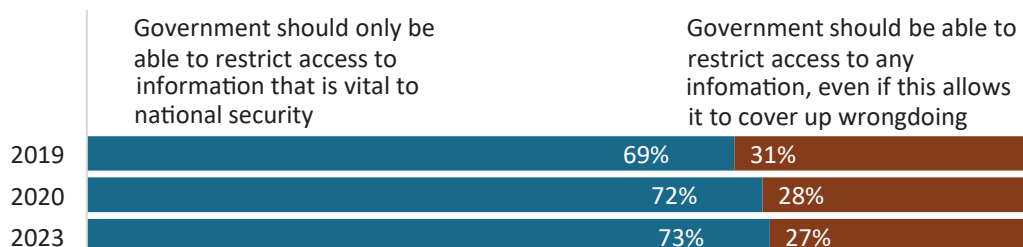
Support for freedom of expression among citizens of Uganda has been consistently high in recent years. Eight out of ten (81%) prefer the statement that people should be allowed to criticise leaders over the view that such criticism undermines their authority and damages the country. Similar numbers say that government should only be allowed to penalise newspapers by going to court (81%) and that the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption (83%).

These figures are consistently high over recent years, and show signs of increasing.

**Figure 7: From each pair of statements, which do you agree with more?**







**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
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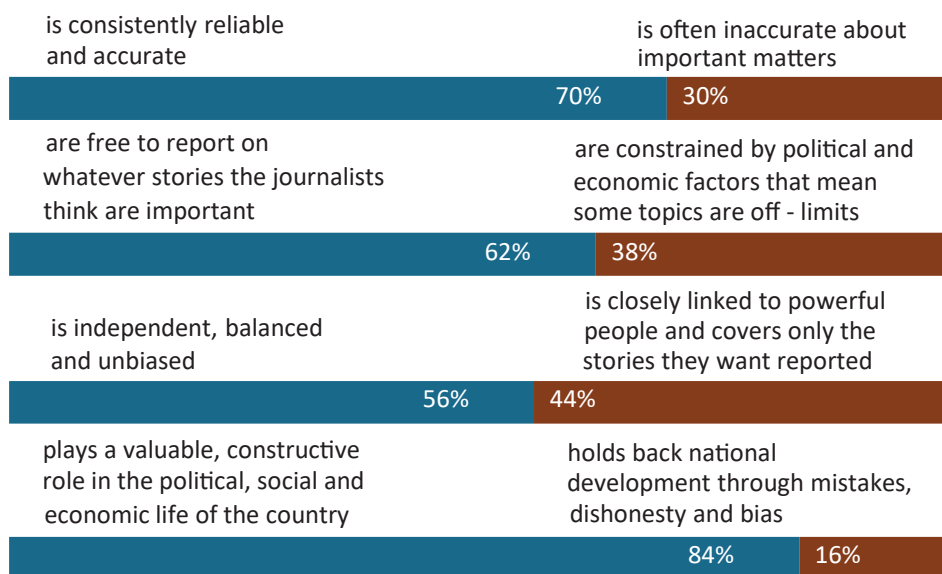
## Insight 7: Overall, citizens believe the national media play a valuable and constructive role in national life

A clear majority of citizens (84%) say the Ugandan media plays a valuable and constructive role in national life, compared to just 16% who say the media holds the country back. Most citizens also say the national media are consistently reliable and accurate (70%), are sufficiently independent that they can freely report on whatever they think is important (62%), and are balanced and unbiased (56%).

Most citizens (76%) also believe that the international media does a decent job in report on events in Uganda.

**Figure 8: In practice, the Ugandan / international media ...**

The Ugandan media ...



