

23 February 2022

*Social Media and Elections in Africa:
A curse or a blessing?*

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with Jonathan Fisher, Jamie Hitchins, Idayat Hassan & Gabrielle Lynch



A red speech bubble graphic with a white outline, containing the text 'The social media debate'. The bubble has a tail pointing downwards and to the left.

The social media debate

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Threat to democracy

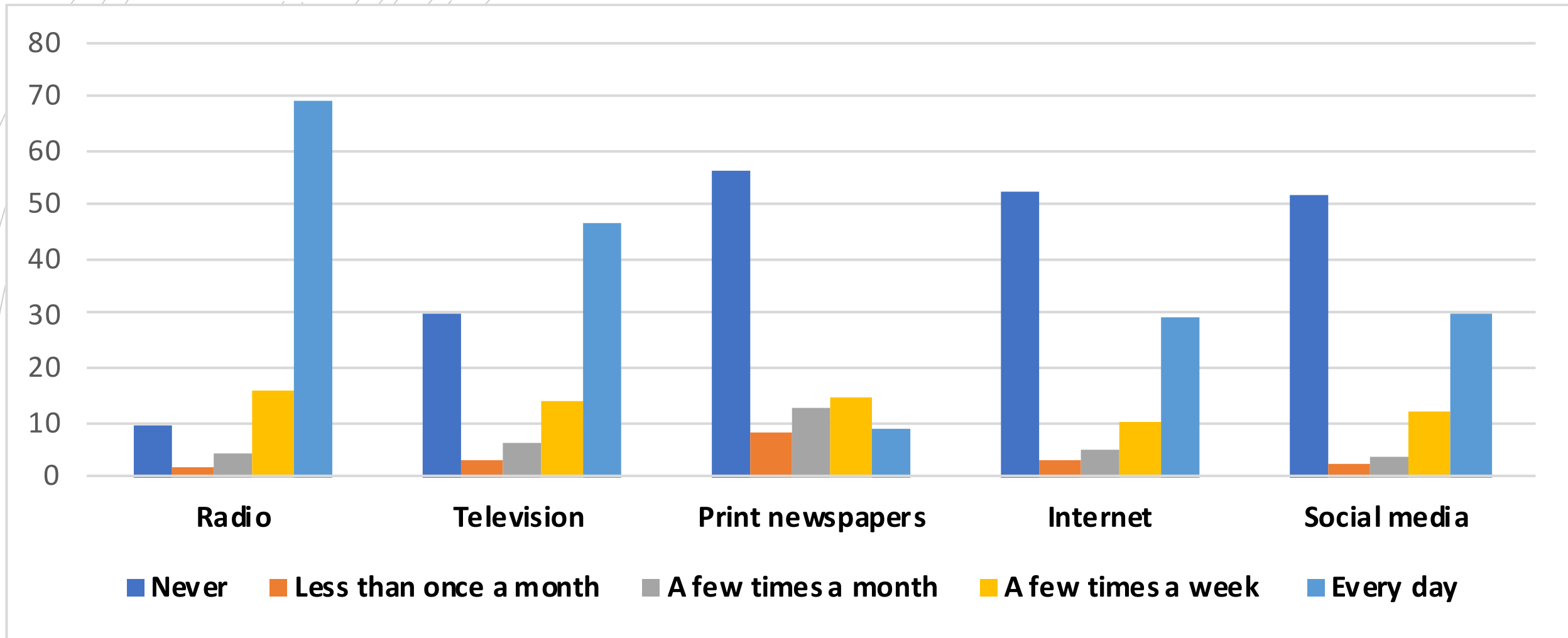
Conditional (control)

Inherent

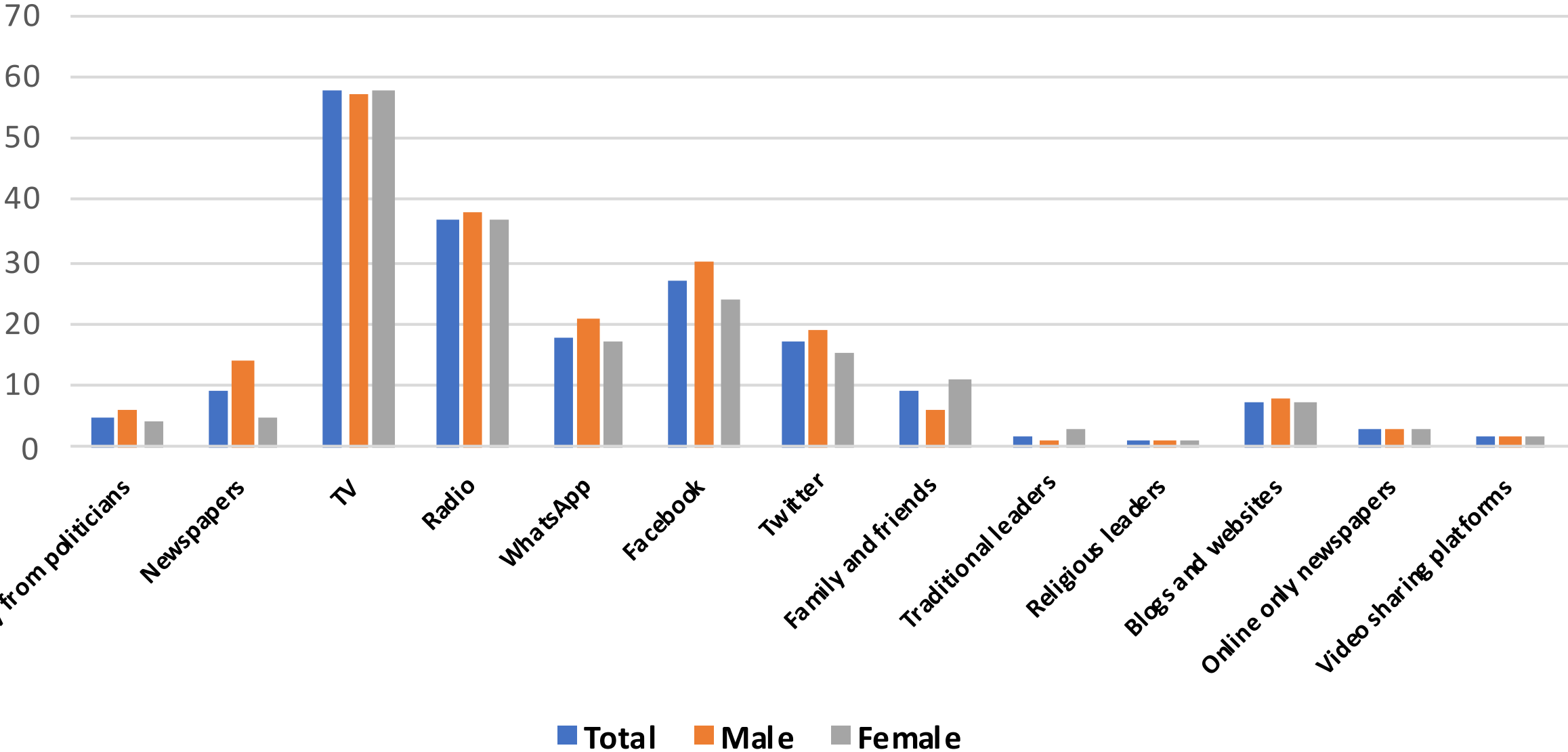
The background features a series of concentric circles in light gray, some solid and some dashed, creating a ripple effect. A large, solid red speech bubble is centered on the page, pointing downwards. The text "The media ecosystem" is written in white, italicized font inside the speech bubble.

