PAPUA NEW GUINEA: UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

BBC MEDIA ACTION

Context

One of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, Papua New Guinea is often described as a "country of many nations". Comprising the eastern half of the Pacific's largest non-continental island and over 600 smaller islands, the country's population of close to eleven million is scattered between islands, coastal areas and mountainous highland terrains – making it one of the lowest population densities in the world. Some 85 percent of the population live in remote, off-grid villages where communities retain ancient cultures and language and are dependent on subsistence and small cash-crop agriculture.

population close to eleven million

over 600 smaller islands

Language:

Papua New Guinea is known for its linguistic diversity: English, Tok Pisin (the widely spoken Melanesian Pidgin), and Hiri Motu are the three official languages; however more than 850 indigenous languages are spoken among over 1,000 tribes throughout the country.

The country's rugged terrain and scattered atolls, combined with vast linguistic diversity, has meant that communication and information remain a huge development gap after almost 50 years of the country's independence. Whilst PNG has the largest media sector in the Pacific, media penetration is largely restricted to urban areas where the English-speaking populations live. The capital city of Port Moresby is the bustling centre of the nation's media coverage and the base for the country's five television stations, two daily and three weekly tabloid newspapers, and the hub for much of the national radio network. Few publications, television, or radio signals reach the country's rugged interior, and community and church-run radio stations play a vital role in rural communication. Consequently, Papua New Guinea's media coverage is heavily urban-centric, and the vast rural population has limited voice and representation in mainstream media. Further challenges to the media industry include the impact of media company ownership (state, private sector, local and international) which can influence editorial values and practice and sometimes conflict with local audience needs and the cultural diversity in PNG. Additional sector wide challenges include pay and high turn-over among journalists, who can face intimidation, direct threats, censorship, lawsuits and bribery attempts, as well as direct interference.[1]

Research Methodology

Data in this research briefing is based on a mixed method research study designed by BBC Media Action. The research was designed to understand the lives of communities in Papua New Guinea, their media access, usage and preferences, how information is shared and perceived, and how key national and local issues affect people's lives.

A nationwide mobile phone survey[2] of 1,010 Papua New Guineans aged 18+ was conducted in March 2025 by Tebbutt Research. Respondents were sampled via a randomly generated list of mobile phone numbers. Survey quotas were overlaid to ensure accurate representation

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[1]https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-67763167
[2]Although other data collection methods were considered for this research, the costs and logistics of face-to-face interviewing were not feasible in the scope of this study and were unlikely to be able to reach significantly more people in such geographic contexts due to the travel required.
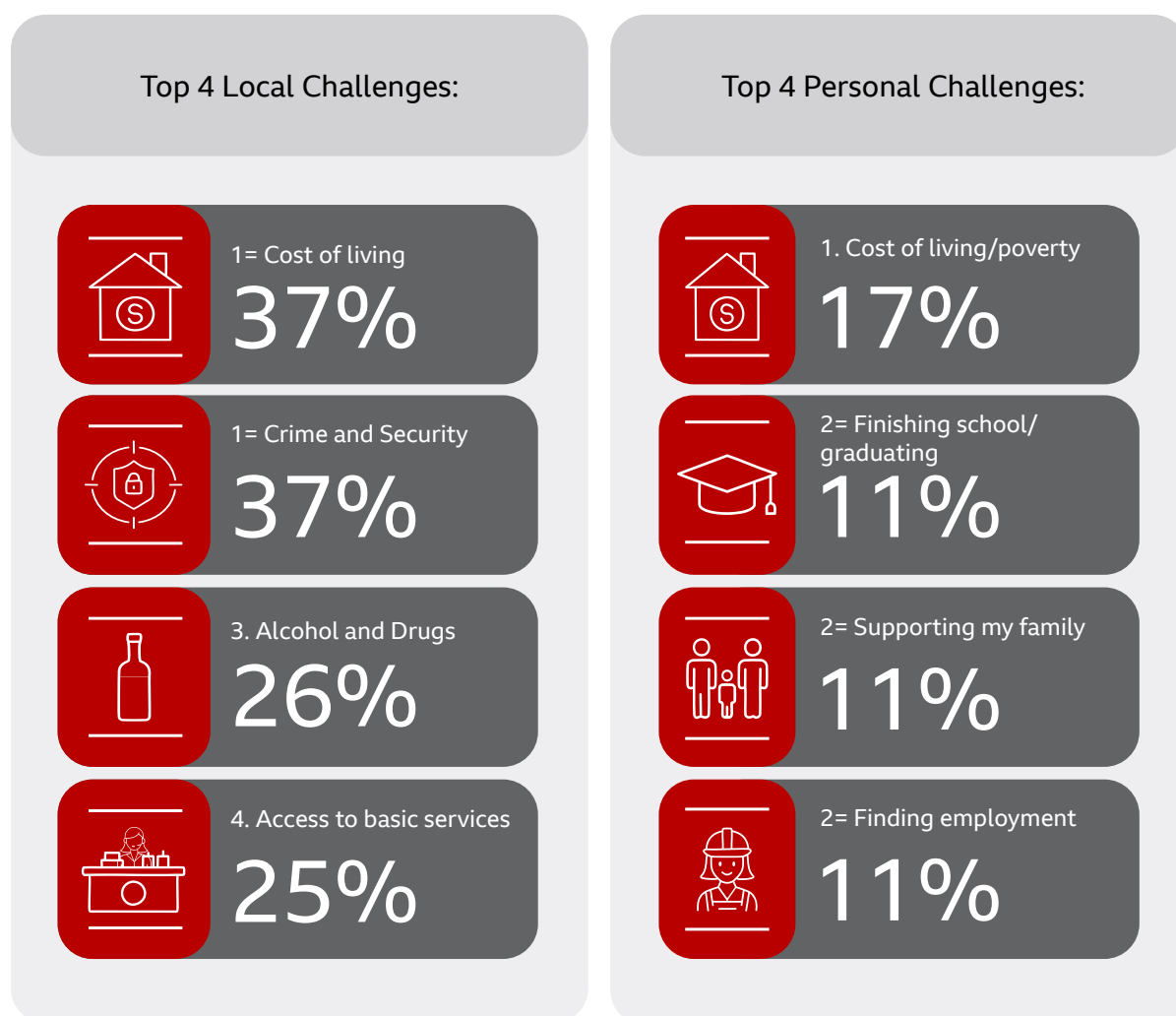
by sex and age within each province in alignment with most recent population data. At the end of fieldwork, weights were applied to adjust survey proportions where needed. Based on this research methodology, all survey participants had access to a phone, either at home or elsewhere. Therefore, the percentage findings presented in this briefing represent the media habits and preferences of a subset of the Papua New Guinea population – that is adults who have access to a mobile phone. As such, the findings presented in this briefing should not be considered representative of the total adult population of Papua New Guinea.