The international media ...

portrays Ugandan events  
in a respectful, honest and  
informative manner

is disrespectful, dishonest and  
uninformative when it reports  
about events in Ugandan



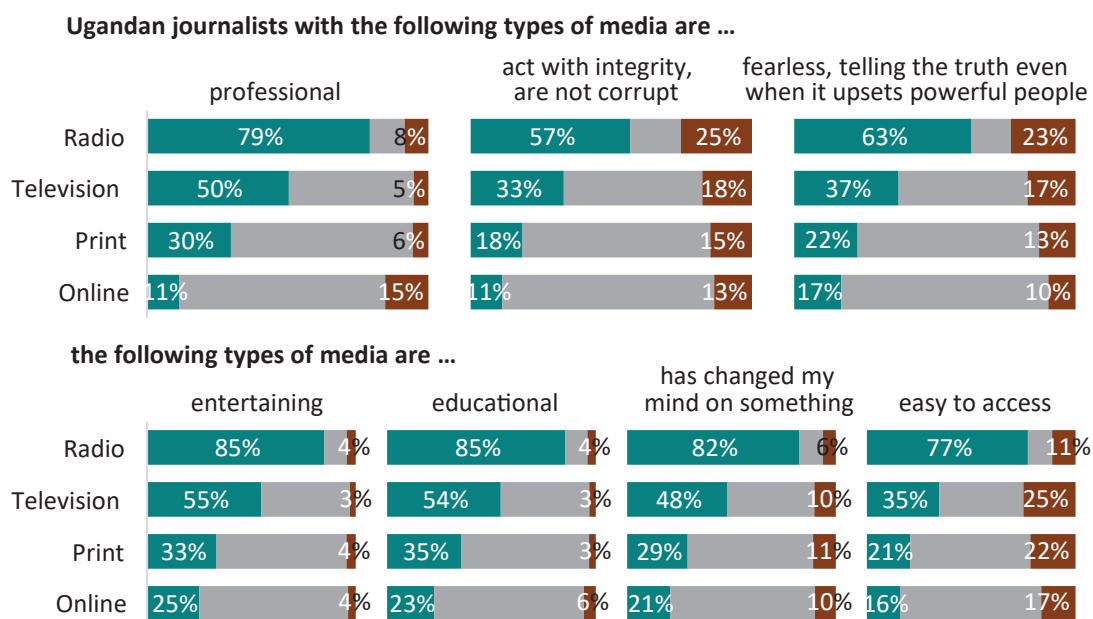
**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
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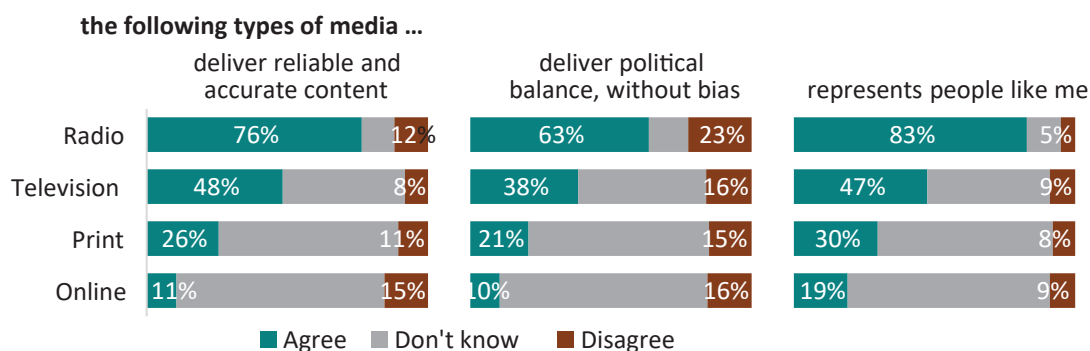
## Insight 8: Citizens are consistently positive about radio and radio journalists, and somewhat uncertain about other forms of media

Across a wide range of measures, citizens say the radio and radio journalists perform well. For example, eight out of ten citizens (79%) say radio journalists are professional, six out of ten (57%) say they act with integrity, and a similar number (63%) say they fearlessly speak truth to power. Further, most citizens say the radio is entertaining (85%), educational (85%), has changed their mind on something (82%), is reliable and accurate (76%) and represents people like them (83%).

Across other media, citizens are less certain about the performance of the media and journalists. However, this is at least partly because they are less familiar with these forms of media.

