

# Media Mirror

## Unveiling public trust in the Maldivian Media

2023



Commissioned by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA). Research conducted by Villa College, Maldives and funded by the European Union.







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The Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) was formed in 2009 with the objective of advocating for journalistic professional rights, facilitating development of local media and ensuring a safe and free working environment without any undue influences that negatively affect press freedom.



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# FOREWORD

A healthy democracy relies on an independent media to inform citizens with accurate information in the public interest and with critical coverage that holds the powerful to account. But there are some major challenges to the media's effective functioning in today's information ecosystem. Increasing political polarisation, pressures placed on journalists and media workers to deliver quality news with limited resources, and varying levels of trust or distrust of news and journalists among members of the public are all factors that put media under pressure to perform effectively and engender trust with those who consume and critique it. Notwithstanding, is the major ongoing struggle of news organisations to maintain financial independence and stability.

At its simplest, trust is important in establishing an ongoing relationship between media outlets and local, national and global audiences consuming news. But maintaining trust is more and more challenged in a world of news overflow, disinformation and social media disruption. For journalists and media organisations to build or maintain audience trust, they must also cope with varying degrees of trust across different groups in society. Industry research shows that some groups in society, such as those holding strong partisan and populist views, are less likely to trust the media regardless of how strong the media is.

While media organisations can work to increase trust in the medium and long term by championing credibility and authenticity, their performance must also be seen as being pitted against other external factors beyond the control of media outlets, including cultural or economic factors. So, if the democratic fabric surrounding them is weak, then journalists' role and efficacy is also eroded. Measuring levels of trust in media and powerful forces that shape media is therefore essential for tracking citizens' perceptions

of the news ecosystem in general and the output and functioning of media workers within that system.

The IFJ is pleased to be working with the Maldives Journalists' Association (MJA), its affiliate in the Maldives, to present this important first ever survey on trust in media in the Maldives. This survey focused on people's perceptions of the intentions of media outlets to give accurate and impartial news. It also investigated how participants perceived leaders' accountability in politics, business, and other institutions and looks at other influential areas such as media ownership and diversity, political media coverage and perceptions of the media's role in maintaining a strong democracy. There are a multitude of approaches that have been tried and tested globally to measure trust. But there is no one size fits all approach to determine public trust.

The IFJ and its affiliates strongly believe that, for a strong media to fulfil its objective to inform the public independently, journalists must be free to report without fear or favour. Media must be financially strong enough to sustain and not bend to the influences of power or persuasion. And the laws and framework that surround it must also be supportive of both respecting and supporting the functioning of media. But beyond that, a strong media is only as strong as the audience, that not only trusts it but readily and regularly consumes and supports it.

We hope this study will inform and educate, not only the media and journalists, but also the country's political leaders and indeed the public - on the vital importance of a free, strong and independent functioning media as a critical pillar of democracy and the steps needed to attain vital public trust and support.

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## Maldives:

# A challenged space for media

## Country Backgrounder –

## Maldives Journalists' Association (MJA)

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Journalists in the Maldives have always had to deal with threats of violence while carrying out their jobs, especially under autocratic governments seeking to muzzle critics and control the dissemination of information. Between 1978 and 2008, former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom ruled with an iron fist, controlling every aspect of the state. Fear of torture, arbitrary arrests, or being charged with terrorism was the lived reality of many journalists and dissenting voices critical of the government.

Following the country's first democratic elections in 2008, journalists enjoyed a brief period where they could write about the government without fear. However, the smooth democratic transition quickly gave way to a bitter zero-sum political struggle. In 2012, the government of Mohamed Nasheed fell, with the Maldives sliding back to autocratic control once again. Between 2013 and 2018, former president Abdulla Yameen led a ruthless campaign to crush dissent. Attacks on journalists and media outlets took many forms: murder, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrests and detention, direct threats and intimidation, physical assault, and defamation or criminal lawsuits. In many cases, the attacks were carried out in collusion with criminal gangs and gangs radicalized into violent extremism. These groups enjoyed complete state protection and political patronage.

Yameen's autocratic rule came to an end in 2018 with the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and his coalition government committed to

wide-reaching reforms. Three months into Solih's presidency, the draconian Anti-Defamation Act that was used by the previous government to silence independent media outlets was repealed. A commission was established to investigate unresolved deaths and disappearances, including those of journalist Ahmed Rilwan and blogger Yameen Rasheed. International covenants and domestic laws were ratified with the intention of promoting and protecting fundamental rights, checking police and state-led violence, and ending the culture of impunity. However, undoing decades of political patronage that has protected and emboldened criminal gangs and extremist groups is an ongoing obstacle.

In 2023, there is growing concern over the recently introduced Evidence Act, implemented by the Solih government, which grants courts the authority to compel journalists and news organisations to disclose their sources based on the vague and overly broad grounds of "terrorism" and "national security." So too, the government has found advertising by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to be a convenient tool for exerting its influence, with media's reliance on this funding as a substantive source of income. Meanwhile, working journalists have raised alarm regarding the harassment, intimidation, and attacks perpetrated by religious extremist groups and individuals allegedly associated with political leaders and criminal organizations and highlighted the challenges of police harassment of media professionals reporting on protests and unrest. The combination of these

issues has contributed to increasing political polarisation in the Maldives media landscape.

One of the biggest challenges confronting the country today, is the unprecedented task of establishing an independent and professional media culture. Key barriers to achieving this include misinformation and disinformation and hate speech have undermined trust in media institutions. Social media has transformed the information landscape around the world, and although technology platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp have made it possible for academics, journalists, civil society organisations, human rights defenders and activists to organise and share information, these same platforms are increasingly being co-opted for nefarious means by state and non-state actors. While the Maldives had begun to steadily climb back up the World Press Freedom Index to 72 in the 2021 rankings, it has since slipped back again and now sits at 100th place in 2023.

As the country heads toward its next elections, the Maldives media remains an industry under pressure. There are serious concerns over the state control of media regulatory bodies, which have typically displayed bias in favour of government-run media and restricted coverage of the opposition, raising questions over the sustainability of the democratisation of the Maldives. The government has also been rattled by sharp divisions within its ranks as lawmakers split into factions over hate speech legislation.