Qualitative research was used to complement the nationwide survey. Fourteen focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Port Moresby, Mount Haegen, Lae, and Bougainville. In each location, the FGDs included men and women from marginalised communities, those with lower media access, and persons with disabilities.

Findings

1. What are the key concerns and issues affecting Papua New Guineans?

People were asked in the survey what issues were most affecting them. The cost of living was the most frequently cited challenge at both the personal and local level among mobile users in Papua New Guinea – a concern shared consistently across age, location, income and education.

Top 4 Local Challenges:	Top 4 Personal Challenges:
1= Cost of living **37%**	1. Cost of living/poverty **17%**
1= Crime and Security **37%**	2= Finishing school/ graduating **11%**
3. Alcohol and Drugs **26%**	2= Supporting my family **11%**
4. Access to basic services **25%**	2= Finding employment **11%**

Secondary issues differed among urban and rural respondents, with urban residents regularly citing crime and security and unemployment as key issues at the local level, whilst rural respondents were significantly more likely to identify access to basic services as a key challenge.
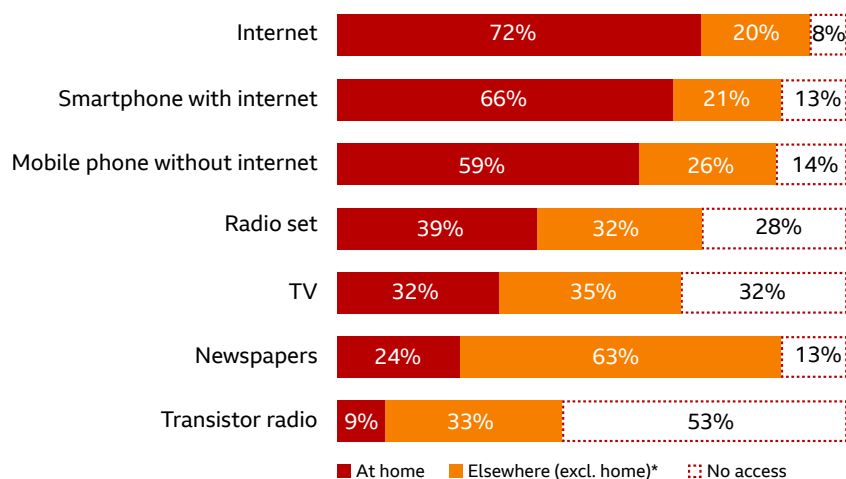
2. How do people in Papua New Guinea access and use media?

DataReportal estimates that just over five million mobile connections were active in Papua New Guinea in early 2025 – this accounts for 47% of the total population.[3] Of these mobile connections, an estimated 87% are smartphones or 'broadband' enabled, meaning they can connect to the internet. However, some subscription plans only include access to voice and SMS services, and the cost of cellular data is a barrier for many users, therefore this broadband figure is not an accurate proxy for mobile internet use. In fact, DataReportal estimates internet penetration in Papua New Guinea accounts for just 24% of the total population in 2025.

A large proportion of PNG's population (estimated at approximately 33%)[4] remains outside of mobile network coverage and therefore 'unconnected', mainly due to the complexity of extending mobile networks in remote and mountainous areas with low population density. Although mobile internet penetration continues to grow in the country, mobile broadband availability and network quality, affordability of devices and services, and limited digital literacy skills are key barriers to adoption and use.

BBC Media Action's survey of adult mobile phone users found that media access[5] in PNG is often outside of the home, with 'ownership' or direct personal access to media platforms and devices limited. This is reflected in the frequency with which respondents report using media, with less than one in three respondents reporting daily use of any media and close to 50% of respondents reporting using each media type less often than once a month.

Media access among mobile phone users in Papua New Guinea[6]

Media	At home	Elsewhere (excl. home)*	No access
Internet	72%	20%	8%
Smartphone with internet	66%	21%	13%
Mobile phone without internet	59%	26%	14%
Radio set	39%	32%	28%
TV	32%	35%	32%
Newspapers	24%	63%	13%
Transistor radio	9%	33%	53%

*While multiple response were permitted for the questions (i.e. access both at home and elsewhere), this chart presents responses as a signle response - i.e., access at thome, elsewhere only, or no access

Q: And do you have access to these media devices in your home or elsewhere? Base: n=1,010

Daily media use

Q: How frequently do you do the following, if at all? Base: n=1013

14%	**25%**	**28%**	**10%**	**16%**	**7%**
Radio	Social Media	Internet	TV	Word of mouth	Newspapers

Frequency of using media

	Daily	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less often	Never
Use internet	28%	22%	5%	21%	24%
Visit social media	25%	24%	5%	17%	29%
Word of Mouth	16%	34%	12%	28%	9%
Listen to radio	14%	21%	7%	31%	26%
Watch TV	10%	19%	7%	28%	36%
Read newspapers	7%	28%	14%	31%	19%

Mobile phone users n=1,010

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Internet and smartphones are the most 'accessible' media, but use is irregular and limited for most people. Among adults in PNG with access to a mobile phone, 92% have access to the internet either at home (72%) or elsewhere (20%), and 87% have access to a smartphone (66% at home; 21% elsewhere).[7] However, access is inequitable, with those aged over 45 years, those living in rural areas, and those with a low level of education significantly less likely to have access to internet and/or a smartphone with internet. People living in the Highlands region are significantly less likely to have access to a smartphone (83%), while those living in the Southern region (where the capital city of Port Moresby is located) are over-represented among those with access (92%).

Whilst most survey respondents reported having access to the internet, regular usage is much more limited. In fact, just 28% of PNG mobile users report using the internet daily, and less than 50% are using it at least once a week. This reflects the shared nature (and limited direct personal use) of devices in households, limited network coverage, and the high cost of data, which younger adults in particular cite as a barrier to regular use of the internet.

> " I have a phone but only get to access Facebook when I come to town because back home there is no mobile phone network. "
>
> – Woman, Bougainville

Access and use of traditional media often takes place outside of the home. Television, radio and newspapers are often accessed outside the home, in shared or public spaces, and are used relatively infrequently by the mobile phone users surveyed. Only around one in ten respondents report daily use of each media (14% for radio, 10% for TV, and 7% for newspapers), most commonly among those living in urban areas, reflecting the urban-centric nature of the PNG media landscape. Older audiences reported being particularly reliant on traditional media at what they describe as 'structured times', such as evening news bulletins on TV and news hours on the radio. Audiences also talk of listening to the radio in the car or on the bus while commuting, whilst televisions and newspapers are often shared among communities.

> " Personally I prefer to watch the 6pm news on TV and I usually do this at the house but sometimes people in the streets bring their TVs out so that is where I watch as well. "
>
> - [Man, Port Moresby]

[7]It should be noted that survey respondents represent a sub-set of the PNG population, adults with access to a mobile phone. As such, % figures should not be considered representative of the total PNG population, of which it is estimated only 47% have access to a mobile phone.

