

23 February 2022

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

**Nic Cheeseman**

Professor of Democracy, University of Birmingham

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



# The social media debate

- 1. Liberation media** – tech that can that “can expand political, social, and economic freedom”  
(*Diamond*)

## The social media debate

- 1. Liberation media** – tech that can that “can expand political, social, and economic freedom” (*Diamond*)
- 2. Authoritarian media** – internet shutdowns, censorship, bots and trolls

## The social media debate

- 1. Liberation media** – tech that can that “can expand political, social, and economic freedom”  
(Diamond)
- 2. Authoritarian media** – internet shutdowns, censorship, bots and trolls
- 3. Destabilizing content** – key issue is the quality of message shared

# The social media debate

- 1. Liberation media** – tech that can that “can expand political, social, and economic freedom”  
(Diamond)
- 2. Authoritarian media** – internet shutdowns, censorship, bots and trolls
- 3. Destabilizing content** – key issue is the quality of message shared

Threat to democracy

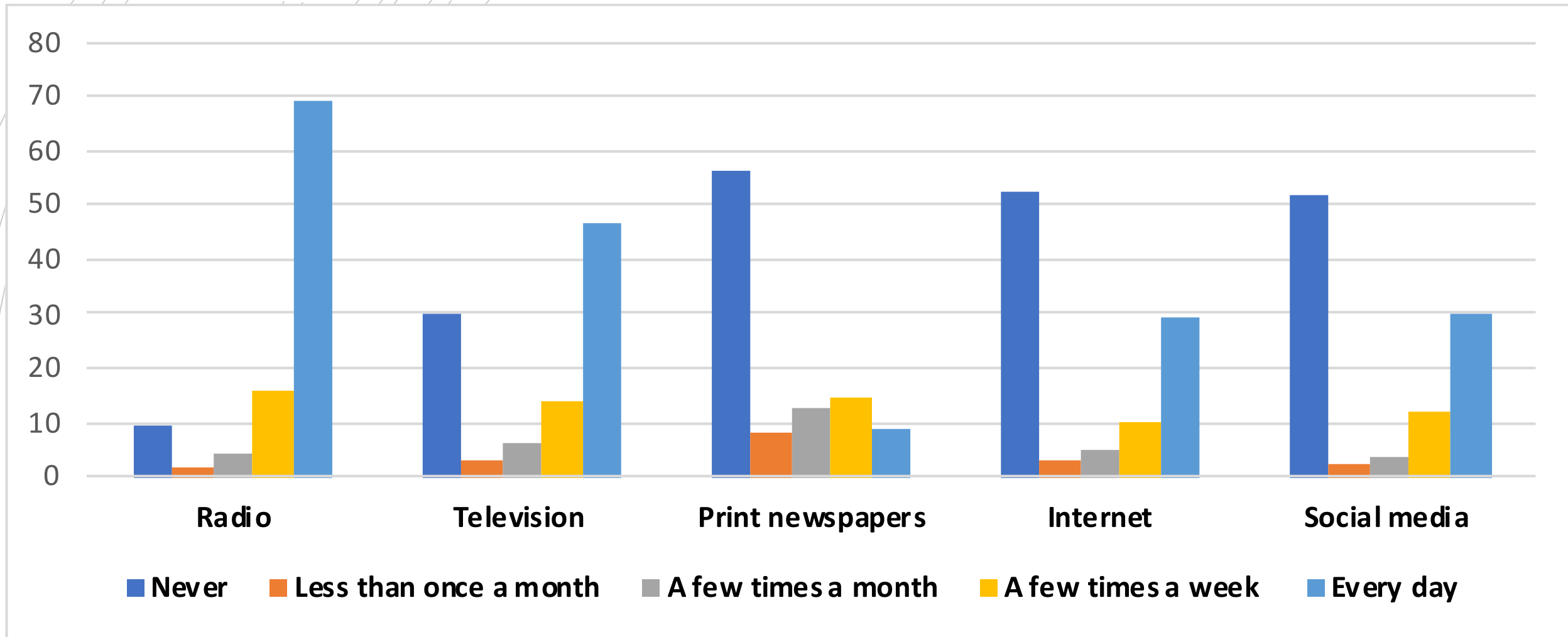
Conditional (control)

Inherent

The background features a series of concentric circles in light gray, some solid and some dashed, creating a ripple effect. A large red speech bubble is centered on the page, containing the text.

