

News in the COVID-19 crisis: Where do South Africans get their news, and is it trustworthy?

Findings from the 2019 South African Reconciliation Barometer

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Key findings

- *TV and radio are the only sources that most South Africans regularly consult – ‘a few times a week’ or ‘every day’ – for information on current affairs. These are also the most trusted sources of information.*
- *South Africans rely more on friends and family than newspapers for information on current affairs.*
- *Print newspapers are only used regularly for information by about a third of South Africans (35%).*
- *About half of South Africans never use online sources (50%) or social media (52%) for political information.*
- *Whereas older South Africans are the most vulnerable to the severe effects of COVID-19, it is young South Africans, rather than older respondents, who access a wider range of sources, including the Internet and social media.*
- *Of all institutions mentioned in the survey, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is the most trusted. The SABC’s large audience across both radio and TV, in multiple languages, is a vital source of information for South Africans.*

Recommendations

- *TV and radio stations, particularly SABC broadcasters, should scale up public-service announcements and infomercials on COVID-19 and on the lockdown measures introduced by the state.*
- *While communications from the Department of Health and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) have been effective online and on social media, greater emphasis needs to be placed on regularly updating much larger audiences via TV and radio.*
- *Music radio stations, typically with larger audiences, but less news content than their talk-radio counterparts, must take greater responsibility and play a greater role in informing the public about COVID-19 and the government’s response.*

Introduction

It is imperative that South Africans be informed about the causes, effects and severity of COVID-19 as it continues to spread throughout the country. While the Department of Health and the NICD provide regular updates on the spread of the virus, many myths, hoaxes and instances of 'fake news' continue to make the rounds. In the light of the government's recent announcement of a national lockdown, which imposed substantial restrictions on many aspects of public life in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 infections, it is vital that the public be aware of the rationale for the introduction of the lockdown and restrictions in order to ensure broad compliance.

To achieve this compliance requires an understanding of where South Africans access their information; how regularly they do so; and which sources they generally trust. Knowing this will assist those in charge of the COVID-19 information 'war room' to target their messaging more accurately so as to limit the spread of the disease.

This policy brief, which draws on nationally representative public-opinion data from the 2019 South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), provides insights into these salient questions on public confidence in the media during a national crisis.

Methodology¹

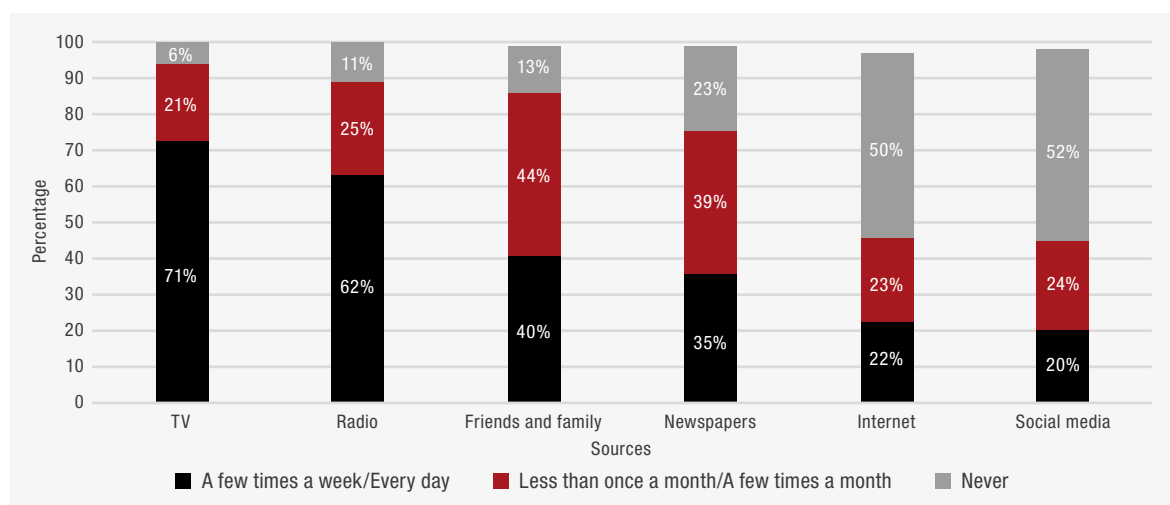
The SARB is a cross-sectional, iterative public-opinion survey which has been conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) on a regular basis since 2003. The survey is nationally representative, with a sample size of 2 400 adult South Africans, a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error of two percentage points. In 2019, face-to-face interviews were conducted in the language of respondents' choice in all nine provinces for the survey in July and August 2019.