Cost and accessibility are the key barriers to frequent use of traditional media.

Whilst radio is valued for its affordability, poor or limited signal were cited as key barriers to use. Television and newspapers are seen to represent a cost, with a TV set out of reach for many, electricity costly and unreliable, and the travel required to get to a newspaper prohibitive.

> " As for newspapers, those well-off citizens are able to afford newspapers every day to read news being published. "
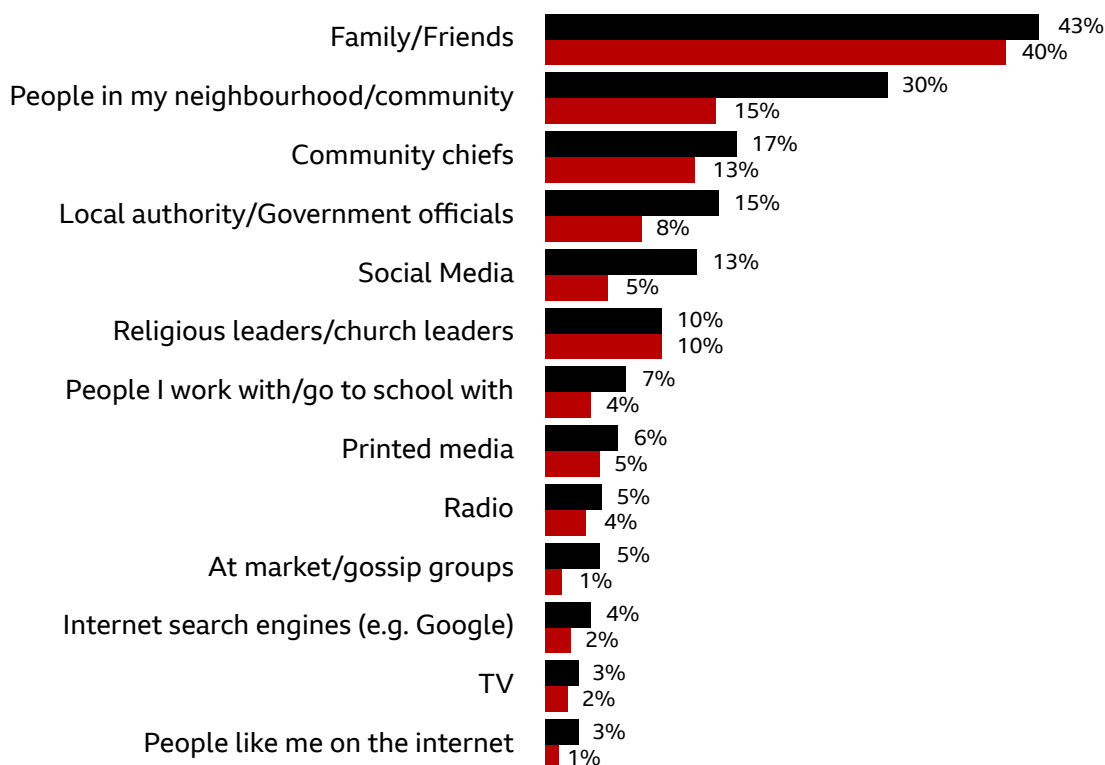>
> – Man, Mt Haegen

3. How are Papua New Guineans consuming and sharing news and information?

Across communities, the way people consume news and information is shaped by accessibility, speed, and trust. Whilst word of mouth prevails as the key source of news and information in Papua New Guinea, audiences report strategically combining media, where available, to piece together and clarify information.

Word of mouth and second-hand information remains the key means of accessing information, filling significant gaps in access to media.

Sources of Trusted information:

Source	Source of information	Trust in information
Family/Friends	43%	40%
People in my neighbourhood/community	30%	15%
Community chiefs	17%	13%
Local authority/Government officials	15%	8%
Social Media	13%	5%
Religious leaders/church leaders	10%	10%
People I work with/go to school with	7%	4%
Printed media	6%	5%
Radio	5%	4%
At market/gossip groups	5%	1%
Internet search engines (e.g. Google)	4%	2%
TV	3%	2%
People like me on the internet	3%	1%

Q. Where or who do you usually go to find information about the issues? Base: n=1,010
Q. Among the sources you have mentioned, which ones do you trust? Base: n=871
(respondents who mention a source)

■ Source of information
■ Trust in information

Family and friends and people in the neighbourhood/community were by far the two most frequently mentioned sources of news and information. Similarly, when asked how they commonly shared information, 'word of mouth' was the most frequently cited means – either in person (63%), via telephone (41%), or at gatherings (40%).

Community leaders, professionals, and family networks play a key role in both disseminating and confirming news in remote locations with limited access to media. Audiences talk of getting news when someone has recently travelled from an urban centre, bringing information back to share with them, sometimes 2-3 weeks out of date.

"When I have enough data, I access Facebook to get information. But when I have no data, I usually wait for people who go to town. When they return, I usually borrow their print newspapers and read everything to get information."