Today, Twitter is the most widely used social media platform and leveraged widely by not only journalists and activists, but also by politicians and key government institutions who have setup their own official Twitter accounts to disseminate

news and information in a country which is largely digitally oriented. Politicians and government actors are known to operate proxy Twitter accounts to serve their own political interests. The potential for misinformation and disinformation to spread in the Maldives is extraordinarily high given that over 63% of the population have access to the internet. More than 70% of internet users are active social media users, mobile connections far outnumber the population, and all leading newspapers and media platforms have an active presence online.

In this space, journalists continue to write, scrutinize, and inform the country. Although there has not been a single murder or abduction since Solih assumed office, physical assaults and threats against journalists offline have continued, while online online harrassment of journalists is increasingly delivered through anonymous social media accounts.

*The Maldives Journalist Association (MJA) is the sole non-governmental organization that represents journalists in the Maldives. Since its establishment in 2009, MJA has been actively advocating for the professional rights of journalists, facilitating capacity building and professional development, and ensuring a safe and unrestricted working environment for journalists.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From a democratic perspective, news media is essential for helping citizens become informed and empowered to act<sup>1</sup>. This perspective is because a public that trusts media will believe the information they receive, be empowered to act, and can hold those in power accountable<sup>2</sup>. To rebuild public trust, measuring trust is essential. This research in media trust is a first of its kind in the Maldives, aiming to explore public perceptions of the media's operations and professionalism in supporting sustainable development and delivering outcomes for broader society in the Maldives.

The study surveyed 667 households from 11 atolls and the Greater Malé Area, representing 54% males and 47% females. The randomly selected islands were classified based on urban-rural classification. In addition, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including government functionaries, journalists, editors, human rights activists, and civil society organisations. A total of 17 key informants, including individuals and media outlets from public and private sectors, were interviewed, providing valuable insights into media-related matters.

### Key findings

#### Accessing news

67% of participants in the Maldives access their news "daily" via online news platforms, followed by television (53%). Interestingly, 52% of the respondents said they access news "daily" via family, friends and people known to them. Another 44% said they accessed news through "sources or people they don't know through the internet". A much smaller proportion got their news daily from radio (26%) and newspapers and magazines (25%). When combined with respondents who accessed news both daily and weekly, the most popular source of news was still online news websites (82%) followed by family/friends (79%).

#### Media type preference

Online news websites and platforms emerged as the most popular type of news media accessed in the Maldives today, with a sizable proportion of people (61%) getting their news from online media/journalism portals. This was followed by television (25%), newspapers and magazines (9%) and radio (5%). The

biggest consumers of online news websites were the age groups between 25-34 and 35-54 (with 22% each equally). This was followed by the 18-24 age group with 12%. But only 2% of those surveyed aged 55 or over accessed their news via online news websites. The study showed a move away from regular newspaper and magazine readership, with more than half of all respondents (53%) saying they "never" relied on these for news.

#### Influence of personal networks for news

Respondents repeatedly rated the quality of news, their trust of news and balance and the accuracy of news they sourced from people they knew personally – sometimes higher than conventional news outlets. The news platform that regularly rated the highest with respondents was television followed by online news platforms. Personal acquaintances (eg family, friends) also rated highest as a source of "accurate and fair" news reports (65%).

#### Facebook dominates as a source of news on social media platforms

Facebook was the clear and dominant choice of the "social media" platforms publishing what people understood as news content with 64% using the platform as their primary medium to access news. This was followed by Google with just 6%, Viber and Instagram (both 5%) and Twitter (3%).

#### Impact and influence of other online sources

The influence of online sources or people not known to respondents showed the impact of increasing digital access and social media influence in the Maldives. While "online sources not known to them personally" were used by almost half the respondents on a daily basis to get news, the level of trust and the perception of the accuracy of information ranked at the lower end of respondent perceptions. The perceived prevalence of "fake news" via these other online sources was also high (49%). Many others (36%) said they did not know if what they were reading was true or not via these other online sources outside news providers.

#### Media relationship to political divisions

The strongest survey response related to political divisions in the Maldives with the majority of respondents (87%) agreeing that the media should



be held accountable for the political division in the country. But alternatively, 51% of respondents also agreed that the Maldivian news media could do a great deal to heal the political divisions in the country.

### **Influence of politics/business on media reporting**

The second strongest response across the survey was the extent to which other news and platforms are perceived to be influenced by businesses or political interests. Between television and internet news platforms and websites, 77% and 74% respectively felt that a media outlet's ownership's business or political interests influenced its news reporting. This was also reflected in focus group discussions with media stakeholders. Media stakeholders noted that the ownership of media outlets in the Maldives strongly affected their operations in various ways. Media outlets that political parties or the government controlled tended to prioritise their own interests and often employed propaganda tactics to exert control over the media and the media narrative. By prioritising personal influence over journalistic values, in turn compromised journalistic quality and credibility and ultimately trust in the media.

### **Media and democracy**

The data shows that most respondents across the Maldives (71%) believe news media to be “very important” (71%) or “somewhat important” to supporting a stable democracy – or 92% overall. Overall, the majority of respondents felt the media supported democracy much better (30%) or somewhat better (33%) than it did five years previously. 64% of respondents said it was “very important” that Maldivian governments and political leaders respected and supported efforts to make media more sustainable in the Maldives. Another 23% of respondents considered it somewhat important. Only 13% said was not that important.

### **Trustworthy news sources**

Public trust in different sources of news and information varied in terms of “reliability”. The most trustworthy sources respondents identified were “people I know in person” (65%) and television (62%). This was followed by online news websites (56%) and radio (51%), while “sources and people I know only through the internet” rated at 46% for its reliability and trust. Conversely 41% of respondents

said they only had “minimal levels of trust” for “sources or people I know only through the internet” – which was ranked lowest in terms of the least level of trust as a news source. This was followed by online news websites with 35% of people saying they had a minimal level of trust in it as a news source. Another 30% said they had minimal levels of trust each in television and people they knew personally.