Analysis

Where do South Africans go when they seek information and news about politics and current affairs? The 2019 SARB survey asked respondents to report how often they received news from six popular sources: (1) television news channels; (2) radio news broadcasts; (3) print newspapers; (4) online news websites; (5) news outlets on social media; and (6) friends and family.

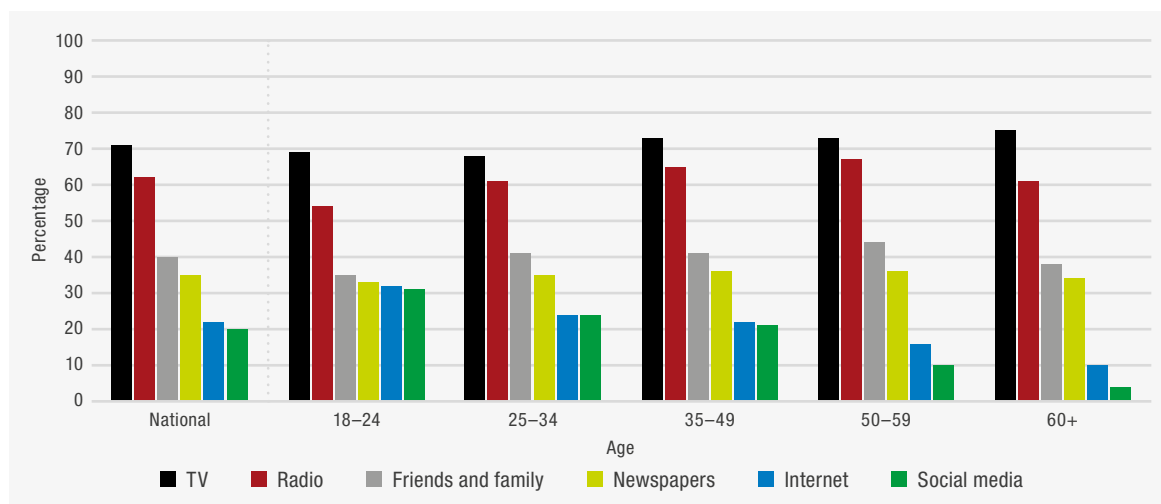
Figure 1, which presents the results in respect of this question, shows that most South Africans rely on TV and radio broadcasts for their information on current affairs. Close to three in four (71%) get their news from TV 'a

Figure 1: How often do South Africans get their information from various sources?



Respondents were asked: 'How often do you get information and news about politics and political issues from the following sources?' Responses coded as 'Refused' or 'Don't know' have been omitted.

Figure 2: Different age groups' regular use of media sources



Respondents were asked: 'How often do you get information and news about politics and political issues from the following sources?' (% who said 'a few times a week' or 'every day'). Responses coded as 'Refused' or 'Don't know' have been omitted.

few times a week' or 'every day', while three in five (62%) use radio. Radio listenership is high across the country and the SABC's three free-to-air TV channels all contain dedicated evening news programmes in multiple languages.

Nearly two in five South Africans (39%) report getting their news from print newspapers 'less than once a month' or a 'few times a month', whereas slightly more than a third of respondents (35%) keep abreast of current affairs through newspapers 'a few times a week' or daily. Print news is a less popular source of information than friends and family, as 40% of South Africans report regularly receiving news by word of mouth. With limited access to the Internet, and in view of the relatively high price of mobile Internet data, half of South Africans (50-52%) never turn to online publications or social media for news content.