– Youth, Lae Morobe Province

How Audiences Share Information

63%	41%	40%
In person	By telephone	At a gathering

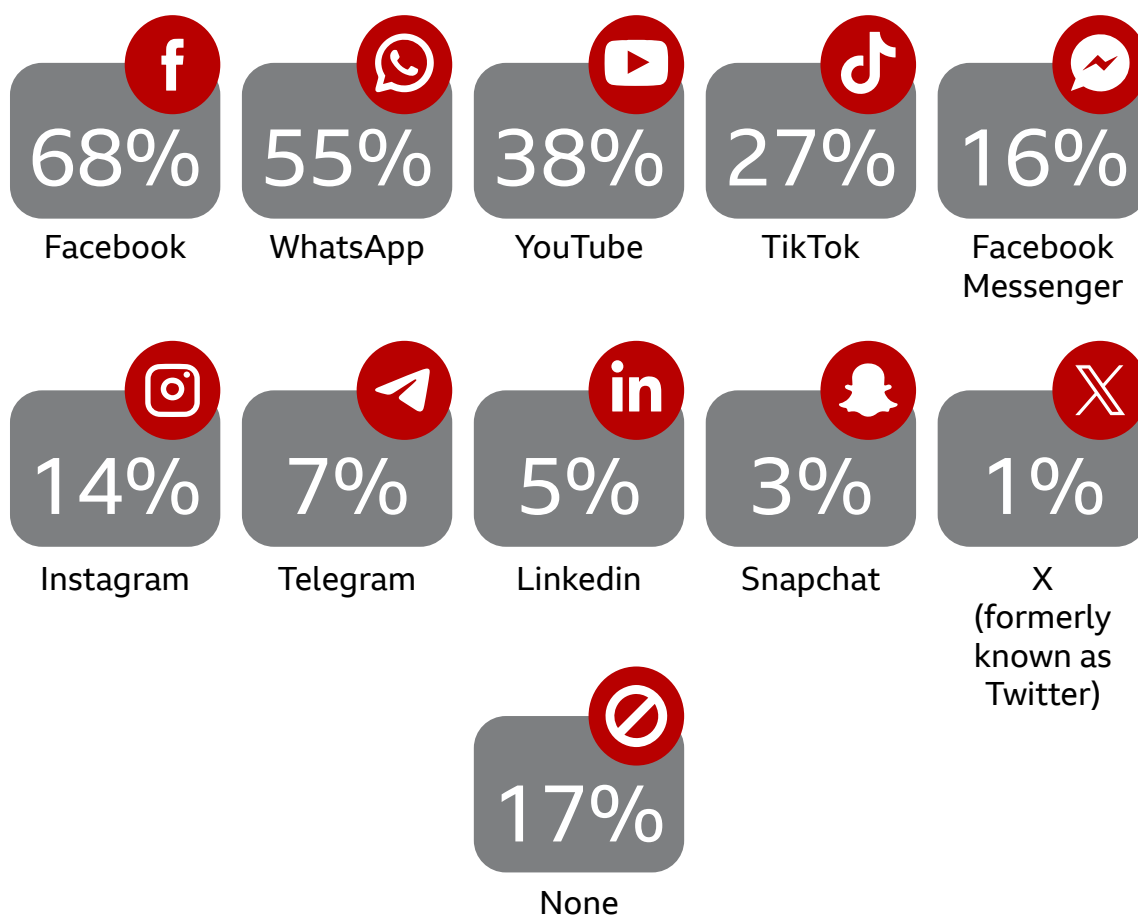| 18%	16%	12%
Post on social media	Via messaging apps	"Like" a post on social media

Q. How do you share news and information with others? Base: n=1,010

Social media is increasingly accessible and popular as a source of news and information. Among adults with access to a mobile phone, 25% visit social media platforms on a daily basis and 24% visit weekly. Accessing social media is by far the most common purpose mentioned by internet users (cited by 57%), and Facebook is the most visited platform. Audiences value social media for the speed and immediacy of information, as well as the accessibility (via smartphone). It is considered the go-to source for breaking news and updates.

68%	55%	38%	27%	16%
Facebook	WhatsApp	YouTube	TikTok	Facebook Messenger

14%	7%	5%	3%	1%
Instagram	Telegram	Linkedin	Snapchat	X (formerly known as Twitter)

17%

None

(base = 776 - those who report accessing social media)

> " Phones are always accessible to us. Some of us live far from town and don't have access to TV, and sometimes paying bus fare to buy a newspaper is too costly. We have no faster way to get news than going online to check. "
>
> – Woman, Mt Haegen

Notably, those using social media daily are significantly more likely to be male, urban, highly educated, employed, have a high income, and/or studying. Conversely, those who do not use social media are significantly more likely to be female, rural, have a low level of education, unemployed, householders or farmers/fishermen.

Information is consumed in a layered way, with audiences checking content across radio, TV and online, to build a full picture of news and events. For those with a smartphone (and particularly youth), social media dominates as a first port of call for information due to its speed, immediacy, and ad hoc accessibility. However traditional media (radio, television, and newspapers) serve to verify and anchor trust in information, whilst interpersonal networks are an over-arching source of information and clarification.

Among Port Moresby's diverse communities, media consumption patterns show a dynamic mix of old and new, harnessing the broad availability of media in the urban setting. Audiences report frequently toggling between platforms, using mobile phones as their main tool to access social media platforms (predominantly Facebook, as well as YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok), while tuning in to radio (FM100, Radio Maria), watching EMTV, and reading the Post Courier for fact-checking purposes, especially for issues considered more 'serious', such as political, health, or national issues.

> "Best to compare news across the different media platforms to assess [the] authenticity of the content broadcasted. I trust TV WAN and NBC Buka most. I trust social media less."
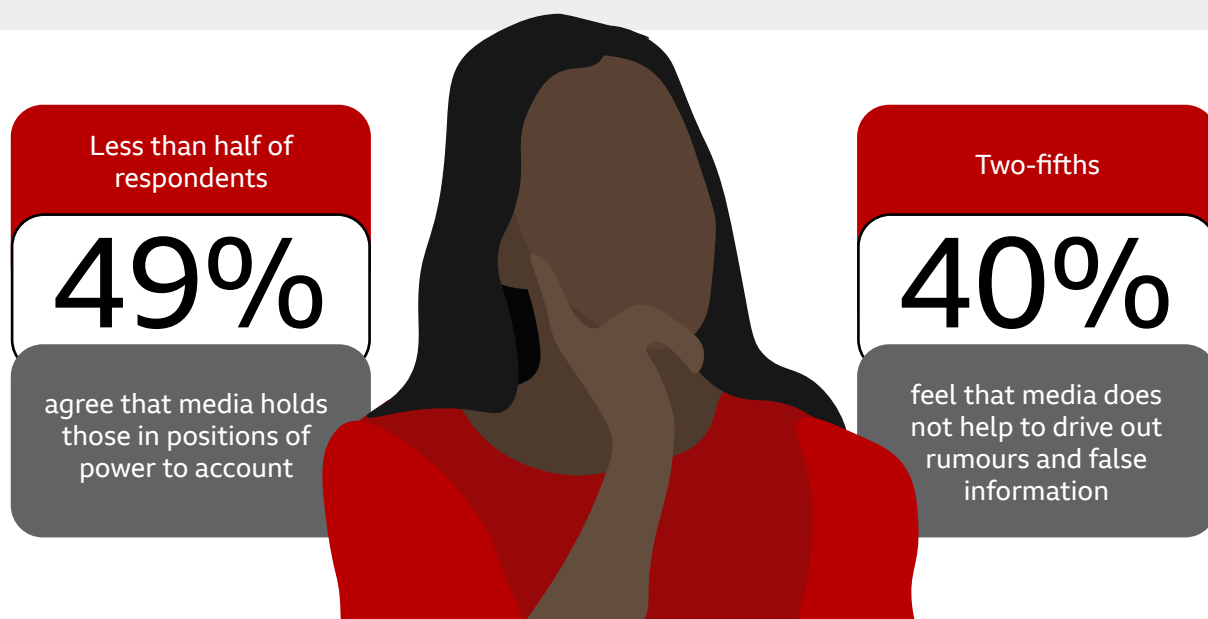>
> – Woman, Bougainville

A layered approach is also described by participants living in rural areas with more limited media coverage and/or access. In these settings, whilst word-of-mouth still predominates as the first step in hearing news, the increasing access to smartphones in these areas has meant that social media is becoming a key source of news and information.