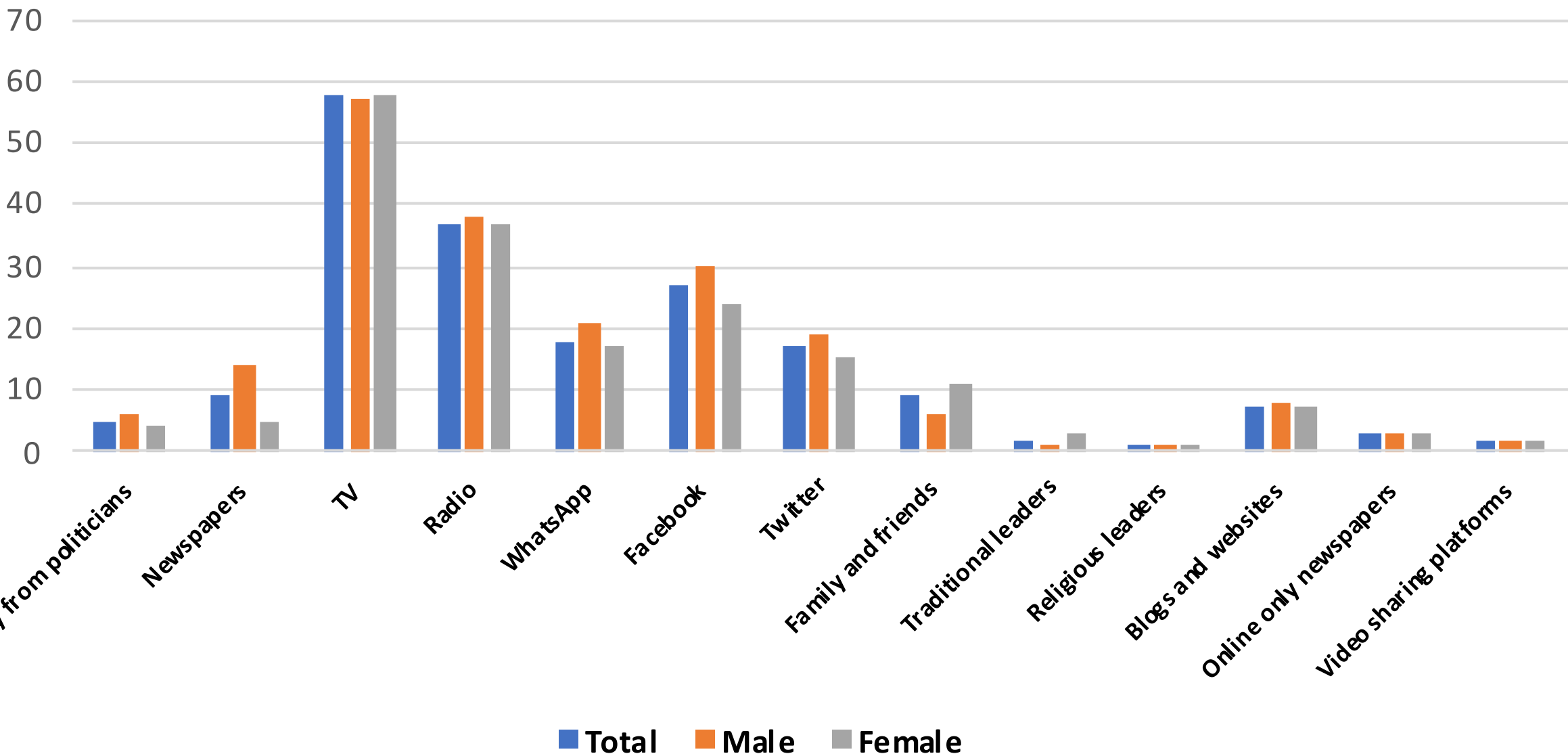
# *The media ecosystem*

# How often do you get news from the following sources:

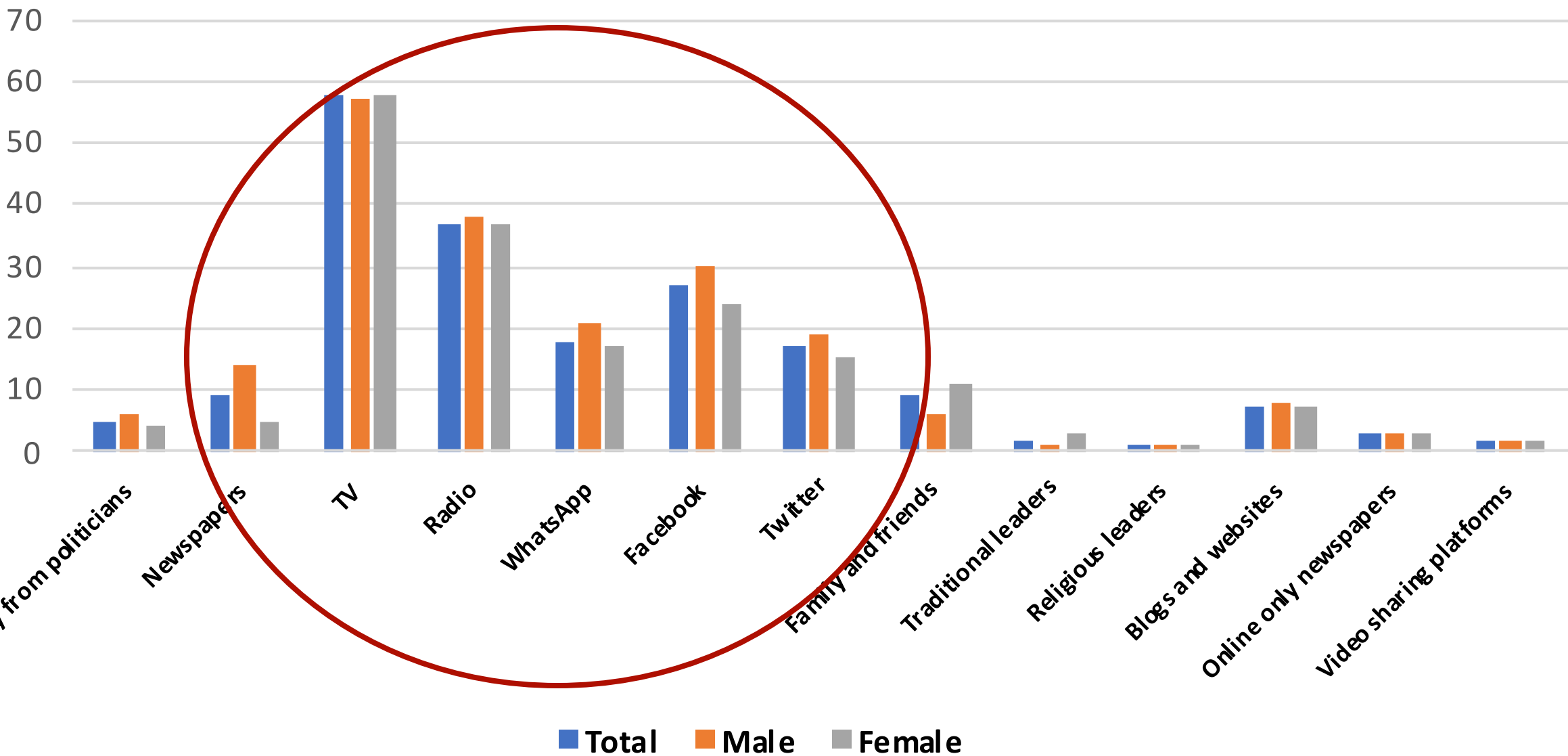




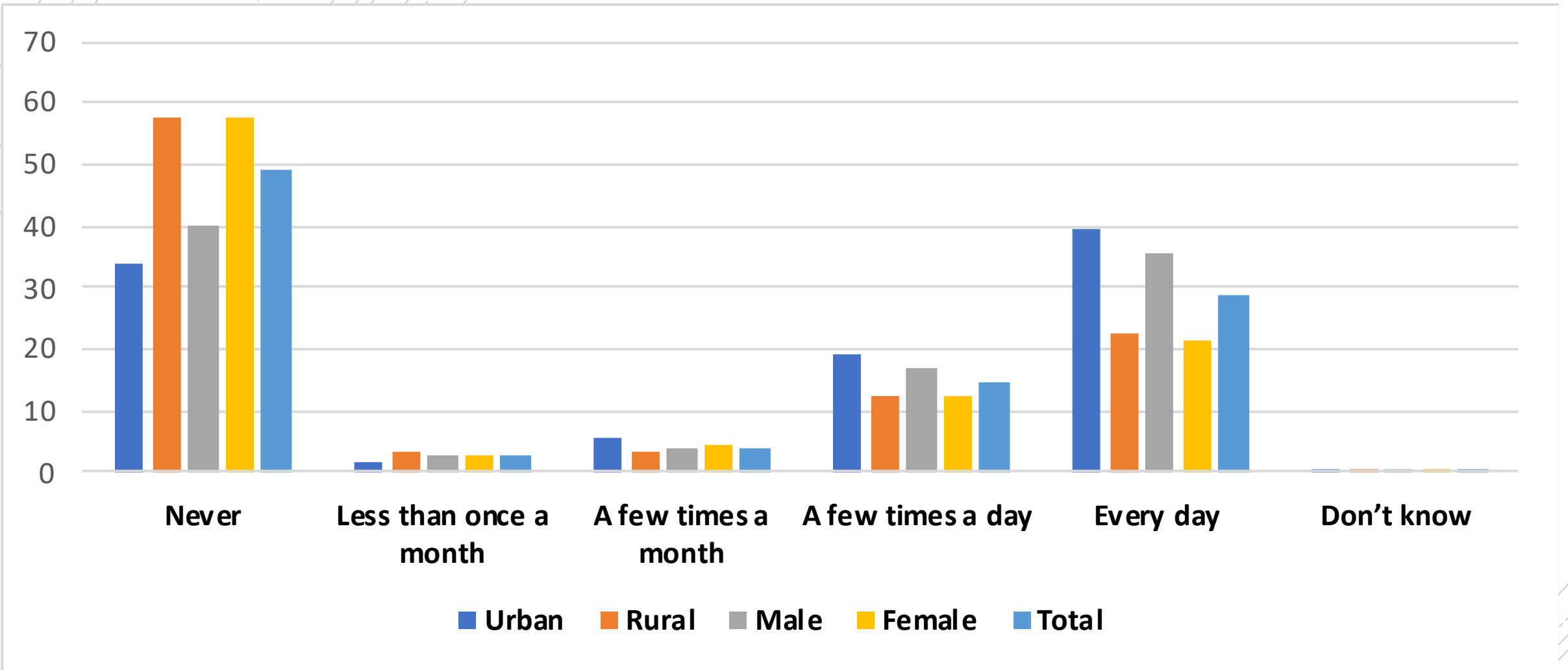