The media ecosystem

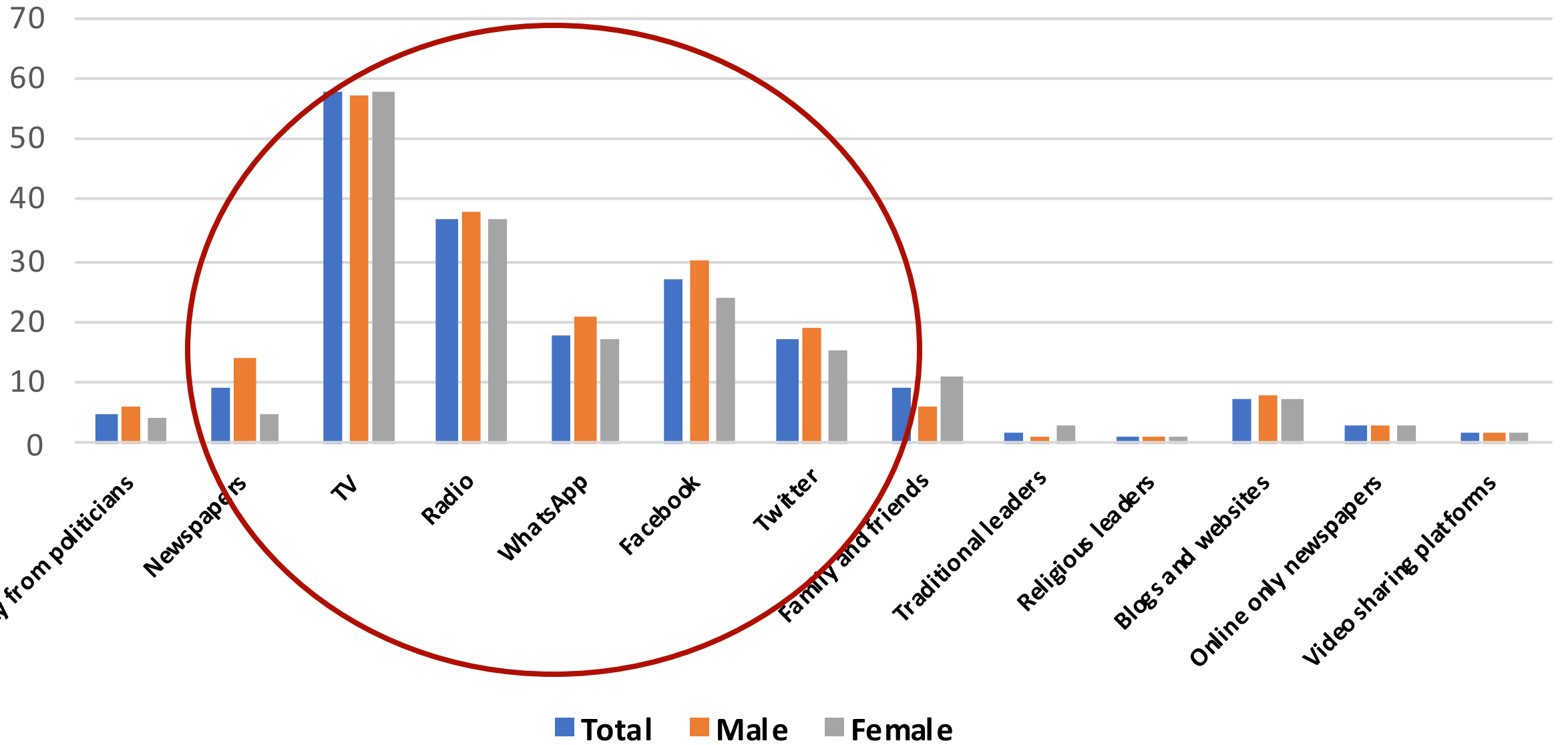
How often do you get news from the following sources:



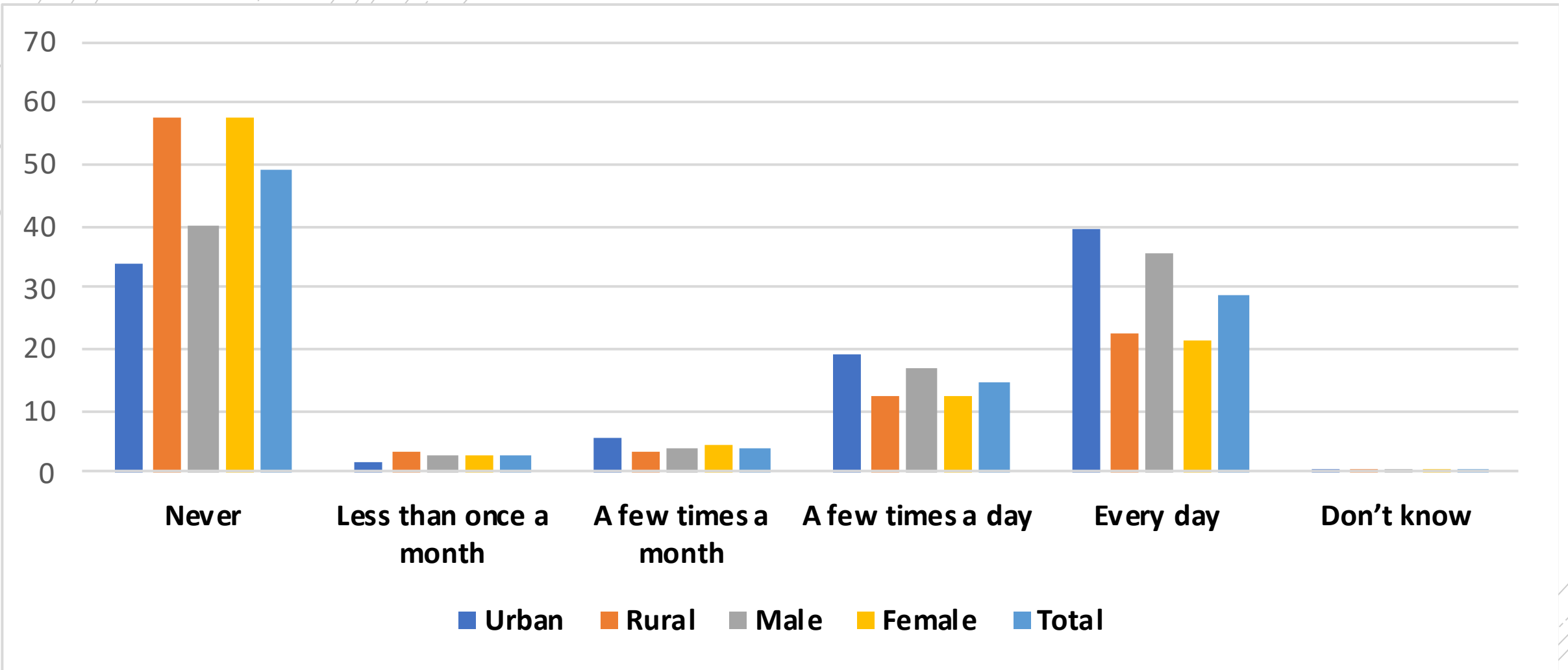
Where do you get most of your information about politics from?