**Figure 9: Do you agree or disagree that ...?**





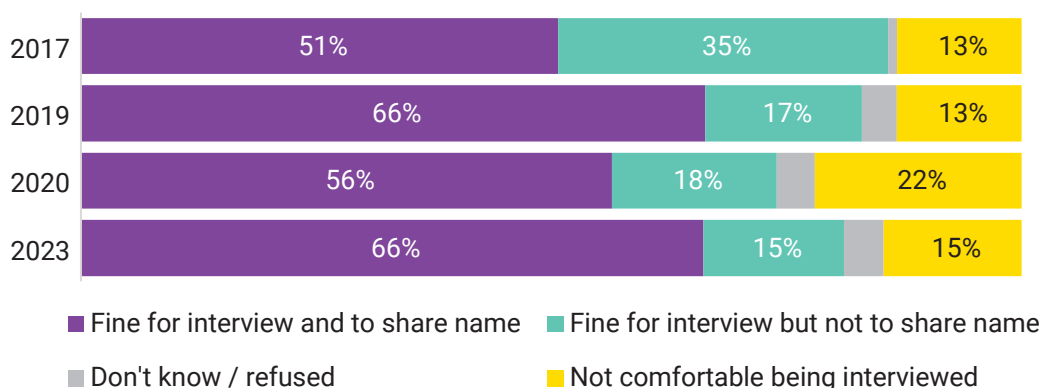
**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

## Insight 9: Most citizens would be comfortable being interviewed by a journalist

Two out of three citizens (66%) say they would be comfortably both being interviewed by a journalist and sharing their name when doing so. A further 15% would be happy being interviewed, but would prefer not to share their name.

Willingness to be interviewed is largely unchanged since 2017 (with the slight exception of 2020, when health concerns may have played a part). However, there are signs that the number of citizens who are willing to share their name with the journalist is currently higher than was the case six years ago.

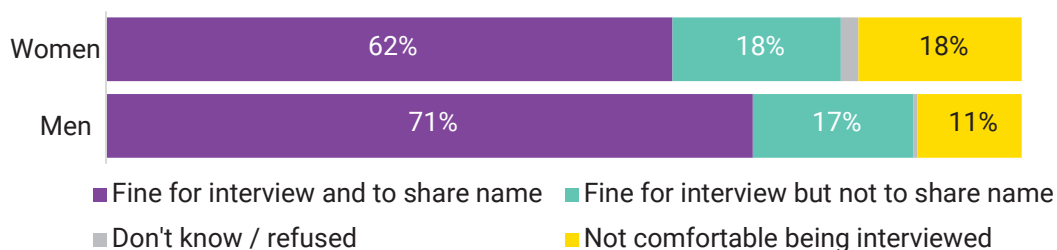
**Figure 10: Would you be comfortable being interviewed by a journalist?  
And if so, would you be willing to share your name?**



**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

Women are a little less likely than men to be willing to be interviewed, and also less likely to be willing to share their name when doing so.

**Figure 11: Would you be comfortable being interviewed by a journalist?  
And if so, would you be willing to share your name?**



**Source:** *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone panel survey round 4 (Jan-Feb 2023);  
Base: all respondents; n=2,749

### 3. Conclusions

This brief presents citizens' views on the state of the media and freedom of expression in Uganda. Three points are worth highlighting in particular.

First, citizens' media habits are evolving significantly. Radio dominates, as it has done for many years, but its lead is declining fast. This decline, however, is part of a wider fragmentation of the media environment, in which different demographic groups are increasingly using different forms of media as their sources of information. TV, newspaper, the internet and social media are also significant sources of information for some social groups: younger citizens, wealthier citizens and the better-educated, as well as those in urban areas, most particularly Kampala. The impact of this evolution may well be significant: those citizens who belong in these groups are likely to work and socialise with others who are like them. They are therefore likely to become increasingly disconnected from the poor, rural, less-educated majority. If largely separate conversations take place that each represent part, but not all, of national society, the potential for increasing division and exclusion is clear.

Second, there is a stark contrast between citizens' strong support for freedom of expression in principle and their worry that this right is often not upheld in practice. Across a wide range of measures, citizens make it very clear that they support freedom of expression: citizens' right to criticise leaders, the value of having a strong and independent media that challenges the government, etc. But most citizens say they don't have the right to criticise certain national leaders in practice.

Third, citizens express a high level of confidence in the Ugandan media as it currently operates. They largely trust the media, radio in particular, they say the media plays a valuable and constructive role in national life, and say the media – again radio in particular – are entertaining, education and represent people like them. In addition, they believe that media and journalists are freed to tell the stories they want to. Maintaining these high levels of confidence could become difficult as different parts of society increasingly depend on different forms of media. Nevertheless, it is a strong positive sign that the media has broad public support.