### **Accuracy of news**

Television news rated highest of media outlets in the accuracy of its news (56%), followed by online news media (52%) and radio (49%). In this question, respondents actually rated the accuracy of news from people they knew (57%) slightly higher than Maldivian media or news outlets.

### **Prevalence of fake news**

The perceived prevalence of so-called “fake news” was lower in traditional or “non-digital media outlets”, according to respondents. Online news websites and social media fared worst with 68% of respondents saying fake news was “prevalent” in the news they produced, and another 49% felt fake news was prevalent in “sources or persons known only through the internet”. This was followed by 44% of prevalence of fake news in television, then newspapers and magazines with 42%, with radio faring best at 27%. The sources of news that had the greatest change in trust over a five-year period were online news websites (56%) and television (52%).

### **Holding political leaders to account**

Online news websites and platforms rank highest in the perception that they were keeping leaders accountable, with 59% of respondents saying they performed this function. Television followed closely in second place (56%), while radio and newspapers/magazines lagged further behind at 43% and 40% respectively.

### **Providing news in the national interest**

In terms of provision of news in the national interest, respondents rated television highest (54%) in fulfilling this duty, but this was closely followed by “people they know” as well as online news websites (51%) and closely by radio (49%). Interestingly, respondents expressed a strong “negative” view of the news provided to them in the “national interest” by both people known to them (42%) and those known only through the internet (47%) – the highest across all

categories. This reflects other influences that may be at play influencing news content in the so-called national interest such as social, cultural, religious, political, or economic factors in how people feel about news shared through other sources other than news.

### **Sensational or biased coverage**

Television and internet news websites were perceived by the largest percentage of respondents to have the highest levels of sensational or biased coverage, at 71% and 75%, respectively. But this was followed equally by people known to respondents or online sources not known to them, both with 59%.

### **Diversity of voices in media coverage**

Media coverage in the Maldives lacked diversity across a number of key areas, with respondents rating the diversity of coverage as lacking on race (i.e. ethnicity, anti-racism and privilege) and disability (both at 26%), followed by social diversity (20%), gender and equality (16%) and age diversity (12%). Women respondents identified coverage of race at the coverage most lacking diversity, while men identified disability.

### **Quality of political reporting in the lead-up to elections**

Respondents actually rated the quality of political media reporting below people known to them (66%) or to online sources not even known to them (64%). The perceived quality of political reporting by actual media outlets rated television and online news platforms equally at 60%, followed by radio (50%) and newspapers and magazines (49%). Newspapers and magazines also fared worst in its coverage with 38% of respondents describing the coverage as “bad”.

### **Quality and trust in public service broadcasting**

30% of respondents “strongly agreed” that public television and radio broadcasting was a necessary service, and 42% of respondents “somewhat agreed”. Another 18% were neutral and 11% agreed or strongly disagreed this was the case. While 54% said they trusted public broadcasting more, another 46% said they trusted private media more than public broadcasting. The strong divide in opinion on the functioning of the public broadcaster warrants examination, with media stakeholders outlining the challenges and deficiencies in public broadcasting in relation to influence and control by the ruling government.

## **THE REPORT**

This report, comprising three chapters, provides a broad picture of the dangers many journalists face in the Maldives. It describes the types of violence and threats journalists encounter and the nature and frequency of these violations.

For this report, media is defined as news mediums supported by journalists, combining traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio, with new media such as websites, blogs, podcasts, and social media.

The first chapter begins by sketching the historical importance of trust in the news media. The chapter discusses the importance of trust in the news media, the role of media, the importance of studying trust,

and the constant value of the ‘trust’ ideal in a digital media landscape.

The second chapter presents the findings of public trust in media national survey, discussing how the public consumes news and perceives its trustworthiness. The chapter also examines the role of media in maintaining a strong democracy and how it may uphold democratic values.

The third chapter includes insights from key informant interviews focusing on media ownership in Maldives and its impact on editorial content. The chapter also presents stakeholders’ views on transparency of media funding and challenges faced by journalists in Maldives.

## DEFINITIONS

Internationally there is no agreed-upon measurement or operationalisation of media trust<sup>34</sup>. There are a number of similar studies undertaken that provides operational definitions for the measurement of media trust<sup>56-78</sup>. This study has been drawn from more extensive international studies across multiple countries and follows IFJ's previous Trust in Media in Malaysia research by Merdeka Media Centre<sup>9</sup>.

There is a variability potential in terms of whether media trust refers to generalised news media trust or trust in specific news outlets, the news reported, or journalists themselves. This is hard to distinguish.

The media is a collective term that refers to how information is disseminated to the public. For this report, the definition of media is limited to that of news mediums supported by journalists, combining the following three categories.

### Traditional media

The term "traditional media" refers to the forms of media that have been in existence for a considerable period of time, namely print media and broadcast media. For the purpose of this study, the category of print media encompasses newspapers, magazines, and books, whereas broadcast media comprises television and radio.

### New (post-internet) media

The term "new media" does not refer to a specific method of communication. Certain forms of new media, such as an online newspaper, bear resemblance to "old media" in the form of a traditionally printed newspaper. Some forms of new media are completely novel, such as a podcast or smart phone app. For the purpose of this study, new media refers to any form of media that is digitally delivered, encompassing a wide range of content such as newspaper articles, blogs, and podcasts<sup>10</sup>.

### Social media

In a general sense, the term "social media" is defined as a digital platform, accessible through the internet or mobile devices, that facilitates networking, information sharing, photo and idea exchange among users who belong to the same online community or social network. For the purpose of this study, social media refers to websites that are categorized as social media platforms encompassing social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Twitter, Viber, and Google<sup>11</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

For this report, Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) were employed for the public perception survey based on a sampling plan that ensured no overlap between the selected islands in different strata. The study used stratified sampling to divide Maldives population into four strata based on their level of urbanisation to provide a representative sample of the population while maximising the efficiency of data collection within a limited time frame. The data was collected from

14 March – 15 April 2023 from across the country, where enumerators employed a systematic approach to select households to conduct face-to-face interviews via the CAPI approach. The selection of stakeholders was purposive, whereby individuals were chosen based on their potential to provide valuable insights as key experts in the field of media.

