

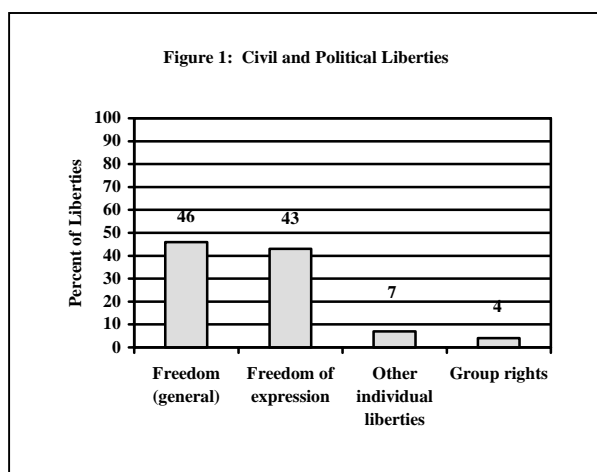


Freedom of Speech, Media Exposure, and the Defense of a Free Press in Africa

Africans value freedom of speech. In Afrobarometer* surveys in a dozen African countries, people say that democracy requires that citizens are able to criticize the performance of governments. It seems reasonable to suppose that the liberty of individuals to express themselves evolves together with the emergence of a free press. This connection raises important questions. Does exposure to a plural mass media – or to other, informal modes of communication – promote popular democratic values? What happens to such values when governments control the media of mass communications? Are ordinary Africans – or the opinion leaders among them – willing to stand up to defend press freedom? After documenting relevant facts about public opinion and media exposure, this briefing paper offers answers to these questions.

Africans associate democracy with free speech

As shown in *Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 1*, Africans associate democracy with freedom. When asked, “what does democracy mean to you?” they most frequently cite civil and political liberties (40 percent of all responses) rather than popular participation in decision-making (16 percent), regular multiparty elections (10 percent), or socioeconomic development (4 percent). After freedom in general, the respondents to Afrobarometer surveys emphasize rights of expression, including freedoms of conscience, speech and the press (43 percent of all liberties mentioned) (see Figure 1). And three quarters (76 percent) agree that a citizen’s freedom to



criticize the government is “important” or “essential” for a society to be called democratic. We use this indicator to capture popular commitments to free speech throughout this paper. So defined, free speech is valued most highly in Botswana and Nigeria (by 85 and 83 percent of adults), but less so in Namibia and Lesotho (67 and 52 percent, respectively). We interpret these results to mean that a majority of Africans across the continent rejects the culture of silence associated with authoritarian rule. Instead, they welcome new opportunities to speak out on political issues.

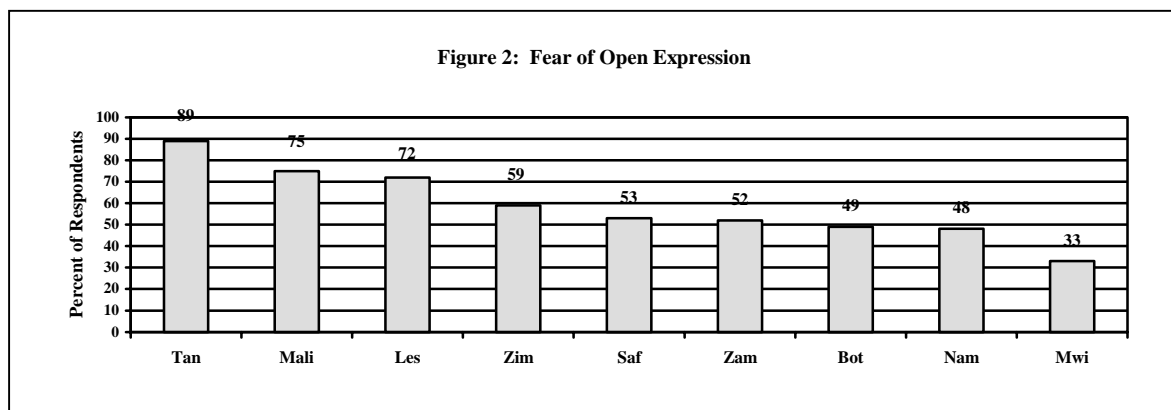
* The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from various African countries. It is coordinated by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), and Michigan State University (MSU). As reported here, Round 1 surveys covered 12 countries: Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe in the period from mid-1999 to mid-2001. Several donors support the Afrobarometer’s research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For more information, including reports with complete findings, see:

In some countries, free speech has been delivered

Is free speech being attained in Africa's emerging democracies? Africans evidently think so, because an average of 75 percent of survey respondents in the 12 Afrobarometer countries agrees that, since the transition from the previous authoritarian regime, "people are (more) free to say what they think." Nigerians, Malawians and Malians (all 89 percent) are almost unanimous in perceiving gains in free speech, but Zimbabweans are deeply divided on this issue (just 54 percent see gains).

Despite new freedoms, political fears linger

Notwithstanding political reforms, the current political atmosphere is not yet completely open. The Afrobarometer also asks people whether they agree or disagree that, "in this country, you must be very careful of what you say or do with regard to politics." Africans apparently still feel residual political fears: on average, twice as many people worry about expressing themselves (59 percent) as throw caution to the winds (29 percent). Cross-national variation is substantial, perhaps reflecting the extent of democratic transition in various countries (see Figure 2). In Tanzania, where the same political party retains power despite the introduction of multiparty elections, 89 percent say, "you must be careful of what you say." In Malawi, by contrast, where Banda-era restrictions have been largely banished, only 33 percent feel constrained about speaking out. But there is no gainsaying the fact that many Africans still see overt politicking as involving a good measure of personal risk.



Africans get political information mainly from the radio

Are these political attitudes affected by media exposure? The Afrobarometer confirms that radio has the widest reach in Africa of any medium of mass communications.¹ We asked people in the 12 countries surveyed how often they consume news from various sources: 54 percent say that they listen to a radio news bulletin every day, 21 percent claim to watch a television news broadcast with the same frequency, and just 13 percent profess to read a daily newspaper. These figures reveal the interesting new fact that television has overtaken newspapers as a source of political information, which is consistent with recent declines in newspaper circulation and the spreading coverage of the electronic media.² Notably, African governments generally find it

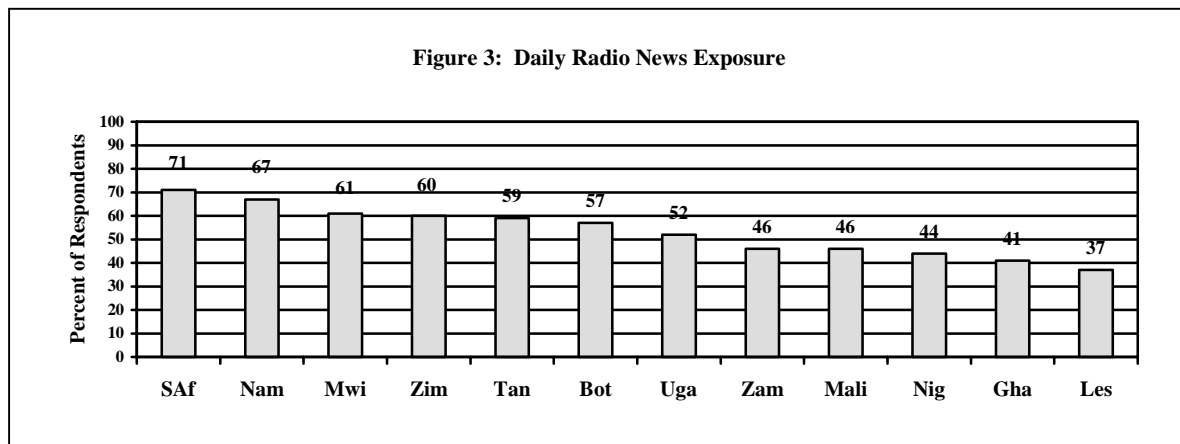
¹ UNESCO estimates the penetration of radio sets in sub-Saharan Africa at 201 per 1000 persons, compared to 43 television sets per 1000 persons. World Bank, *African Development Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2002). Note, however, that media exposure in Africa is often collective, with many users crowding around a single television set or sharing a single newspaper.