# Where do you get most of your information about politics from?



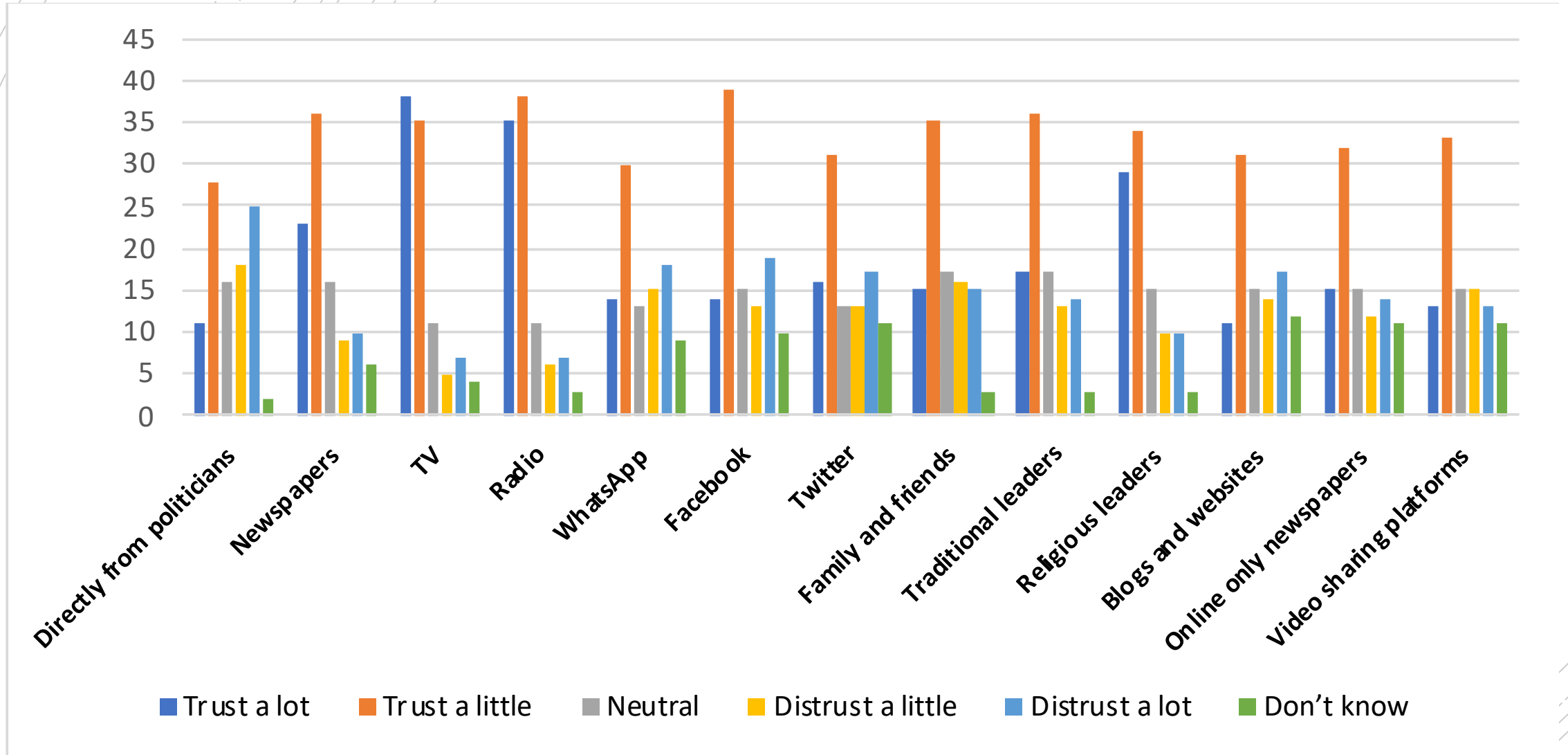
# Where do you get most of your information about politics from?