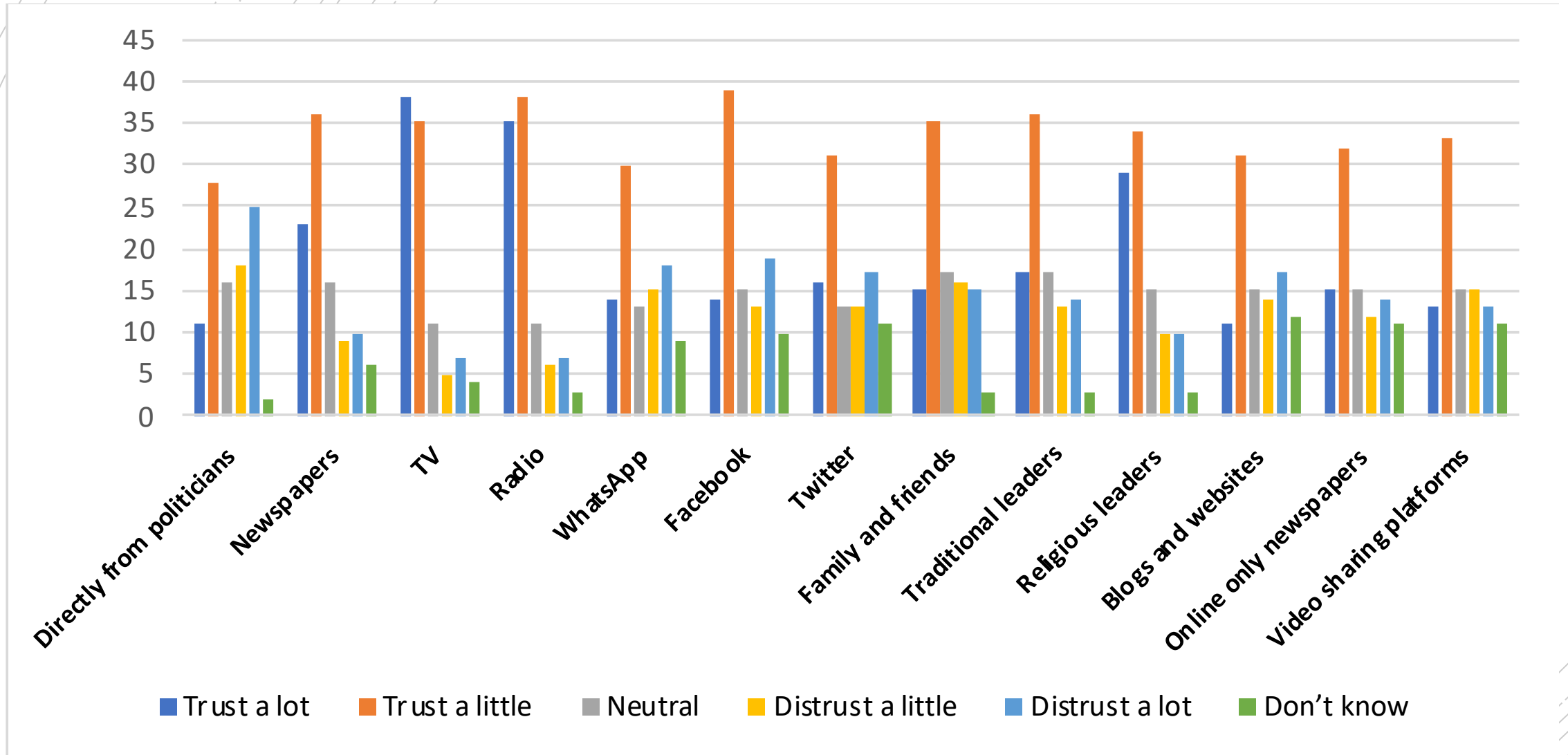
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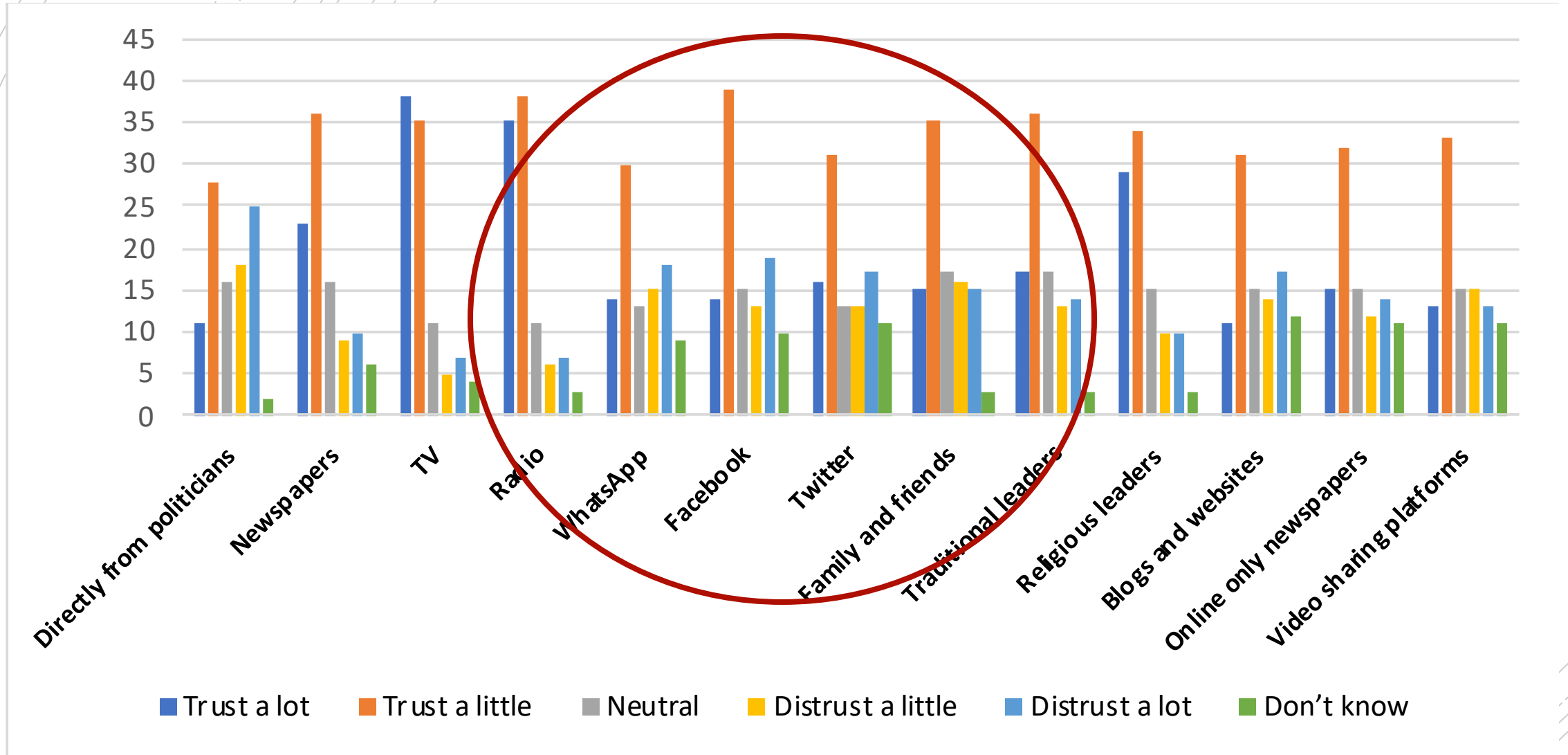
How often do you use the Internet?