² See A.S. de Beer, F.P. Kasoma, E.R. Megwa and E. Steyn, "Sub-Saharan Africa," in John C. Merrill (ed.) *Global Journalism: Survey of International Communication* (New York: Longman, 1995).

easier to control television broadcasting than the often unruly and plural private print press. But neither TV-watching nor newspaper readership is widespread: half of the Africans we interviewed *never* watch TV news or read a newspaper. But almost everyone listens to radio news at least occasionally; only 14 percent never listen. And, despite the recent spread of new FM stations, the radio airwaves are dominated in most countries by a national (government) broadcaster, which means that most Africans still face a restricted diet of political information.³

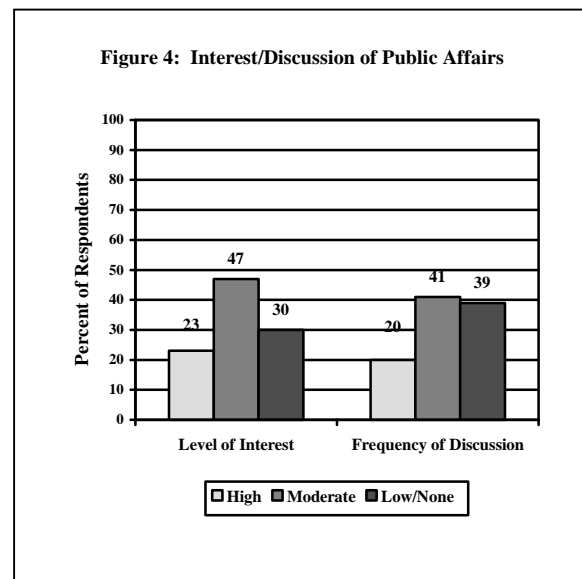
Media exposure is unevenly distributed

There are considerable regional variations in media exposure across and within African countries. Take access to daily radio news bulletins, which is higher in Southern Africa (except Lesotho) than in West Africa: whereas 71 percent of South Africans listen to radio news daily, only 44 percent of Nigerians and 41 percent of Ghanaians do so (see Figure 3). Moreover, while radio listening is widespread, other media are used mainly in urban areas: town dwellers are four times more likely than rural residents to read a daily newspaper (23 percent versus 6 percent) and five times more likely to watch television every day (44 versus 8 percent). As such, urban news consumers have a wider choice of news sources than their country cousins, who tend to rely mainly on government-controlled national radio broadcasts.



Political information diffuses informally

We suspect that the influence of the mass media on public opinion is understated by data on direct exposure. In African societies, where people place a premium on interpersonal relationships, much political information passes by word of mouth. Even in non-African societies it has long been held that “people appear to be much more influenced in their political decision(s) by face-to-face contact with other people... than by the mass media directly.”⁴ We surmise therefore that non-users of the mass media may receive the news of the day indirectly and informally, that is, via transmission by opinion leaders. To capture this dynamic, the