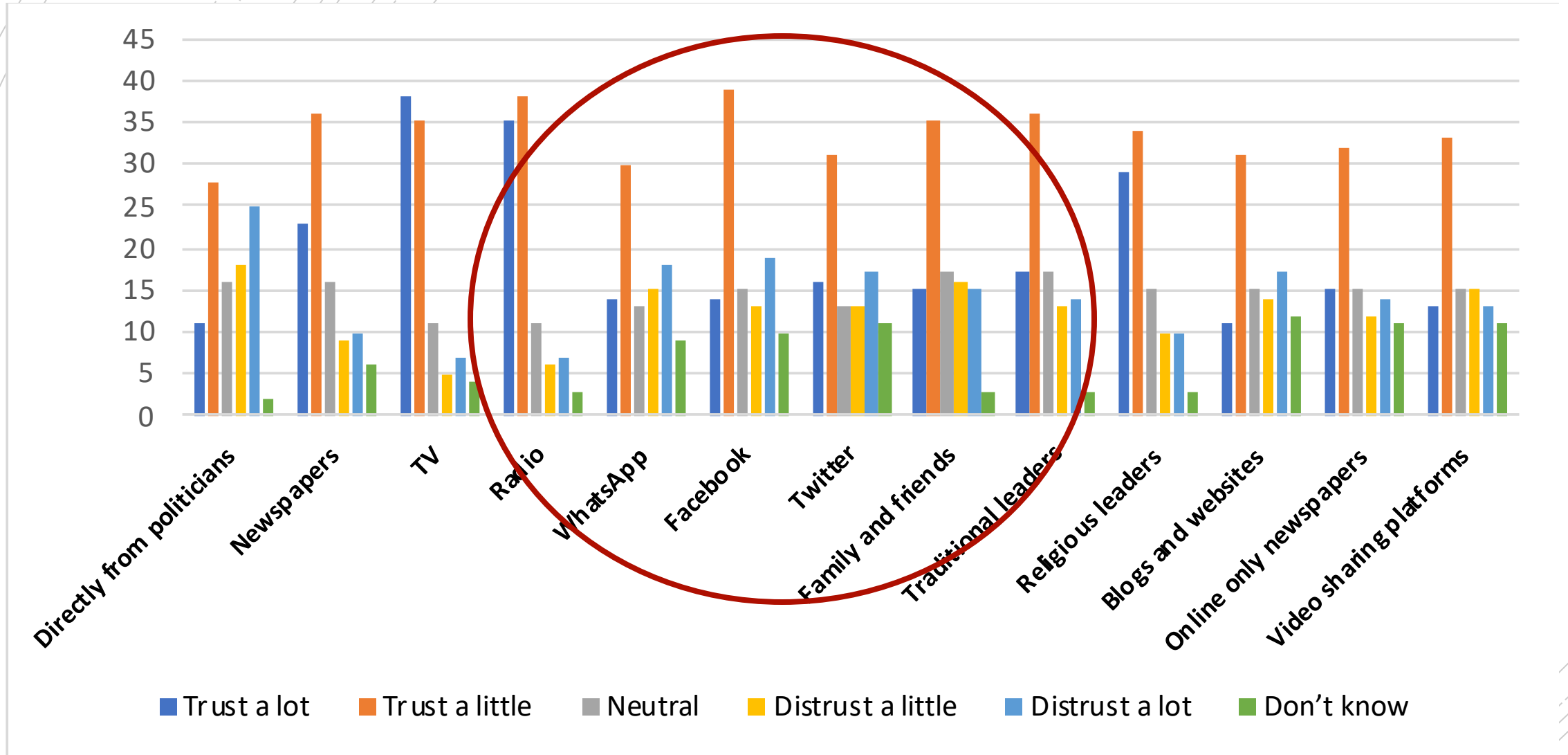
# How often do you use the Internet?