The study considered the country's population above 18 years of age, as per the latest 'Population and Household Census of Maldives'12. A minimum sample size was calculated with a significance level of 95% ( $\alpha=.05$ ), and a margin of error of 5% ( $E=\pm 5\%$ ), was 384. The data collection process successfully achieved 667 samples, which yielded a margin of error of 4% at a 95% confidence interval (Annex B).

Data was automatically recorded on a computer-based database. All measures to safeguard and ensure ethics were maintained throughout the evaluation cycle (Annex C).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **1. SUPPORT FOR STRONGER, MORE SUSTAINABLE MEDIA**

Media operations in the Maldives play a key role in supporting a stable democracy and have improved capacity to do so in recent years, but it is also important that the Maldivian government and its political leaders respect and support efforts to make media more sustainable in the Maldives and less vulnerable to political or business influences.

## **2. STRENGTHENING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE IN MEDIA OWNERSHIP**

Editorial independence is crucial to countering the impact of media ownership on journalistic practices. Editorial independence can be achieved through a combination of factors, including strong ethical standards, codes of conduct, and a culture of professional journalism. Journalists and editors must be trained to uphold these standards.

## **3. ESTABLISHING TRANSPARENCY IN FUNDING FOR MEDIA OUTLETS**

As media independence and impartiality is strongly impacted by economic and political influences in the Maldives, there is a critical need for a strong national mechanism to build greater transparency on the funding of media outlets and operations in the Maldives.

## **4. MEDIA LITERACY FOR THE PUBLIC**

Advocacy for media literacy is essential to ensure the public can critically evaluate and consume media content responsibly and informally. Encouraging individuals to think critically to question media so individuals can critically evaluate whether content they read are is genuine media content or misinformation/disinformation. The public would benefit from broader education campaigns to understand the distinction between social media and journalism.

## **5. PROMOTING ETHICAL JOURNALISM THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING**

Conducting comprehensive training programs in ethical journalism are essential. These initiatives should cover media ethics, critical thinking, and media literacy, empowering journalists to make informed decisions and navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Ongoing professional development and mentorship opportunities further reinforce ethical standards. By prioritising ethical journalism training, media outlets can cultivate a culture of responsible reporting, where journalists uphold the values of truth, accuracy, and accountability, leading to increased public trust.

# CHAPTER ONE: MEDIA AND TRUST

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The media remains an essential tool for disseminating information and promoting public discourse on issues of importance. News media significantly impacts society, shaping public opinion, influencing social change, and promoting or discouraging behaviours. However, it can also be misused to spread false information and propaganda.

## Media in the modern context

While in today's digitised and globalised world, interpretations of what constitutes media keep broadening, newer platforms push traditional media further into the background. Nevertheless, this does little to level the playing field for online platforms, as news media of all formats must now battle fierce competition for people's attention from a myriad of other online information sources.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have become the preferred medium to consume news content or purported news content, causing a shift away from traditional, professional journalistic outfits. This shift made political and other social actors less reliant on genuine news media and journalism content to reach the public and an environment that is readily willing to attack news media providers<sup>13</sup>.

Further, within the news media framework, emerging competitors can fall under the categories of alternative and partisan media, in which attacks on traditional news media for being untrustworthy are common. These media outlets, if politically funded or supported, also have strong capacity to skew and manipulate genuine and factual news as "fake" or generate other criticisms of independent or critical media as being anti-nationalist while they

simultaneously run a propaganda or populist agenda in line with the state of influential politicians. To this effect, research also suggests that those who prefer these sources are most likely to fall prey to the hostile media phenomena, i.e. the tendency to perceive news media as being hostile towards one's own side while favouring the other side in a political conflict<sup>14</sup>.

From a democratic perspective, a key function of news media is to 'aid citizens in becoming informed'. The essence of their contribution is this - a public that trusts media will believe the information they receive, be empowered to act and can hold those in power accountable. Therefore, the confidence people demonstrate in their media directly affects the health of the democracy they live in. But a perfectly informative news media environment is of little democratic use if citizens, by and large, do not consume the news or do not trust it<sup>15</sup>.

Unfortunately, public debate and scholarly literature seem to suggest that the rise of misinformation and broad erosion of trust (between news media and the public) are becoming widespread across different countries and media environments. These factors, along with the aforementioned rise of alternative and partisan media, contribute to the transformation of media landscapes in regions like South Asia, which may, in turn, have a detrimental effect on people's ongoing efforts to overcome urgent socio-economic, financial, and environmental issues and various conflicts<sup>16</sup>.

To paint a picture of the local context, and because this research into media trust is the first of its kind in the Maldives, it is important to briefly turn the pages a few decades back to the initial stirrings of news media. It was during the tenure of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who held power for 30 years, that print became widespread and broadcasting was introduced, but this was also a time of severe control and gross oppression<sup>17</sup>. It set the tone for media literacy (skills that allow people to understand the role of media in society and to be critical consumers) in the Maldives. Although progress has been made, misunderstanding of journalistic purpose and the need for government accountability as part of a functioning democracy with the media as the watchdog, continues to undermine the media and journalists.

In June 2005, as part of Gayoom's reform agenda, license requests were granted to privately-owned publications. Several media outlets launched operations<sup>18</sup> only to find themselves targeted with threats, attacks, and arrests. Nevertheless, by 2008, Maldives began its transition to democracy with a newly ratified Constitution and the election of President Mohamed Nasheed. A seemingly brighter horizon came to a premature end in 2012 when Nasheed resigned - allegedly under duress - and then succeeded (following an election) by former President Yameen Abdul Gayoom<sup>19</sup>.

Not only would this mark a return to the crushing of media freedoms, but during former President Yameen Abdul Gayoom's two terms in office, the media faced crippling fines, arrests, assault, arson, disappearance, and even murder. Strict laws such as the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act further muzzled the media. Draconian laws such as the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act were ratified and enforced<sup>20</sup>. All of these actions were supported by a steady stream of hostile media narratives issued by the leadership and affiliates - granted, most state-aligned media were spared disparagement, but the

impact on public perception of the industry was at once unforgiving and ubiquitous.