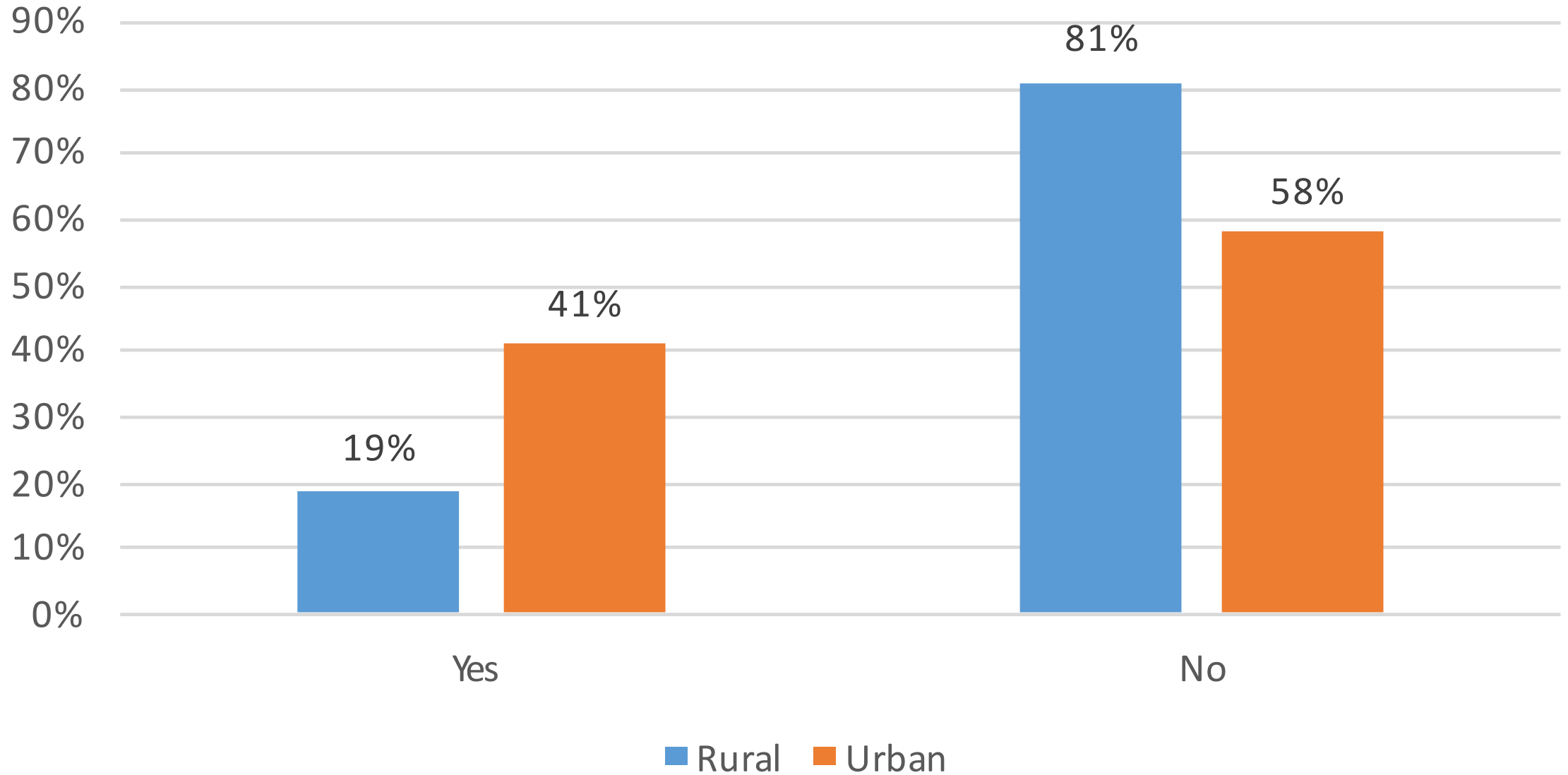
How much do you trust these different sources of information about politics?