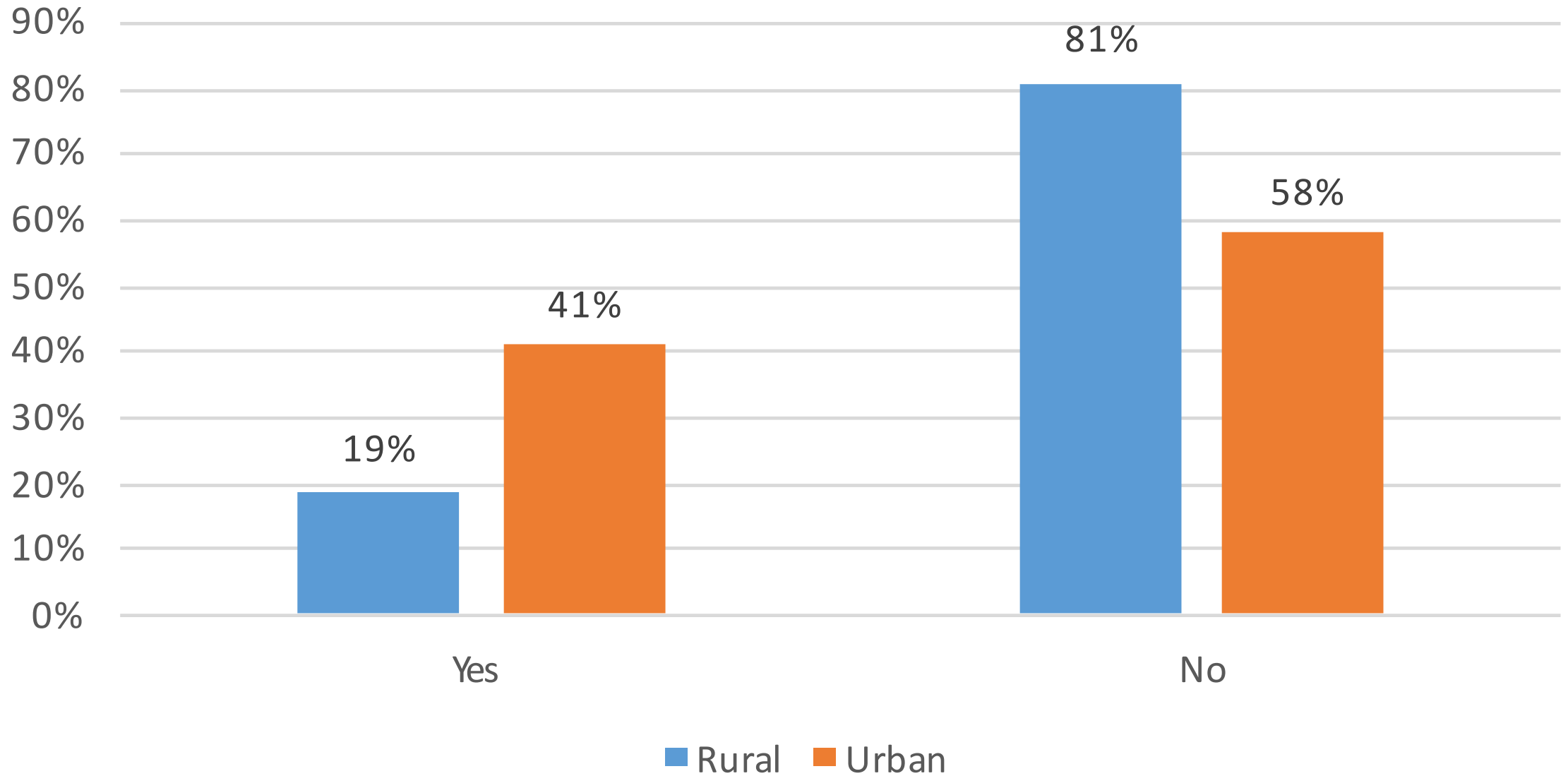
# How much do you trust these different sources of information about politics?



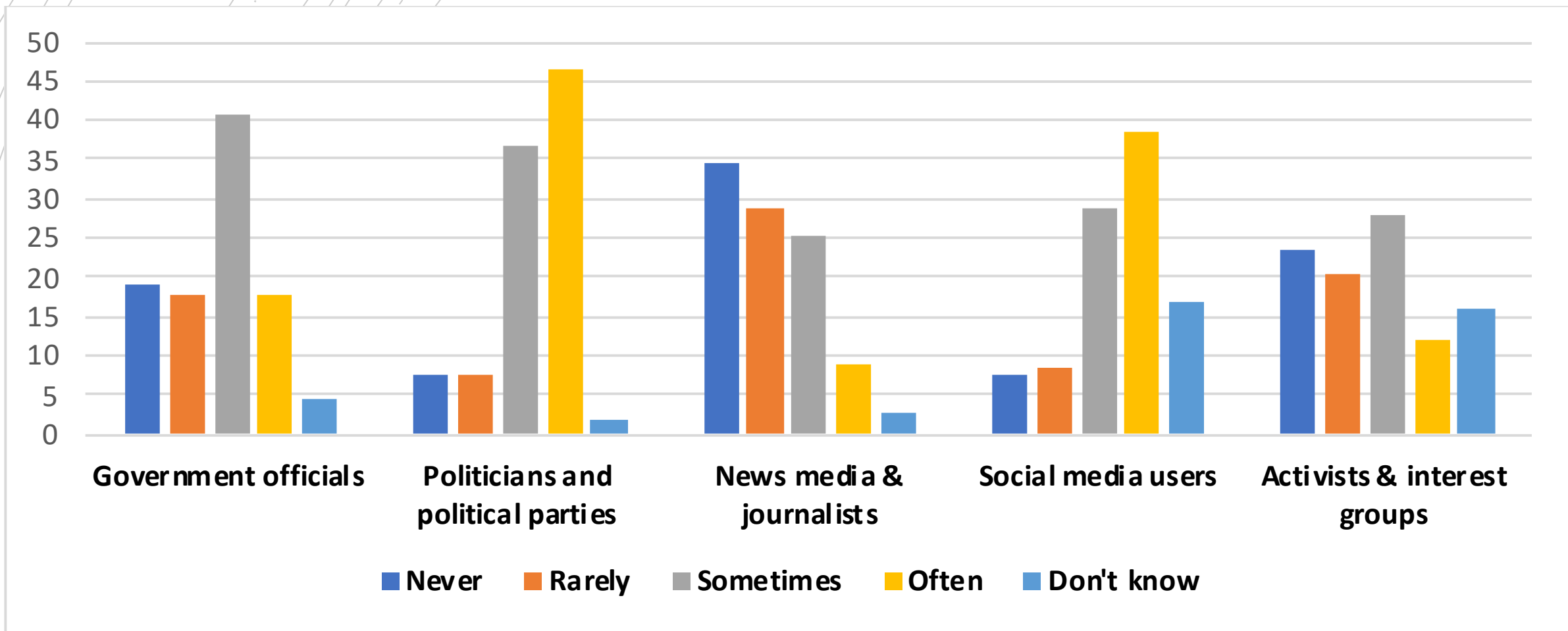
# How much do you trust these different sources of information about politics?