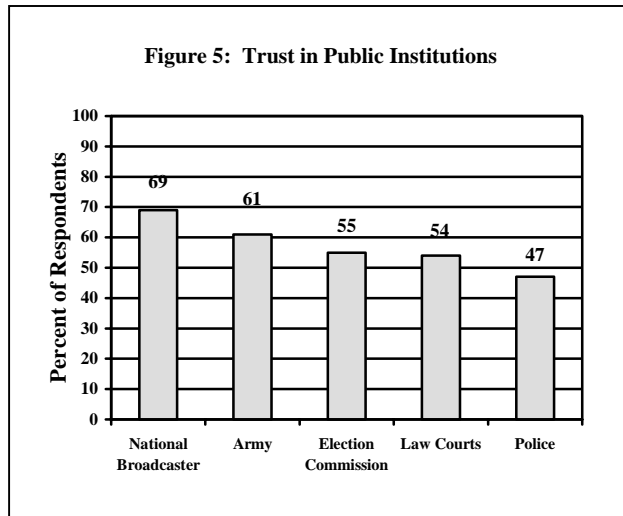
³ For a useful overview of recent developments see Goran Hyden, Michael Leslie and Folu Ogundimu, *Media and Democracy in Africa* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

⁴ Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 27-28 and 281-2.

Afrobarometer asks whether people are interested in public affairs and whether they discuss such issues with others. Overall, across the 12 countries we studied, seven out of ten people express some measure of interest in public affairs, and six out of ten discuss public affairs with others at least sometimes (see Figure 4). To identify opinion leaders, we distinguish the small minority who simultaneously express a high level of interest in, and engage in frequent discussions of, public affairs. Not surprisingly, this elite group (12 percent) also tends to be educated, to belong to voluntary associations, and to consume all three forms of mass media.

Africans trust national broadcasters

Do Africans trust the information they receive from the mass media, especially from official radio and TV broadcasters? Figure 5 shows the proportions of the general public that trust various public institutions “somewhat” or “a lot.” Remarkably, two-thirds of the Africans we interviewed give the national broadcaster a positive rating, higher than the army, the electoral commission, the law courts, and the police. Two factors seem to be at work: on one hand, the bulk of the general public tends to regard national broadcasters as reliable



watchdogs of democracy; on the other hand, ordinary people are poorly prepared to detect any bias in official reportage. In Mali, where the electronic media are relatively even-handed and the populace has limited education, fully 88 percent trust the ORTM. In Zimbabwe, by contrast, where education is more pervasive and ZBC radio and television spew blatant propaganda, only 40 percent find the coverage trustworthy.

Independent media enjoy no clear popular advantage

In Afrobarometer Round 2 we ask respondents to compare the trustworthiness of government and independent media outlets.⁵ So far, results are inconclusive: in Nigeria people trust independent newspapers and broadcasters more than official government sources; in Ghana, the opposite holds true; and, in Cape Verde, people give low trust ratings to all media, whatever their sponsorship. Thus, even though the independent print press was often in the vanguard of the popular crusade against military and one-party rulers, it has not universally reaped public acclaim in the new democratic era. Perhaps this is because private media houses often lapse into irresponsible, sensationalistic, and unprofessional journalism, which undermines the credibility of the entire independent media sector.⁶ Alternatively, since many Africans do not actually read non-official newspapers or view private TV channels, they may have no basis for forming opinions about these sources. To support both conjectures, we note that opinion leaders in Nigeria – who are relatively educated, well informed, and exposed to a variety of media opinions – are less trustful of all types of media than the public at large.

⁵ Round 2 surveys were conducted or planned for 15 countries between June 2002 and September 2003. Eleven of the 12 countries in Round 1 (minus Zimbabwe) were resurveyed, and Cape Verde, Kenya, Mozambique and Senegal were added.