However, in 2012, Nasheed resigned and was succeeded by former President Yameen Abdul Gayoom. His two terms in office were fraught with crippling fines, arrests, assault, arson, disappearance, and murder for news media, as well as strict laws such as the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act.

It would be remiss to suggest that the repercussions following these events were complete public distrust in news media when the result was a heavily concentrated and deeply polarised media landscape - in a country where the overall concept of democracy was still new. As President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's five-year term draws to a close in November 2023, the situation for the media remains politicised and encumbered by a lack of independence<sup>21</sup>.

Following Solih's much-celebrated election as a liberal democrat, an initial rise in Maldives' ranking on the World Press Freedom Index was recorded from 120 in 2018 to 72 in 2021. According to global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), having fallen 28 positions since 2021, Maldives is now ranked 100 out of 180 countries on the Index, indicating a serious decline in media freedoms<sup>22</sup>.

On the backdrop of another residential election in 2023 that has been flagged by international and local observers for an increase in targeted disinformation campaigns, this report and its findings are key for journalists, editors and media outlets to identify public trust gaps and work on addressing these deficits. Journalists in the Maldives have consistently raised the alarm on challenges such as harassment, intimidation, and attacks from public factions and those allegedly affiliated with political leaders. This, coupled with the governments retaining control over regulatory bodies, gives credence to the theory that the relationship between news media and the Maldivian public is poised to deteriorate even further.

# Public Trust and Media

The most recent reminder of the need for credible news media, at least where government and authorities are concerned, was underscored by the COVID-19 Pandemic, which, amidst a cacophony of fake news and misinformation, proved that the audiences' trust in media is an invaluable resource to leverage.

However, trusted news media is, and will always be, of far greater significance to the public. Even when muzzled, journalists have proven invaluable in the struggle against autocratic regimes and kept dissent alive<sup>24</sup>. They raise stories of embezzlement by corrupt leaders, reveal the strife of vulnerable factions, pull back the curtain on criminal gangs and more. Thus for a country like the Maldives, which has experienced significant changes in governance over a relatively short period, the need for increased trust in an institution that upholds democracy by creating an informed public, facilitating accountability, and promoting civic engagement - remains paramount.

Beyond political tyrants, imperious magnates, and kingpins, with the expansion of digital and social platforms, modern news media are grappling with misinformation, political polarisation, government patronage, etc. It has undermined respect for the media's work and role, weakening public trust in the most potent tool available to empower ordinary citizens. One of the biggest challenges the media faces is rebuilding that public trust<sup>25</sup>. That is why measuring trust is essential - it helps track public perceptions of news media and better understand public concerns or needs, all of which help pave the way for strategic planning<sup>26</sup>.

Regarding the many issues highlighted above, this study explores public perceptions of the media's operations and delivering outcomes for broader society in the Maldives.

# CHAPTER TWO: SURVEY FINDINGS

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Understanding how individuals consume news and perceive its trustworthiness is critical in a fast developing media environment, where traditional channels and social media coexist. A comprehensive survey was undertaken to acquire insights into these issues, collecting the opinions and habits of the Maldivians.

The survey's findings offer insight into participant demographics and delve into several aspects of media consumption, such as trust, accuracy, accountability, diversity, political coverage, and the function of media in a democratic society.

### **Demographics:**

Participants in the study represented a varied cross-section of Maldivian society. The survey's large sample size allows for a more thorough understanding of media consumption trends and views across different demographic groups.

### **Interest in media news consumption and current affairs:**

One of the key areas investigated in the study was how participants kept up with news and current events. The findings provide important insights into people's interests and behaviours, such as their usage of traditional channels like television, radio, and newspapers, as well as the importance of social media in their news consumption.

### **Trust in media and its relevance:**

The survey examined participants' perceptions of reliable sources and their role in providing accurate and up-to-date news. At the same time, the study examined how trust in media has changed over the last five years among the Maldivians and the prevalence of fake news in the participants' media landscape.

### **Intention, accuracy, and accountability of media outlets:**

The survey focused on participants' perceptions of the intentions of media outlets to give accurate and impartial news. It also investigated how participants perceived leaders' accountability in politics, business, and other institutions.

### **Media ownership and diversity:**

The survey focused on understanding the participants' perspectives on news media ownership, diversity of ownership, journalist professionalism and ethics, and the presence of diverse media voices. The insights from this section offer light on participants' perceptions of the role these factors play in shaping their trust and consumption of news.



**Political media coverage:**

The survey examined the standard of political reporting and the degree of blame on the media for political polarisation. The study also assessed participants' opinions on the media's contribution to mending political rifts and promoting productive political conversation in the Maldives.

**Media and democracy:**

The participants' perceptions of the role of media in maintaining a strong democracy and how media may uphold democratic values in the Maldives were examined. The survey's

results also shed light on how participants felt about media sustainability and its implications for democracy in the island nation.

**Trust in public and private broadcasters:**

The survey provides insight into public and private broadcasters' trustworthiness ratings to better understand how participants felt about the broadcasters. The study also asked participants if they believed that public broadcasters of radio and television offered the general public the necessary services they required

The questions are directed explicitly around key six areas.

**Online news website or platform**

These are reliable sources of news and information available on the internet. The internet, or going online, created more opportunities for newspapers and independent news sites not linked to a printed version.

**Television**

Television remains a prominent medium for news consumption, primarily through news channels and programs.

**Radio**

News and current affairs reporting that uses audio is broadcast over radio frequencies and/or digitally.

**People I know**

When referring to "people I know," it typically involves personal acquaintances, friends, family, or colleagues they know personally.

**Sources or People I know only through the internet**

This category encompasses sources or individuals they do not know and have encountered solely through online platforms, such as social media networks (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter) or other online communities.

**Newspapers and magazines**

Newspapers and Magazines are the two most common forms of print media

## Demographics

A total of 667 samples were collected via door-to-door surveys, representing 11 different atolls and Greater Malé Area, whereby 54% of respondents were male and 47% were female. The age groups of the respondents are classified below. The largest age group among the respondents are aged 35-54 years, representing 42% of the total participants.