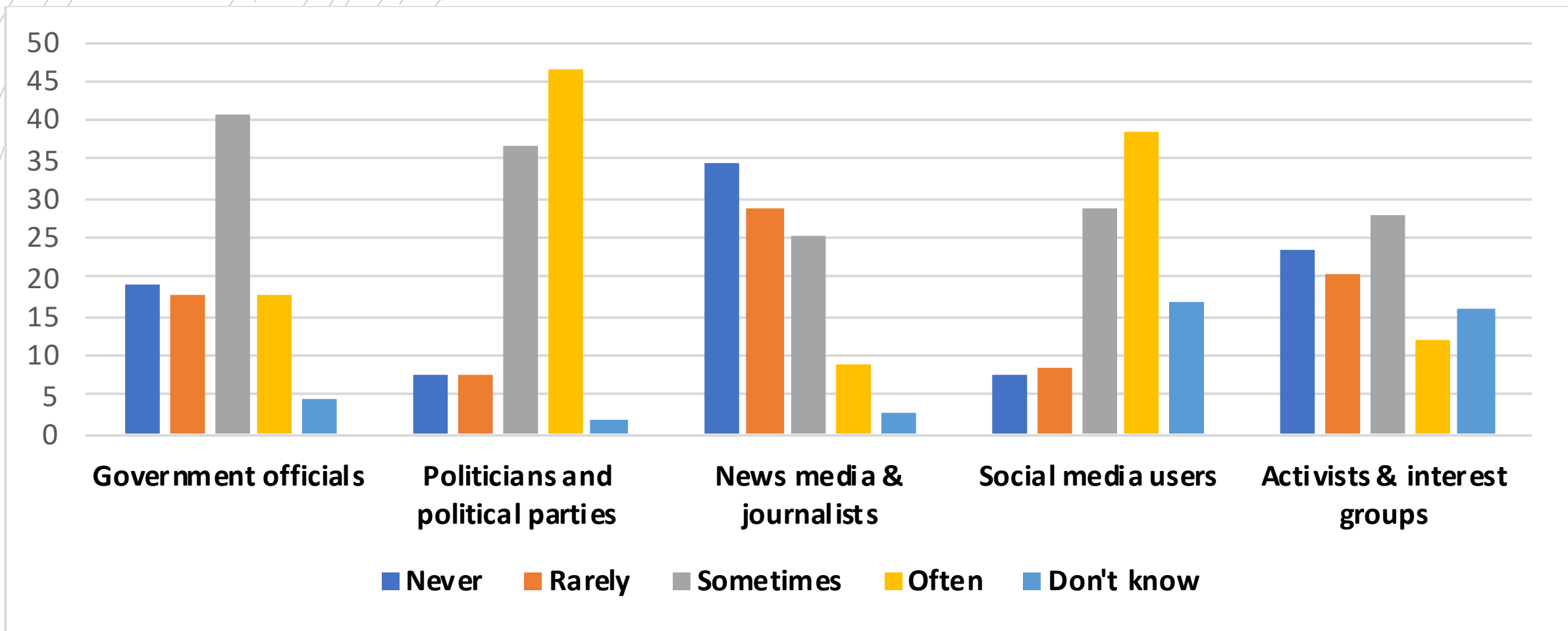
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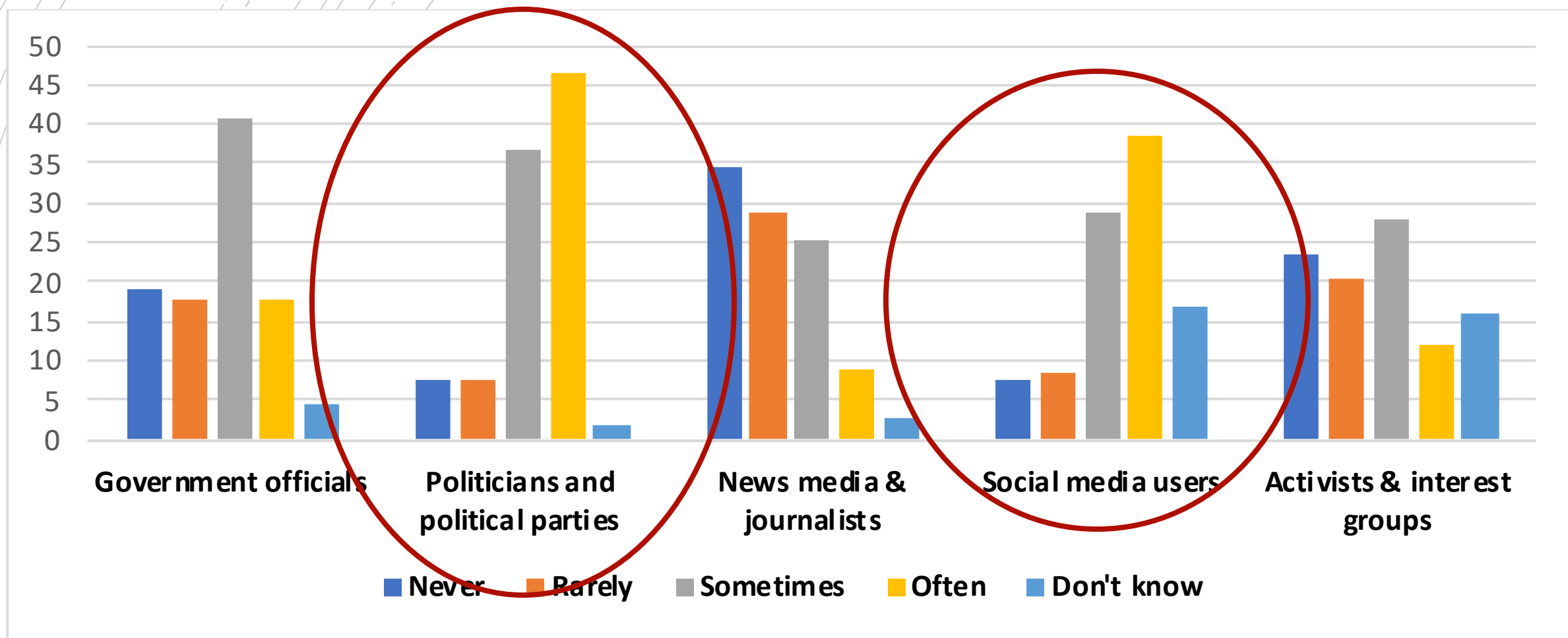
Do you have a WhatsApp account?



In Kenya, how often do you think people from the following groups spread information they know to be false?



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What is happening in Kenya?