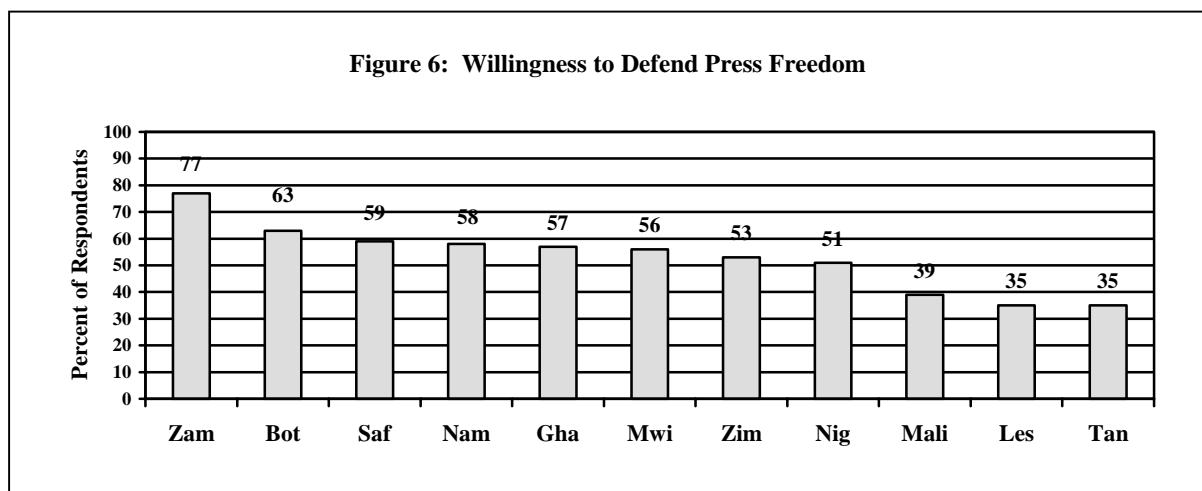
⁶ African scholars are beginning to examine the issue of press performance in emergent democracies. For example, see the special issues of *The Journal of African Communications* (Winter 2003) on ‘Nigeria, Press, and Democracy,’ and *African Rural and Urban Studies* (1997) on mass media and democratization in Africa.

Exposure to the mass media encourages attachments to free speech

Does exposure to the mass media encourage popular commitments to free speech? Certainly there are positive correlations in the Afrobarometer data between a person's direct exposure to each of the three media sources and his or her attachment to the democratic norm that citizens ought to be free to criticize governments.⁷ Moreover, there are also positive correlations for indirect influences via opinion leaders.⁸ The best combination for the formation of attachments to expressive liberties appears to be daily newspaper access *plus* regular discussion of public affairs. Africans who do both of these things are significantly more likely to treasure free speech than those who do neither (86 versus 74 percent). If anything, the indirect effect of frequent group discussion is slightly more powerful in nurturing support for the right to engage in criticism of government than the direct effect of reading a daily newspaper.⁹ And, predictably, trust in a national broadcaster *reduces* attachment to free speech.¹⁰

But people will not always stand up to defend press freedoms

Do popular preferences for free speech have tangible behavioral consequences? To get at this important practical question, we asked people what they would do if the authorities "shut down newspapers that criticized the government." The Africans we interviewed are divided in their responses. Barely one-half (53 percent) says they would do something, whereas 41 percent would do nothing, and 7 percent would actually support the government. In most cases, "doing something" amounts to little more than discussing a media crackdown with friends and neighbors; less than one-quarter would either join a protest demonstration or complain to a public official. Citizens professed the greatest willingness to defend press freedoms in Zambia and Botswana, and least willingness in Lesotho and Tanzania (see Figure 6).



⁷ While all relationships are statistically significant ($p < .001$), they are not especially strong: Pearson's r for radio = .060; for TV, $r = .062$; and for newspapers, $r = .079$.