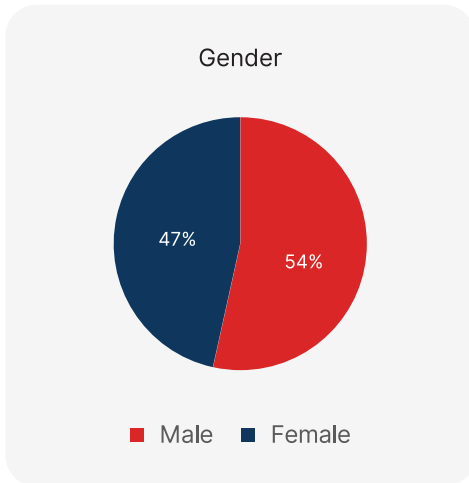


Figure 1. Sex of the respondents

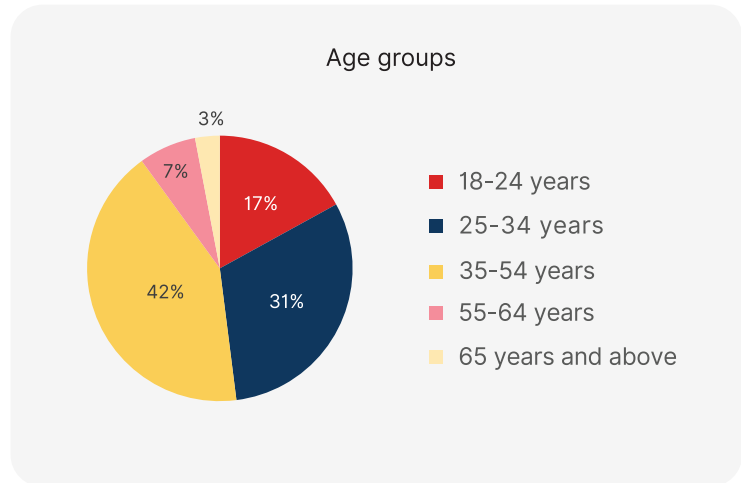


Figure 2. Age group of respondents

The islands were classified using the urban-rural classification based on the administrative division of the country. The highest group of respondents were from Urban regions (44%). The second highest group of respondents, comprising 42% of the total, were from semi-urban regions. The remaining 14% of respondents were from rural regions. The survey's findings also highlight the respondents' educational qualifications, revealing that the majority (32%) completed an O' level qualification. Furthermore, 16% of respondents completed vocational certificates and diplomas, whereas those with no formal education (12%) or primary education (15%) had lower percentages. It is worth noting that over 40% of respondents have occupational certificates, diplomas, A' level, or university degree qualifications, indicating that the surveyed population has a comparatively high level of education.

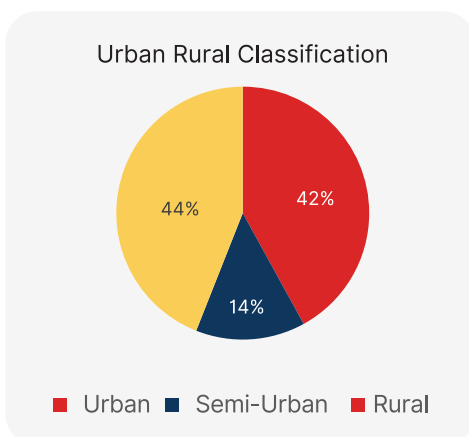


Figure 3. Urban-Rural Classification

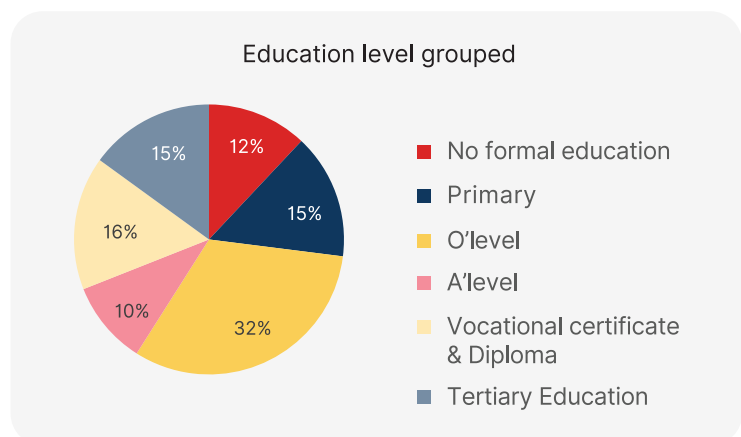


Figure 4. Education Attainment

The majority of respondents (62%) are employed. This distribution is skewed towards male respondents (38%) compared to female respondents (24%). The data shows fewer retired people, students, and unemployed people (17%). Furthermore, a higher proportion of female participants (11%) identified as homemakers, reflecting Maldivian cultural norms. These employment dynamics provide useful insights into the respondents' occupational profiles, which may influence their media consumption patterns and attitudes toward news and current events.