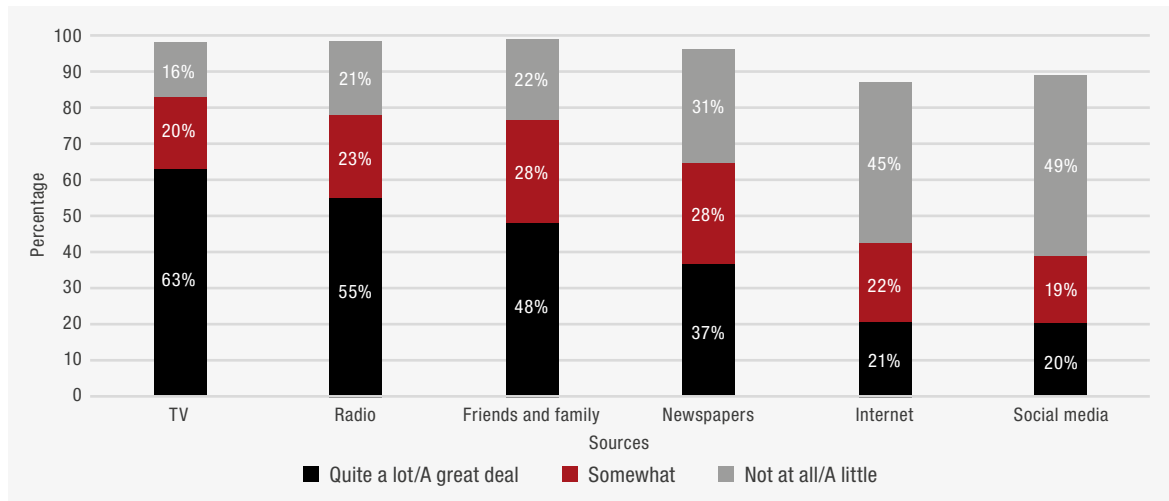
When respondents were asked where they get their news from, there is a significant difference across age groups (see Figure 2). Young South Africans (in the age group 18-35 years) are far more likely than older respondents to consult a wider variety of information sources. In particular, a third of those in the age group 18-24 years (31-32%) report regularly getting their news from online publications or social media, which is in stark contrast to the situation regarding South Africans over the age of 60. Despite using online news sources more than older respondents, most young South Africans say that they get their news from radio and TV 'a few times a

week' or 'every day'. Radio and TV are the most important sources of information for adults across all age demographics.

Figures 1 and 2 point to where South Africans get their news from. But do they trust these sources? Unsurprisingly, the most popular sources of information across most of the country – TV and radio – are also the most trusted sources (see Figure 3). Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) trust television news 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal', while more than half (55%) express high levels of trust in radio broadcasters. Less than half (48%) trust information from friends and family 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal', while newspapers are considered even less trustworthy, with nearly a third (31%) saying they only trust print news 'a little' or 'not at all'. Online news sources – online news publications and news outlets on social media – are considered to be the most untrustworthy, with nearly half (45-49%) of South Africans trusting these sources only a little or not at all.

TV and radio are trusted 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' by South Africans across all ages (see Figure 4). Young South Africans (in the age group 18-35 years) express much more trust in online news sources than older respondents, while older South Africans (>35 years old) express greater trust in newspapers than younger respondents. The share of respondents who trust friends and family 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' as sources of information is relatively consistent across age groups. South Africans are generally

Figure 3: Trust in various sources of information



Respondents were asked: 'How much do you trust the following sources of political information and news?' Responses coded as 'Refused' or 'Don't know' have been omitted.