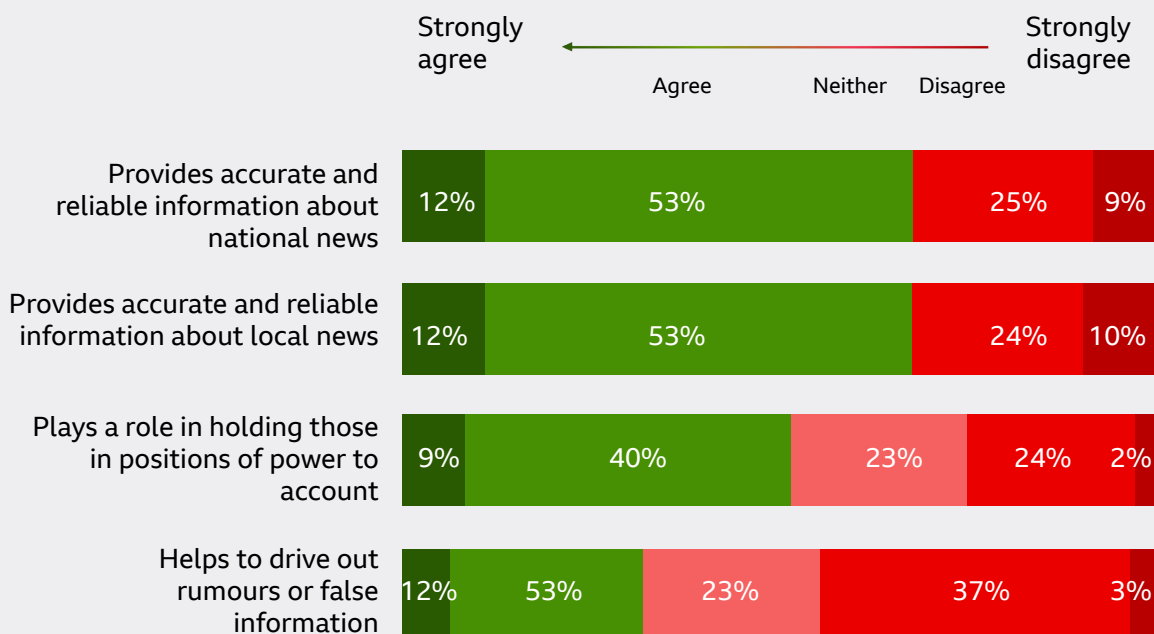*Opportunities for fact-checking are more limited for communities with less access to formal media.*

People in rural areas report actively seeking to cross-check information using traditional media but can only do so when the opportunity arises - for example, during town visits or via media shared among the community. Notably, in many cases this verification process is likely subject to significant delays, with survey data indicating that most respondents use radio, TV, and newspapers less often than once a week.

4. What do Papua New Guineans think of the media?

Audiences value the media for accurate news and information but call into question the media's role as the 'fourth estate'. Survey respondents largely agreed that media provided accurate and reliable information, however there is scepticism around media's role in holding those in power to account and countering rumours. Less than half of respondents (49%) agree that media holds those in positions of power to account, whilst 40% feel that media does not help to drive out rumours and false information. Furthermore, politicians and the government are commonly mentioned as key sources of false or misleading information (by 31% and 22% of respondents, respectively). Audiences we spoke to, cite the need for the media to provide more investigative journalism to expose corruption and ask tougher questions of public officials.
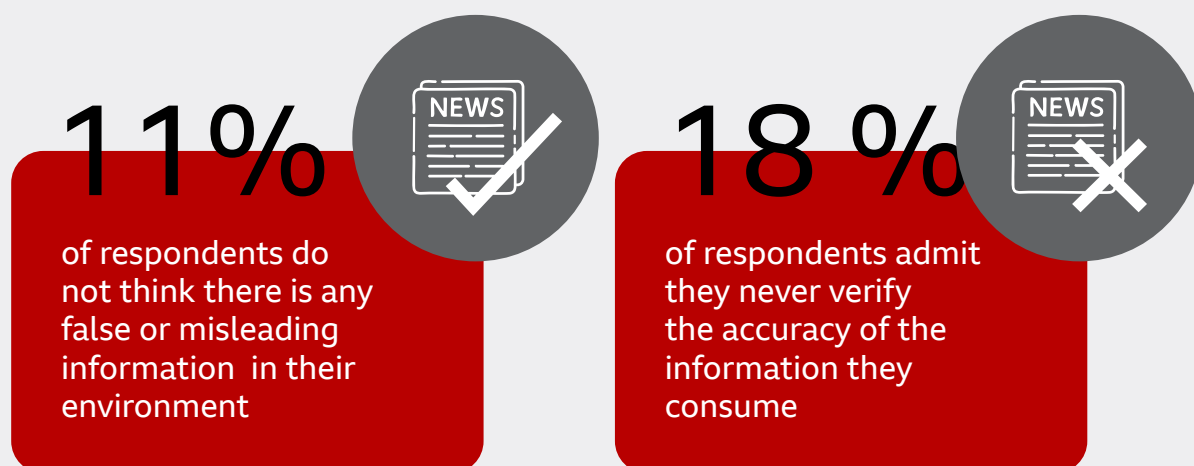
Less than half of respondents

49%

agree that media holds those in positions of power to account

Two-fifths

40%

feel that media does not help to drive out rumours and false information

Perceptions of the Media

Strongly agree ← Agree   Neither   Disagree → Strongly disagree

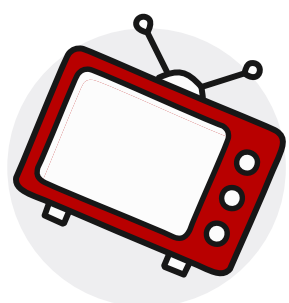|	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Provides accurate and reliable information about national news	12%	53%		25%	9%
Provides accurate and reliable information about local news	12%	53%		24%	10%
Plays a role in holding those in positions of power to account	9%	40%	23%	24%	2%
Helps to drive out rumours or false information	12%	53%	23%	37%	3%