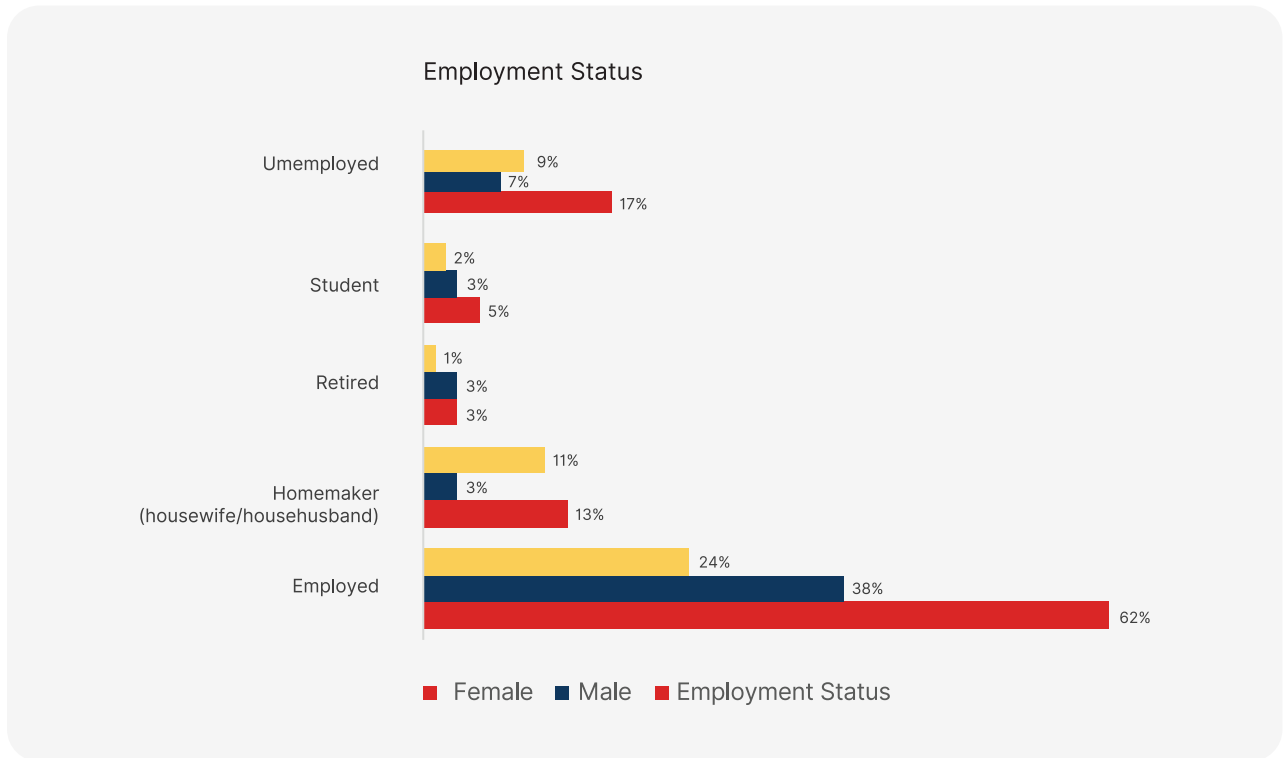


Figure 5. Employment Status

The demographics indicate that most respondents are male, employed, live in urban areas, and have relatively high levels of education. These patterns are consistent with the country's overall socio-economic and demographic profile. The study finds near gender parity, with slightly more male respondents (54%) than female respondents (47%).

## Interest and Consumption of Media for News and Current Affairs

More than half of the participants (67%) regularly access online news sources. This emphasises the convenience, real-time updates, and variety of news sources offered by digital platforms. There are many reasons for the substantial reliance on internet news sources. The widespread availability of internet connectivity and the increasing accessibility of smartphones and digital devices have made it easier for individuals to access news online. Online platforms also offer a variety of news sources, enabling consumers to tailor their news intake based on their tastes and interests.

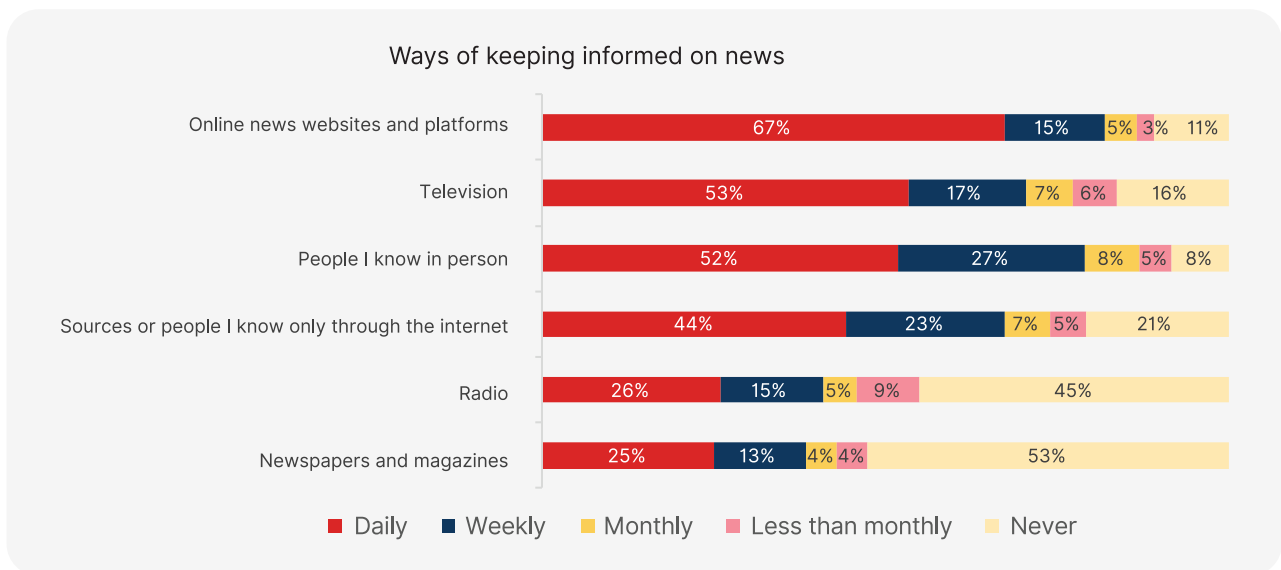


Figure 6. Ways of keeping informed on news

Television continues to be an essential medium for news consumption, with 53% of respondents saying they watch it daily. This shows that television, which provides a visual and audible medium for conveying information, is still a widely used and favoured news source. Television's broad appeal and accessibility can be attributed to its continuing importance as a news medium.

At a close third place, 52% of respondents relying on individuals they know in person for news daily, the survey results highlight the significance of interpersonal ties in news consumption. This demonstrates the importance of social networks and in-person conversations for disseminating and discussing news. The survey also reveals that 44% of respondents regularly rely on news sources or individuals they only know through the internet. This underlines the growing impact of social media networks and internet platforms in influencing the news landscape. The Maldives' cultural and social dynamics can be used to explain the reliance on people known personally for news. Personal connections are considered a dependable source of news and information because of how close-knit the Maldivian society is. This information relay through people they know fosters confidence and credibility among individuals, making personal connections a valuable source of news and information.