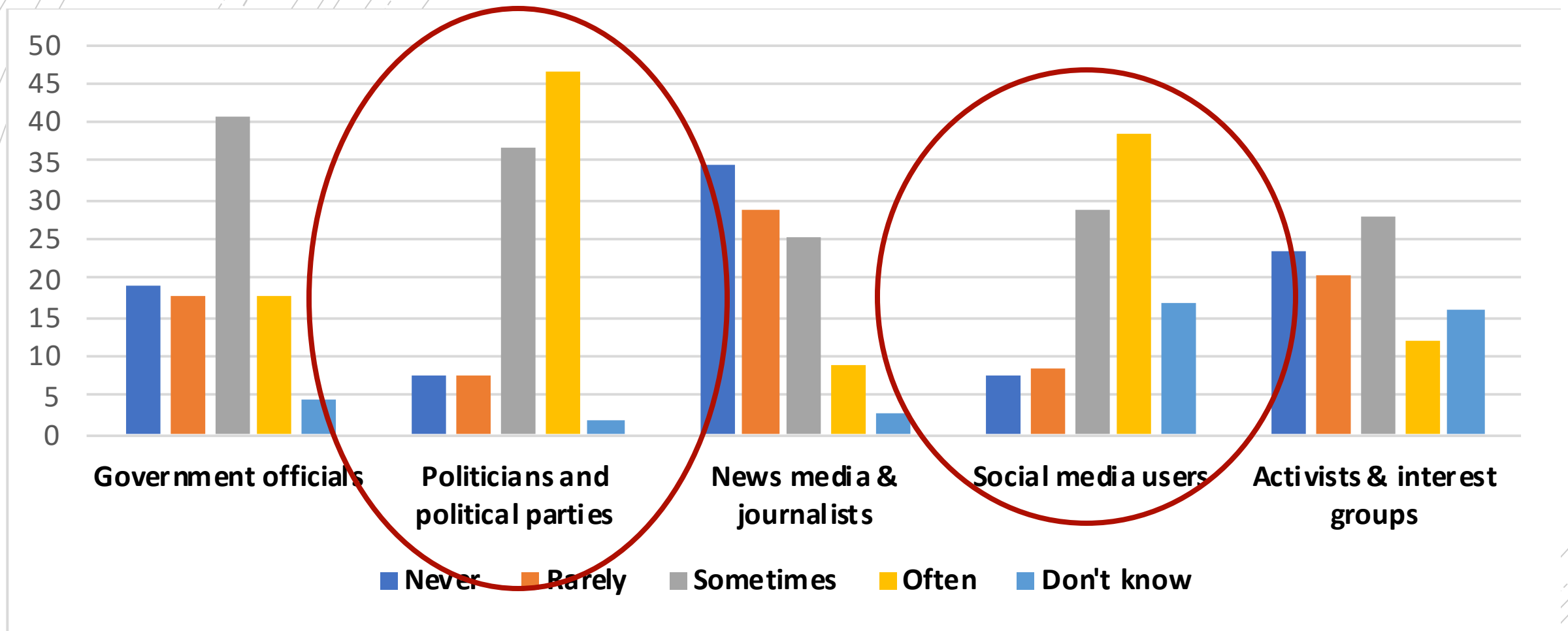
# Do you have a WhatsApp account?