Mobile phone users n=1,010

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False information is seen as widespread, yet many remain unaware or unconcerned. While many people believe they encounter false or misleading information regularly—especially those with higher education—around 11% do not think there is any in their environment. Despite this, nearly 20% of respondents admit they never verify the accuracy of the information they consume. Verification, when it does occur, is often informal, relying on traditional media or personal networks like friends and family. Interestingly, those who lack confidence in identifying misinformation are also the least likely to check facts, highlighting a concerning gap in media literacy.
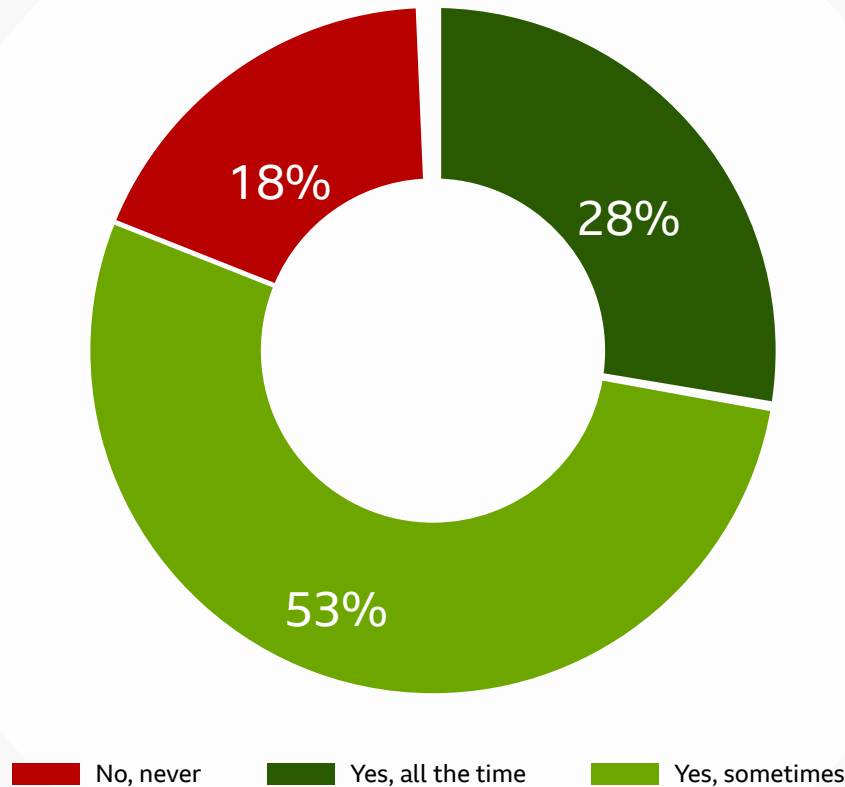
11%

of respondents do not think there is any false or misleading information in their environment

18 %

of respondents admit they never verify the accuracy of the information they consume

Perceived Frequency of Exposure to False or Misleading Information

18%	Every day
39%	At least once a week
30%	Several times a month
11%	Never / none exists

Don't know

Q: How frequently do you come across information that you think is false or misleading? Base: n= 1,010
Q: How often do you check information for accuracy? Base: n=1,010

Reported Frequency of Checking Accuracy of Information

18%

28%

53%

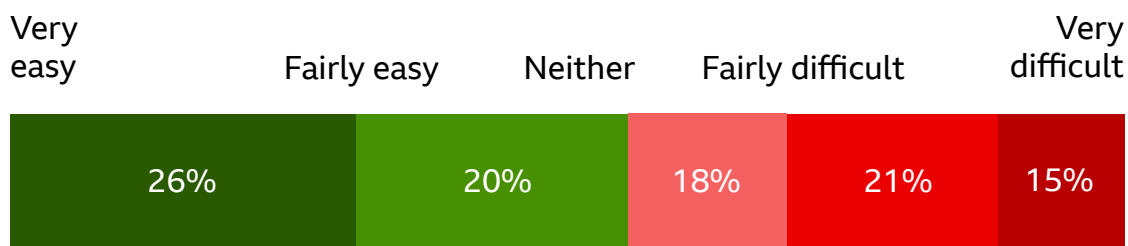**Legend:** 🟥 No, never 🟩 Yes, all the time 🟩 Yes, sometimes

Confidence in spotting misinformation is high, but blame is placed on others. A majority of people express confidence in their ability to detect false information, particularly men and those with higher education or income levels. However, this confidence coexists with a strong belief that misinformation is primarily spread by politicians, governments, and ordinary citizens. Women and those with lower media access are more likely to express uncertainty about the sources of misinformation.

Social media is the main battleground for misinformation, but trust hinges on the source. Respondents report encountering misinformation most frequently on social media, though word-of-mouth also plays a role. Trust in information is highly contextual—health-related news, for example, is only trusted when it comes from medical professionals or official sources. Verification methods include consulting elders, MPs, or local radio, showing a blend of traditional and modern trust networks, though few say they engage in regular verification behaviour.

Sharing information is driven by emotion and identity, not accuracy. Many people share information to feel connected to their community, even if it means exaggerating or prioritising speed over truth. Those who claim high confidence in spotting misinformation are more likely to engage in risky sharing behaviour, such as spreading information that aligns with personal beliefs or exaggerating for effect. Gender and education also play roles—men are more likely to engage in these behaviours, while better-educated individuals tend to be more cautious. This points to a complex interplay between confidence, identity, and information ethics.
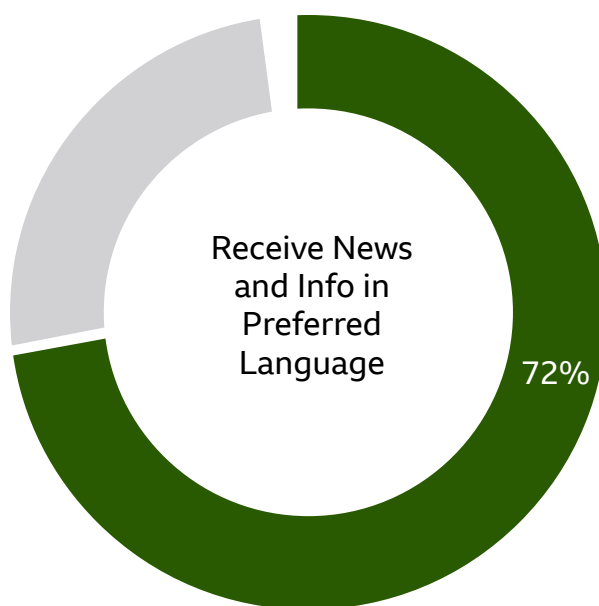
5. What are the barriers to people being informed?

Just over a third (36%) of people find it difficult to get information.

Very easy	Fairly easy	Neither	Fairly difficult	Very difficult
26%	20%	18%	21%	15%

How easy or difficult is it for you to find information about issues that matter to you? Base: n=1,010

Availability of News and Information in Preferred Language

Receive News and Info in Preferred Language — 72%

English is preferred more by:
…urban audiences
…those in Southern region
…highly educated
…those who are employed, studying or retired

| 75% English |
| 1% Motu |

| 61% Tok Pisin |
| 3% Other |

Tok Pisin is preferred more by:
…those with lower education
…those who are unemployed
And less preferred by young people, higher earners

Q. How easy or difficult is it for you to find information about issues that matter to you? Base: n=1,010
Q. Do you get news and information from the media in your preferred language?
Q. What language do you prefer to get news and media in? Base: n=997 (media users)

Finding information on issues and topics that matter is challenging for many people. More than a third of mobile users in PNG (36%) said they found it difficult to find information about issues that matter to them. This was particularly the case for those with no income, and those with a low level of education, who were significantly more likely to report that it was very difficult to find information.