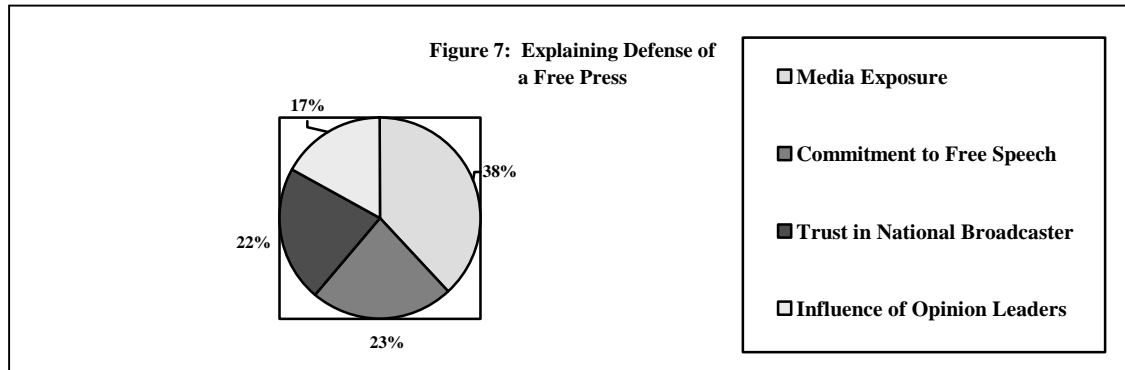
⁸ For interest in public affairs, $r = .039$ ($p < .001$), and for discussion of public affairs, $r = .098$ ($p < .001$).

⁹ In multivariate regression, $\beta = .085$ for discussion and $\beta = .061$ for newspapers.

¹⁰ Pearson's $r = -.073$, $p < .001$.

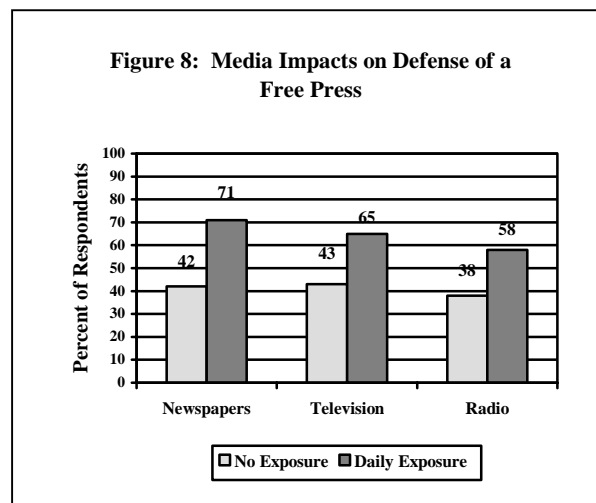
Defense of a free press is driven by media exposure

What best explains whether or not people will stand up to defend press freedom? Is it: (a) the strength of their commitments to free speech; (b) the extent of their direct exposure to mass media; (c) the indirect influences of opinion leaders; or (d) popular trust in the national broadcaster? Or does defending press freedom hinge on all of the above? A simple multivariate analysis reveals that all these factors matter to an overall explanation, but that media exposure matters most. As Figure 7 shows, an index of media exposure explains more variance in an individual's willingness to defend press freedom than any other factor.¹¹ In other words, there is no substitute for direct exposure to the mass media itself in generating political activism around the issue of press freedom in Africa.



Newspapers – more than radio – are critical to press freedom and democracy

It is commonly thought that, because radio reaches more people in Africa than any other communications medium, it is the ideal channel for all aspects of civic and political education.¹² But we arrive at a different conclusion in relation to defense of a free press, at least as this concept was measured in the Afrobarometer. We find that, among the various media, newspaper readership is more important in encouraging people to defend press freedom than TV viewing, and much more important than radio listening (see Figure 8). In other words – and not surprisingly – African newspaper readers are much more likely (71 percent) than African radio listeners (58 percent) to resist a government shutdown of independent publications. This finding points to the central role of the print press in the cultivation of democratic attitudes and practices. It is the most effective tool of mass communication for encouraging and reinforcing popular commitments to free speech, the emergence of opinion leadership, the reduction of political fear, and open criticism of national broadcasters. In the final analysis, wide readership of newspapers is vital to the consolidation of democracy itself.



¹¹ The regression model explains 6 percent of the total variance in defense of the press; the slices of pie chart indicate the proportional composition of that 6 percent. Note: the trust relationship is negative.

¹² See Louise M. Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995).