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



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





# 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.”***

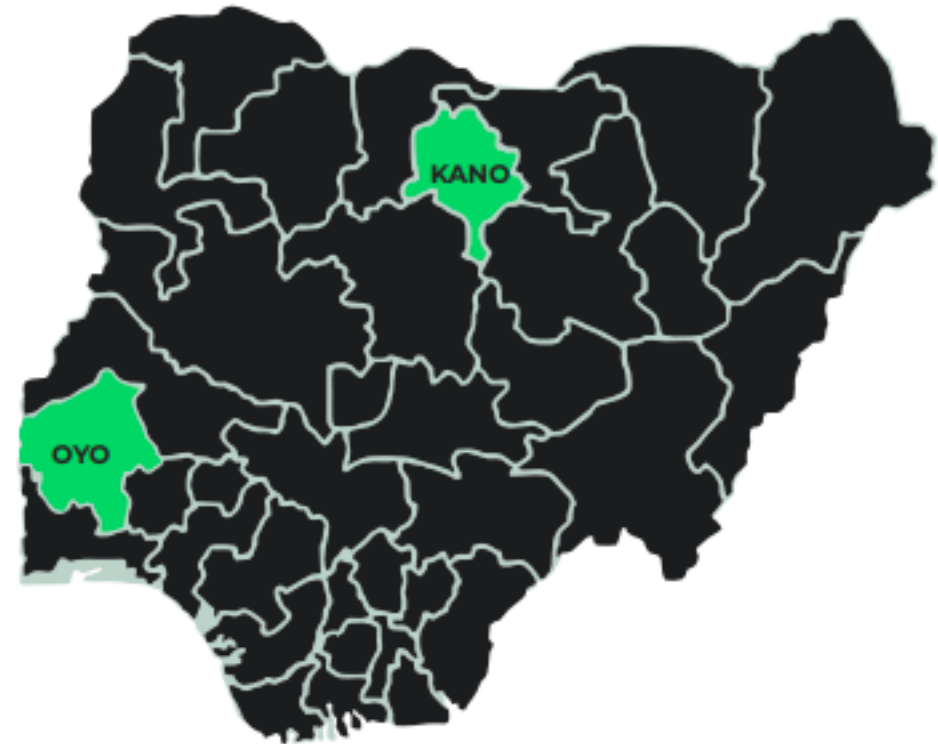
Argument



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

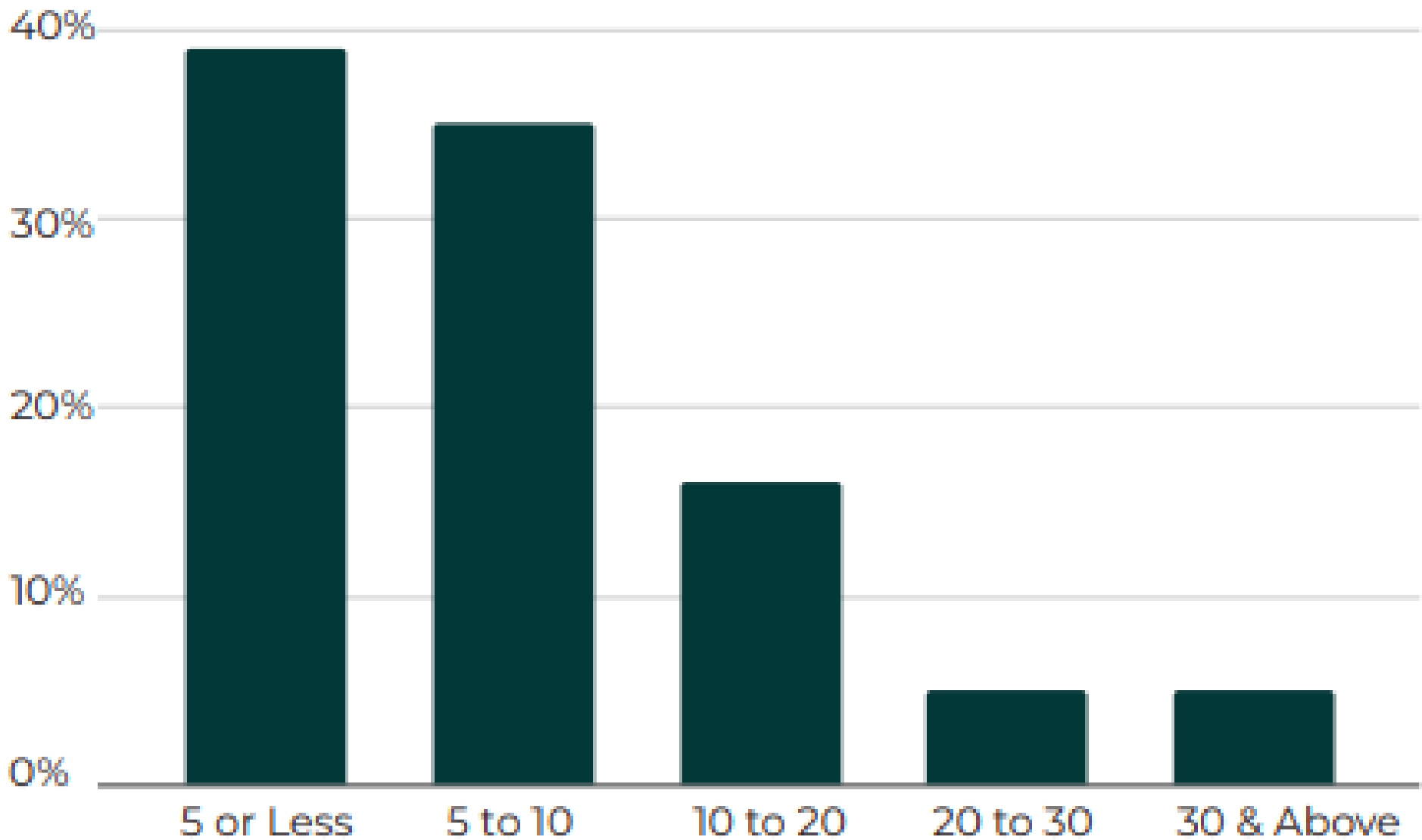
### Authors:

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



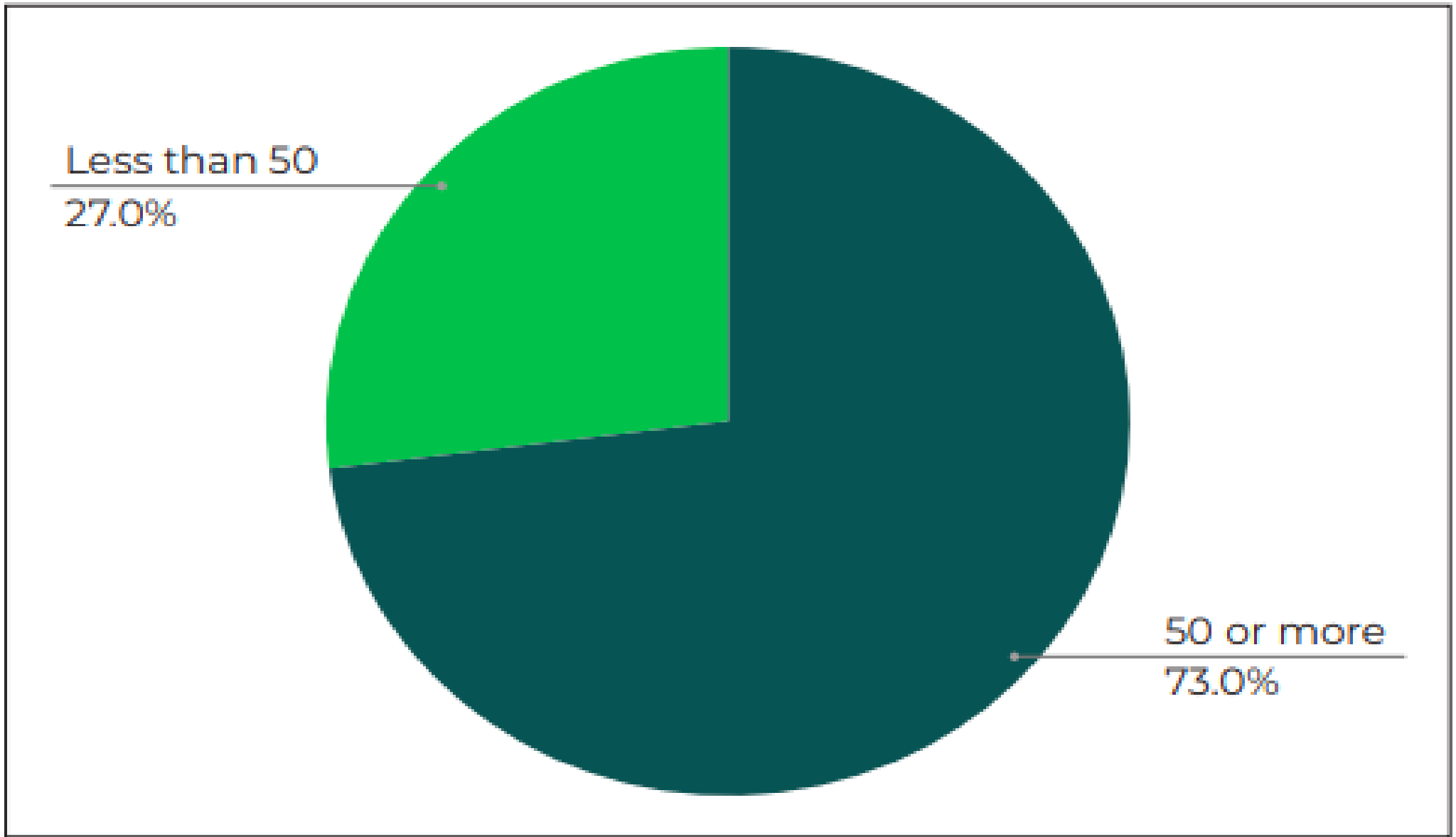
## How is WhatsApp used?