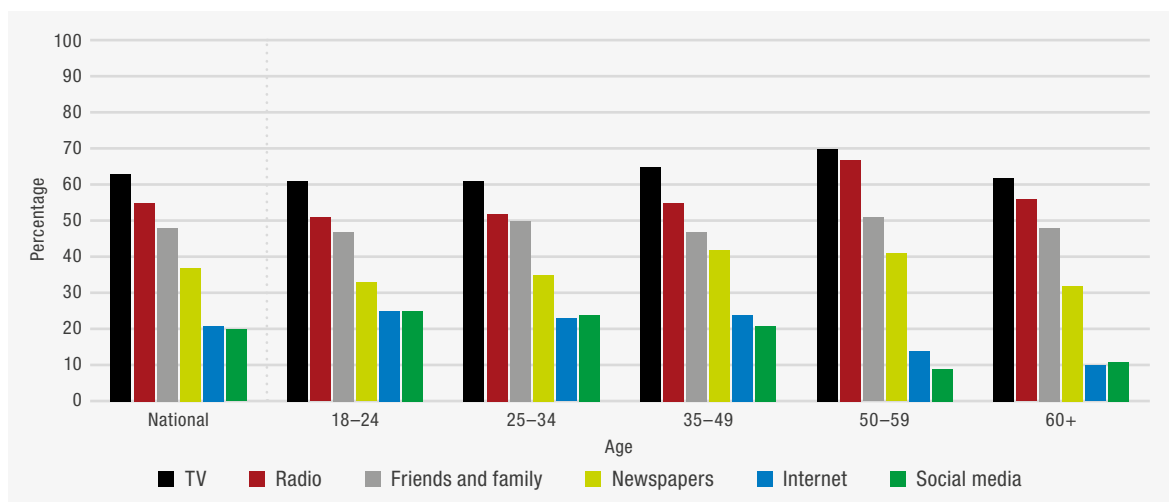
sceptical of online news sources and, across all age groups, TV and radio are the most trusted sources of information.

Why are TV and radio the most frequented and trust sources of information? In South Africa, these two mediums are relatively inexpensive and broadcast in many of the country's languages; TV and radio audiences span class, language and geographic divisions (Jacobs 2019). The SABC, as the national broadcaster, is the largest broadcaster of television and radio in multiple languages. For example, Ukhozi FM, an isiZulu-language SABC radio station, has a monthly audience of over seven million listeners, making it

among the most popular radio stations in the world (BRC 2020a). News programmes in isiXhosa and isiZulu on SABC 1, a free-to-air TV channel, have audiences of around four million South Africans (BRC 2020b).

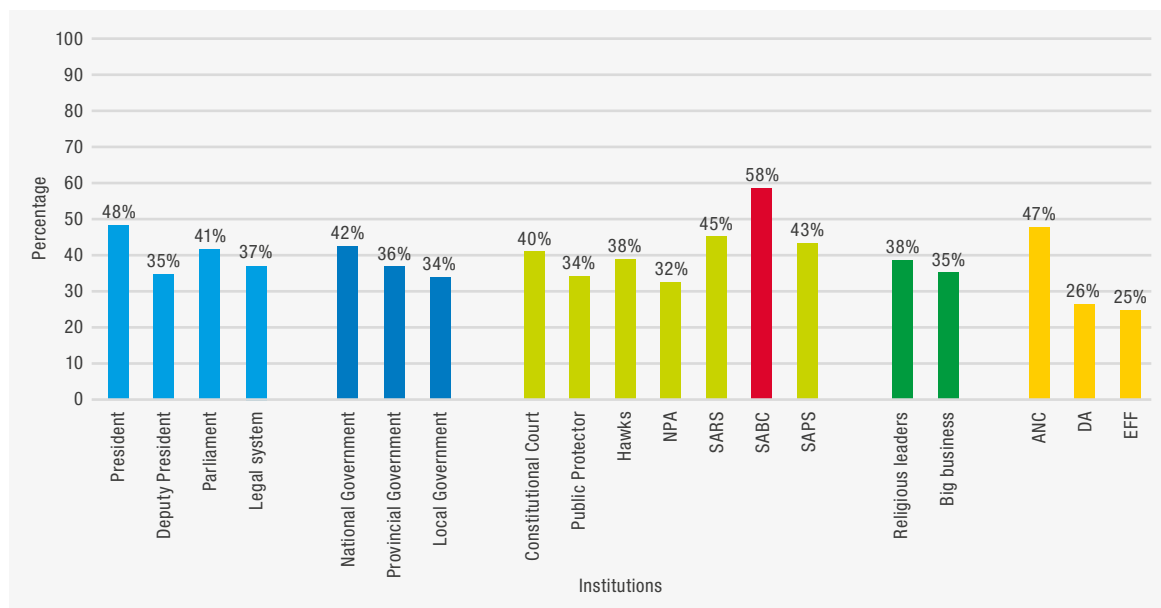
Figure 5 shows that the SABC is the only institution that a majority of South Africans (58%) express 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of confidence in. Despite a recent history of mismanagement, the SABC's wide reach has cultivated a strong sense of public confidence in it. More South Africans expressed a high degree of confidence in the SABC than in the president or the governing party.