Key context: ICC prosecutions and domestic vigilance

- Official Twitter and Facebook pages relatively banal
- Most prominent political leaders deploy carefully curated messages
- Limited interaction with senior figures
- More controversial messages generally left to downstream candidates

What is happening in Kenya?

Three main sources of divisive messages/fake news/hate speech:

- 1.** Consultants and informal “working groups” used to prepare attack ads and misinformation
- 2.** “Ethnic WhatsApp” groups generate misinformation
- 3.** Local level individuals seeking to gain traction/notoriety

→ Little third-party manipulation thus far



*We need to talk about
WhatsApp*



Why?

- WhatsApp most popular messaging act in over 40 African countries
- Fear of prosecution pushes a higher proportion of fake news to WhatsApp and Telegram in Kenya
- These are the platforms we know least about ...

“ WhatsApp is a disruptive technology that challenges existing hierarchies in ways that are simultaneously emancipatory and destructive, strengthening and undermining democratic consolidation at the same time. The challenge is therefore to understand both aspects of WhatsApp’s impact and the ways in which they interact.”

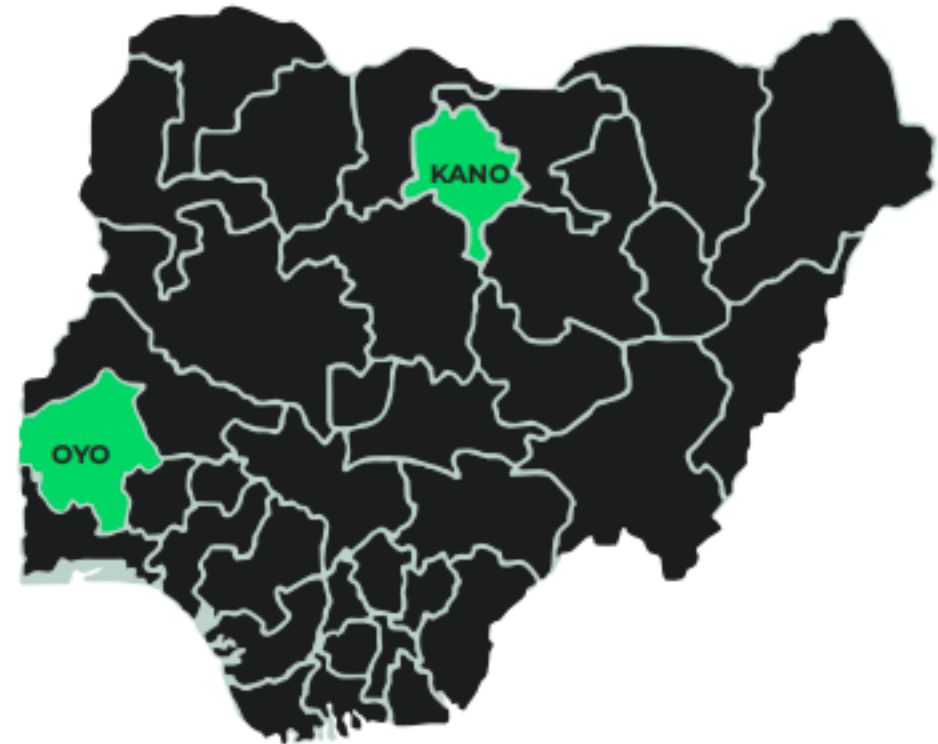
Argument



WHATSAPP AND NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS: MOBILISING THE PEOPLE, PROTECTING THE VOTE

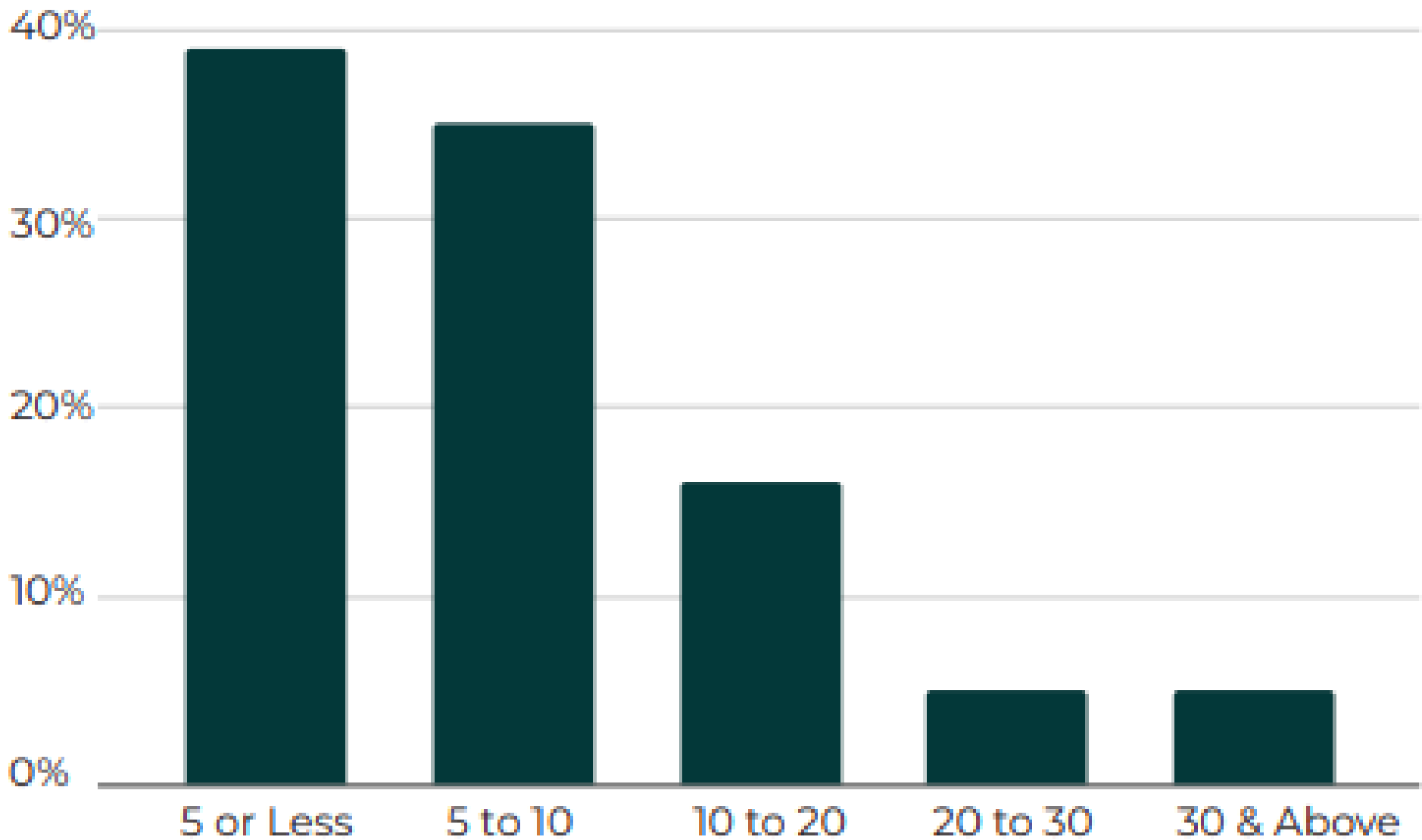
Authors:

Jamie Hitchen (independent),
Idayat Hassan
(Centre for Democracy and Development),
Dr Jonathan Fisher
(University of Birmingham),
Professor Nic Cheeseman
(University of Birmingham)

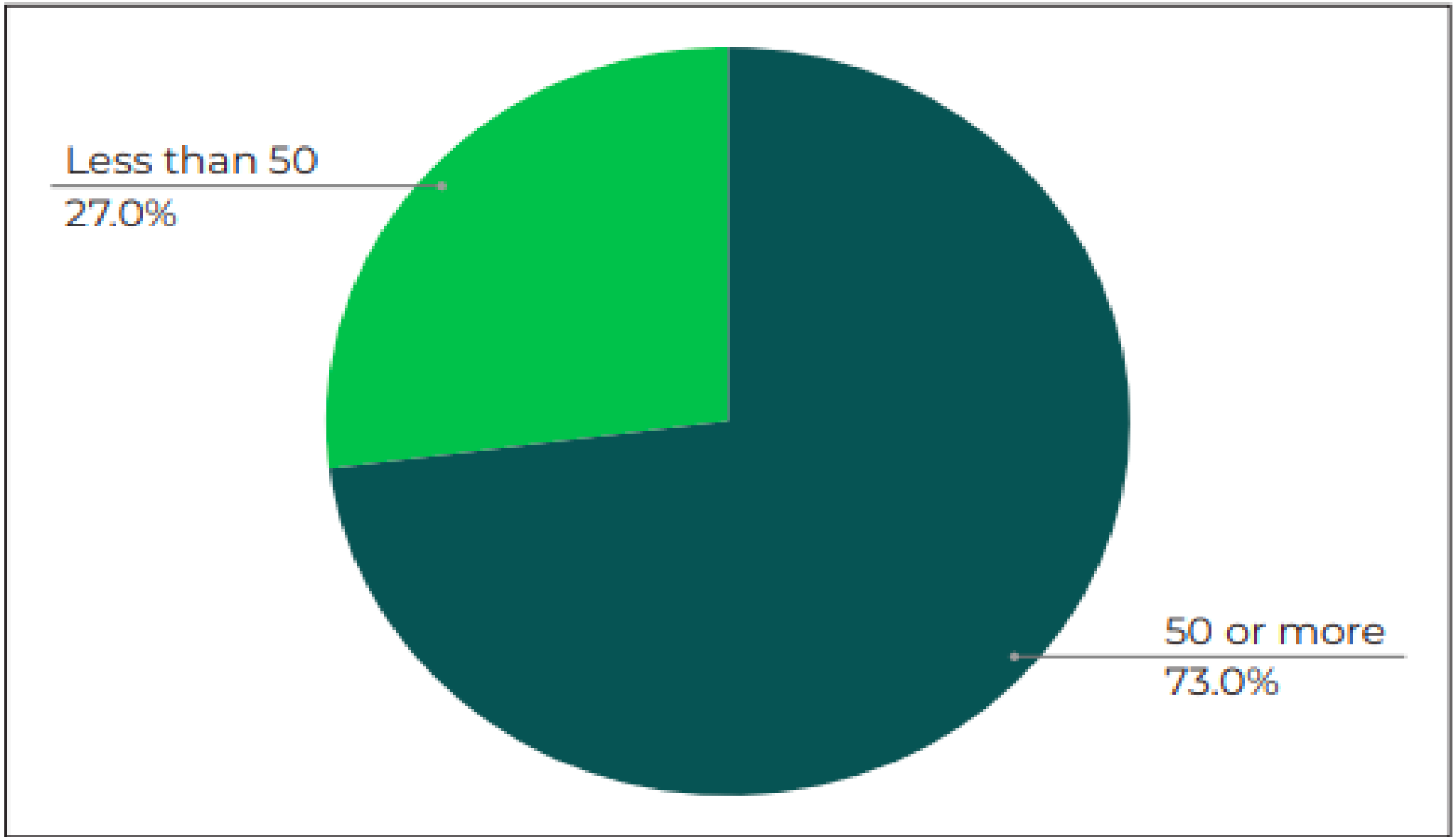


How is WhatsApp used?

1. “Organic” nature of WhatsApp is overplayed.
2. In reality, it often depends on the pre-existence of social (religious/university) and political (party) institutions
3. WhatsApp helps, but the ground campaign wins.