Audiences turn to friends and family and people in their community for information, but the extent to which they trust what they hear depends on the source. Word-of-mouth is the most common source of information for audiences, and while family and friends and community chiefs are fairly well-trusted, there is more doubt when the news comes from other people in the community.
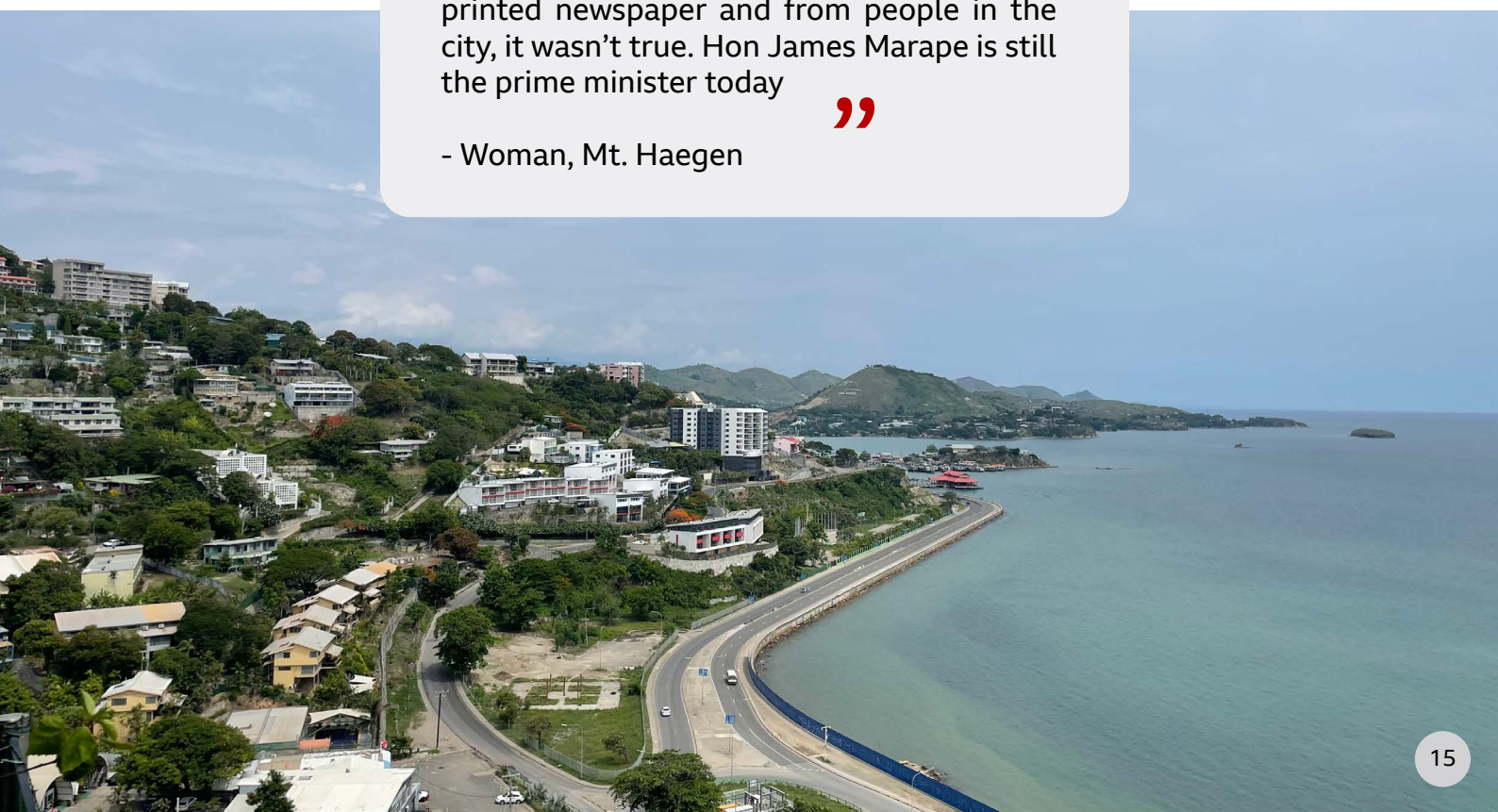
Social media engenders limited trust among audiences and is widely recognized as prone to misinformation. Social media, although increasingly accessible, popular, and fast, is widely viewed with skepticism due to its vulnerability to misinformation, unverified or fake accounts, and sensational content. Even younger audiences, who report leaning heavily on social media platforms, recognized them as less reliable as a source of news and information. Audiences particularly felt that political content on social media was prone to bias and misleading information, citing the representation of recent political scandals on Facebook as problematic. Audiences considered misinformation as deeply harmful — not only confusing individuals but also threatening health and livelihoods when tied to critical topics like disease outbreaks or economic promises, disrupting community trust and social cohesion. For communities with limited and infrequent access to formal media, misinformation spread via social media can be easily and quickly amplified by local word-of-mouth networks as explained below:-

> " Someone posted on social media stating PNG Prime Minister Hon. James Marape stepped down and people at the village believed. However, after verifying through printed newspaper and from people in the city, it wasn't true. Hon James Marape is still the prime minister today "
>
> - Woman, Mt. Haegen

6. What do people want to see from the media?

More local representation: Media coverage is considered lacking in rural voice and representation, and locally relevant stories.

Audiences across all locations cited the need for media to deliver not just 'news' but practical, locally relevant content on health, youth, education, safety, agriculture, and climate issues. Audiences called for inspirational local success stories to counter negative coverage bias, as well as community awareness campaigns targeting youth and social issues.

There is a clear call for more rural representation and balanced reporting that reflects community resilience and lived realities, with more inclusive and positive storytelling. Audiences also called for more talk-back shows or interactive media as a means for citizens to voice concerns and share ideas.