Figure 4: Trust in various sources of information, by age



Respondents were asked: 'Please indicate how much confidence you have in each of the following institutions' (% who said 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'). Responses coded as 'Refused' or 'Don't know' have been omitted.

Figure 5: Share of respondents expressing a high degree of confidence in institutions



Respondents were asked: ‘How often do you get information and news about politics and political issues from the follow sources?’ Responses coded as ‘Refused’ or ‘Don’t know’ have been omitted.

Conclusion

Where do South Africans get their news from, and do they trust it? The findings from the 2019 SARB survey indicate that most South Africans get their news from TV and radio, while the majority have ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ of trust in these sources. Print newspapers are less popular sources of information than broadcast news and are less trusted. Online sources of information – online news publications and news outlets on social media – are the least common sources for news on current affairs, although younger South Africans are more likely to engage with these sources. Word-of-mouth from friends and family is also an important source of information for many South Africans.

Older citizens, and immunocompromised people, are most likely to suffer the debilitating effects of COVID-19. While social media and online news broadcasts have several communication advantages, these channels cater for a relatively exclusive and younger audience. To preserve public health and ensure that the most vulnerable are informed about COVID-19, government’s communication strategy must be directed to those outlets where older South Africans regularly access their news, namely TV and radio stations.

The SABC, as the largest broadcaster of television and radio in the country, has an enormous responsibility to keep the public informed during the national and global COVID-19 crisis. It is the only institution that a majority of South Africans have a high degree of confidence in. As new developments on the spread of COVID-19, and the government’s response to it, emerge every day, it is imperative that TV and radio stations – as the most frequented and trusted sources of information – broadcast this information accurately, responsibly and continually.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 and its deleterious effects can be limited if the public is informed and cooperative. Media outlets, particularly TV and radio stations, need to heighten their efforts to inform the public about the causes, effects and treatment of COVID-19, as well as clarify and amplify the government’s response to the crisis. To limit the damage of the COVID-19 outbreak, South Africans will need to cooperate with one another and trust in the state’s efforts to reduce the risk of infection, but, first, South Africans will need to be informed. News sources have a crucial role to play in the national response to this crisis.

Further reading

Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRC). (2020a). *BRC Radio Audience Measurement Listenership Report Jan '19–Dec '19*. Available at: <https://brcsa.org.za/brc-ram-listenership-report-jan19-dec19/>.

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Jacobs, S. (2019). *Media in Post-apartheid South Africa: Postcolonial Politics in the Age of Globalisation*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

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Endnotes

1 Respondents' participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered. The sampling approach used a stratified, multistage random sample design, including stratification variables such as province, population group and geographical area. Sample weights were benchmarked to Statistics

South Africa's 2019 mid-year population estimates. The weights were within acceptable limits, with no observed abnormal or unusual skews. The final data set was weighted to correct any disproportions that may have occurred (Potgieter 2019).

About The Author

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) was launched in 2000 by officials who worked in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the aim of ensuring that lessons learnt from South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy are taken into account and utilised in advancing the interests of national reconciliation across Africa. IJR works with partner organisations across Africa to promote reconciliation and socio-economic justice in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing democratic transition. IJR is based in Cape Town, South Africa. For more information, visit <http://www.ijr.org.za>, and for comments or enquiries contact info@ijr.org.za.

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