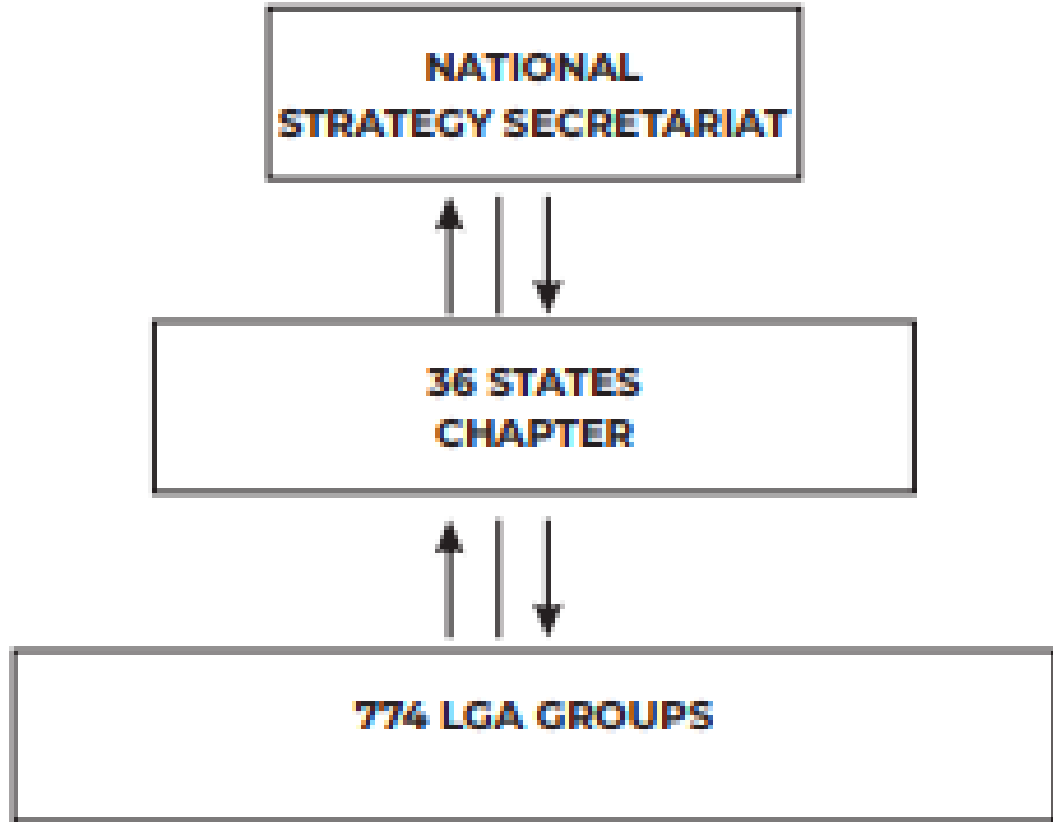


Number of WhatsApp groups respondents were members of

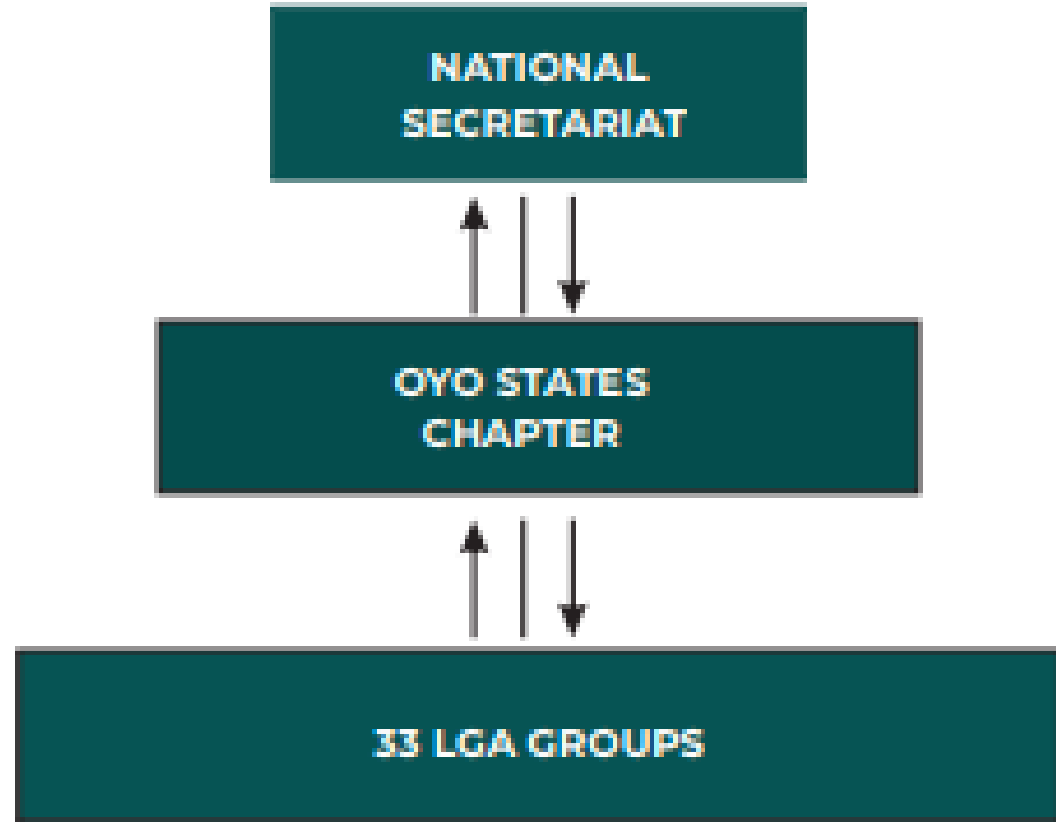


Average number of WhatsApp group members

BUHARI NEW MEDIA CENTRE



OYO STATE CHAPTER





*When does fake news
work?*

Successful “fake news”

1. Many “fake” stories are shared, but few “take off”.
2. The most successful stories contained elements of truth or played on popular tropes.
3. Little evidence fake news changes votes, but it can change perceptions.
4. Government disinformation facilitates “fake news”.



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Muhammadu Buhari @MBuhari · Dec 2, 2018

One of the questions that came up today in my meeting with Nigerians in Poland was on the issue of whether I've been cloned or not. The ignorant rumours are not surprising — when I was away on medical vacation last year a lot of people hoped I was dead.



1:02 298.4K views

2.5K 4.2K 11.1K



Freeman @Freeman76417962

Replying to @MBuhari

We didn't say you're cloned, but you're an impersonator, your nam is Jubril Aminu al- sudani You're from Sudan, they performed a plastic surgery on you and paid you \$250 USD to impersonate buhari.... Your cup is already full. You will soon route in Jail.

7:05 PM · Dec 2, 2018 · Twitter Web App

Relevant people



Freeman @Freeman76417962

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Passionately Black, Unapologetically Biafran, Africa First, Unimpressed by Technology that is not in tune with Nature. #Copied



Muhammadu Bu... @MBuhari

Following

This is the official account of Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria

Trends for you



David Miliband

#ModernWarfare

Going dark. Out now.

Promoted by Call of Duty UK

#JohnPeel

Moyes

Judy

Show more



*Democratic
disruption*

Democratic Disruption 1

1. Opposition leaders often say that WhatsApp has opened media up.
2. Fake news can be countered quickly – in contrast to newspapers and TV.
3. The low cost involved also levels the playing field.
4. Few if any of those involved favour greater censorship.

Democratic Disruption 2

1. The use of “propaganda secretaries is an access point for youth into political process
2. In Kano, women who previously struggled to engage in debates share ideas over WhatsApp
3. Journalists can talk more safely to informants
4. Election observers/civil society use encrypted apps to mobilise

Conclusion

1. Social media is a disruptive force with democratic + undemocratic effects.
2. These are not fully separable: two sides of the same coin.
3. “Taming” such platforms with censorship will curtail both positive and negative effects.
4. Overall impact of WhatsApp depends on context.

A red speech bubble graphic with a white outline, containing the text 'Stay in touch'. The bubble has a tail pointing downwards and to the left.

Stay in
touch

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www.democracyinafrica.org