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.



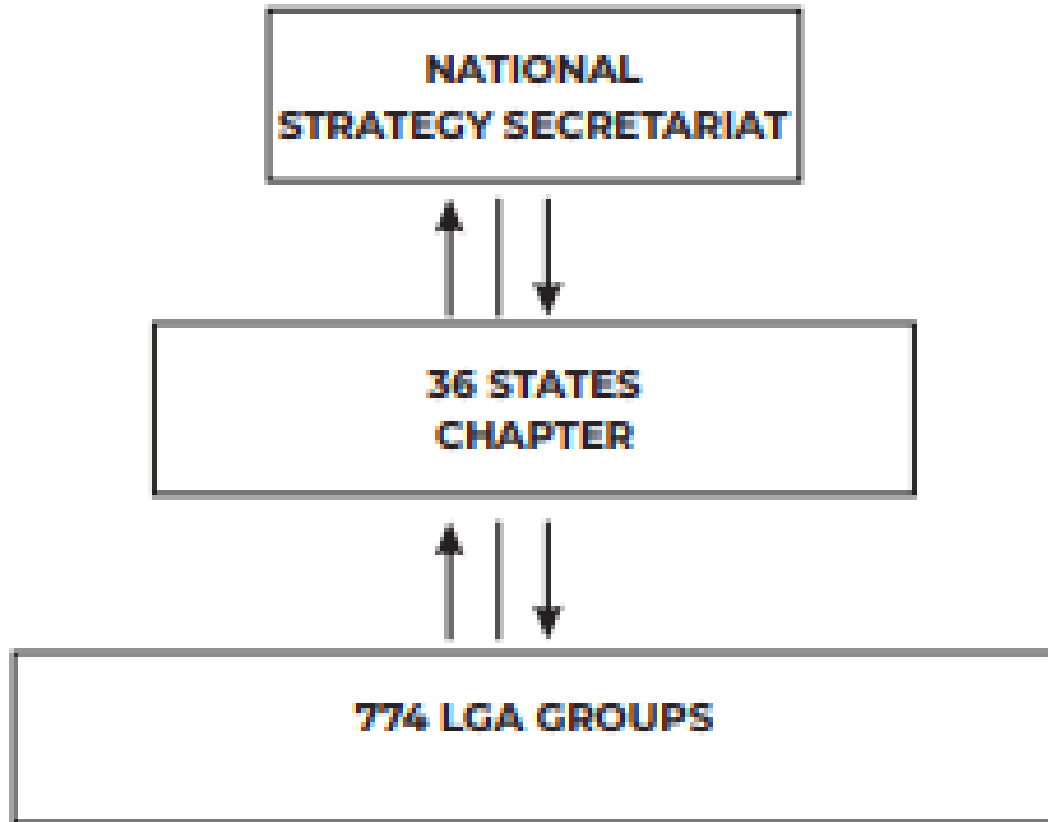
Number of WhatsApp groups respondents were members of



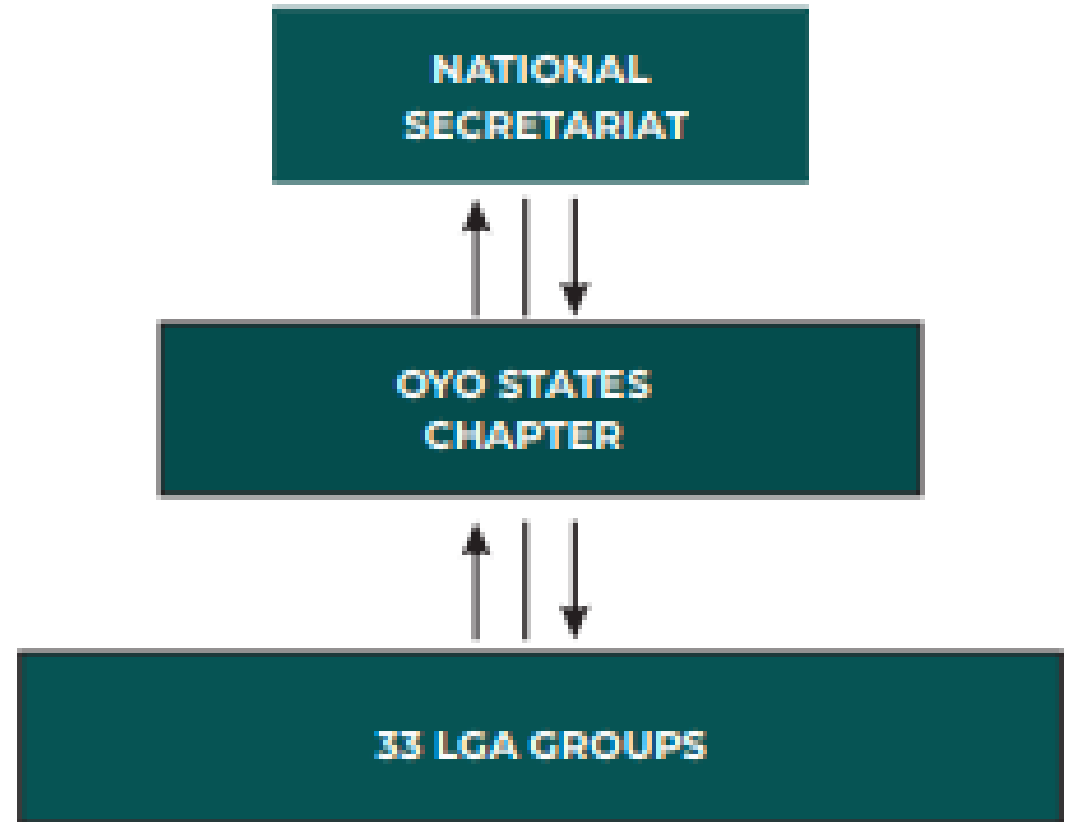


Average number of WhatsApp group members

**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”.



← Tweet

Search Twitter

Home

Explore

Notifications

Messages

Bookmarks

Lists

Profile

More

Tweet



**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

Follow

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

@fromagehomme

[n.cheeseman@bham.ac.uk](mailto:n.cheeseman@bham.ac.uk)

[www.democracyinafrica.org](http://www.democracyinafrica.org)