> " Media people should go around the places and see how people are surviving and report specifically in remote areas… "
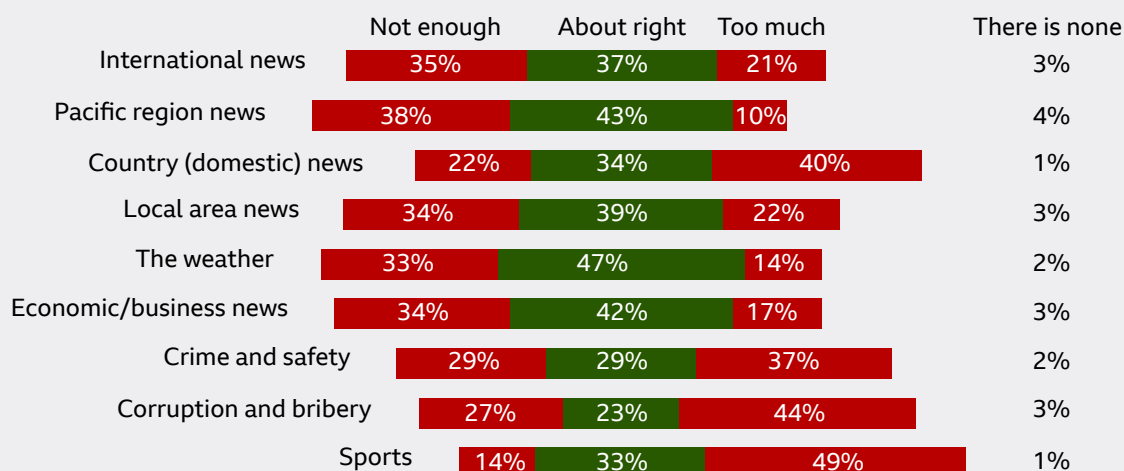>
> - [Lae, Adult]

Local languages are under-represented in mainstream media. Although most survey respondents say they can get news and information in their preferred language (71%), it is largely only radio where audiences can benefit from local-language broadcasts. Television and social media widely rely on English as the common language. Audiences cite the need for more content in local languages to ensure greater reach and accessibility of national level conversations and express a desire to preserve native languages to support community education and cultural pride.

Audiences would like to see more international and regional news. Although the majority of survey respondents feel there is enough or more than enough domestic news, over a third say there is not enough coverage of international or regional issues, nor adequate weather or business reporting.
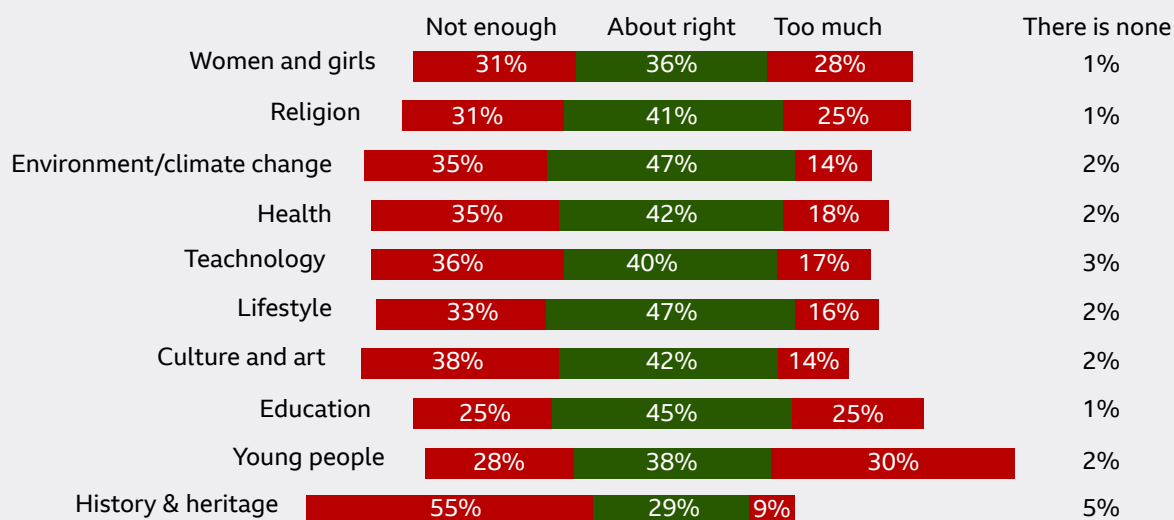
Perception of the Adequacy of News and Current Affairs Content

	Not enough	About right	Too much	There is none
International news	35%	37%	21%	3%
Pacific region news	38%	43%	10%	4%
Country (domestic) news	22%	34%	40%	1%
Local area news	34%	39%	22%	3%
The weather	33%	47%	14%	2%
Economic/business news	34%	42%	17%	3%
Crime and safety	29%	29%	37%	2%
Corruption and bribery	27%	23%	44%	3%
Sports	14%	33%	49%	1%

Q. Thinking generally about the news and current affairs available in the country, do you think that there is too much, about the right amount, not enough, or no media coverage about...? Base: n=997 (media users)

More media content on PNG history and culture. Audiences also feel there is not enough coverage of history and heritage, noted by 55%, nor culture and arts content.

Perception of the Adequacy of Entertainment Content

	Not enough	About right	Too much	There is none
Women and girls	31%	36%	28%	1%
Religion	31%	41%	25%	1%
Environment/climate change	35%	47%	14%	2%
Health	35%	42%	18%	2%
Teachnology	36%	40%	17%	3%
Lifestyle	33%	47%	16%	2%
Culture and art	38%	42%	14%	2%
Education	25%	45%	25%	1%
Young people	28%	38%	30%	2%
History & heritage	55%	29%	9%	5%

Q. Thinking generally about the entertainment available in the country, do you think that there is too much, about the right amount, not enough, or no media coverage about...? Base: n=997 (media users)

7. Recommendations

To enable audiences to navigate their information environment effectively, it is necessary to address information gaps. A concerted effort is needed to close the digital divide that disproportionately affects rural communities. Expanding access to both internet and devices are essential to bring affordable and reliable digital connectivity to underserved areas.

For public trust and engagement to grow, the quality of content must be a priority. This involves moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and diversifying content based on audience needs and feedback. Content should be relevant, informative and feature inspiring stories of local success and resilience.

Promoting accountability is also key; this can be done by providing platforms for citizens to hold government officials and institutions accountable. By partnering with local journalists, content can be made authentic and culturally appropriate, building a more vibrant and responsive media ecosystem.

Media literacy education to help audiences discern fact from misinformation is critical. Communities need education and support to improve fact-checking capabilities and support responsible social media use, especially at a time when smartphones are becoming increasingly accessible, and unregulated social media platforms are the first port of call for news and information. This can be achieved by launching media literacy public awareness campaigns in communities as well as schools. The goal is to equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information, making people aware of information disorder, and understand diverse perspectives. Initiatives should prioritise practical tools and be delivered through community-led training and workshops.

Improve media sector professionalism with journalism training and support, including social media policy development. Targeted training for media organisations and individual journalists should be provided to improve accuracy, fairness and editorial standards in reporting. This would support the production of high-quality news and information (especially via social media) of established news outlets and independent journalists. Training to support media outlets to develop and implement social media policies to guide employees' online conduct would ensure responsible engagement with the public on social media platforms.

Harness mobile phones to communicate key social messages. Social behaviour change communication initiatives such as simple text messages or calls with information about issues important to people's lives, such as weather or health, could be useful for those with low-tech or basic handsets.

Increase availability of localised news and information. Support local media to create engaging programming which addresses a broader range of issues and highlights positive stories. Include content in local languages.

Seek opportunities to reach the population with limited or no formal media access. Media and communication initiatives, including outreach activities, to reach and engage these groups.

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