The findings reveal that 44% of respondents regularly rely on news sources or individuals they only know through the internet. The significant reliance on information or sources that can only be found

online can be ascribed to the expanding power of social media and online communities. People can connect with like-minded people, opinion leaders, and influencers who exchange news and information on online platforms. People looking for a wider variety of news sources may be drawn to internet networks due to their accessibility to other perspectives and opposing viewpoints. In addition, 26% of respondents indicated daily use of radio, which continues to be an important source of news. This implies that radio is still a dependable and accessible way to get news. People can easily keep informed by radio broadcasts, especially during everyday commutes or while participating in other activities.

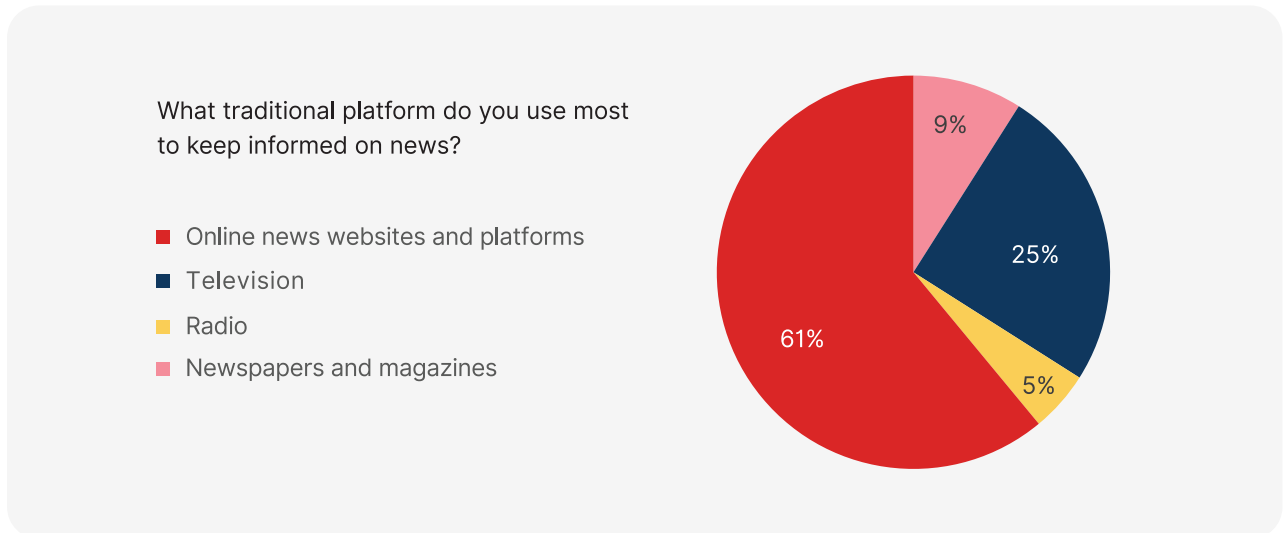


Figure 7. Traditional platforms

The study shows a decline in regular newspaper and magazine readers, with most participants (53%) saying they never rely on these channels for news. There could be several factors contributing to the falling newspaper and magazine readership. The move to digital platforms and the availability of online news sources may have reduced demand for traditional print media. Furthermore, changing lives and interests and a need for fast and up-to-date news may have contributed to a drop in regular readership.

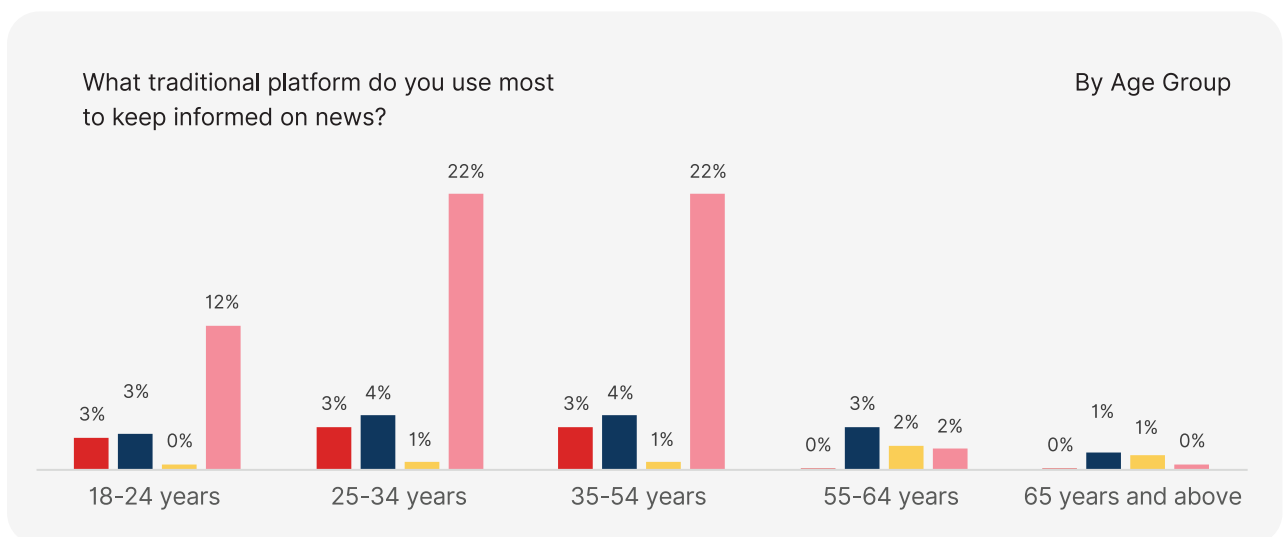


Figure 8. Traditional platform-by age-group

Public use of traditional news platforms indicates some intriguing patterns. Online news websites and platforms emerge as the most popular option, with a sizable number of people (61%) relying on them for news consumption. This implies that news consumption patterns are shifting to digital platforms. There are numerous reasons for this which include the widespread availability of internet connectivity and the growing adoption of smartphones and digital devices, online news platforms offering diverse sources, real-time updates on current events and breaking news, the anonymity and interactivity offered through features such as comments, engaging in sharing opinions, the decline in printed media due to the rise of digital alternatives, and the generational difference in preferences to use the platforms.

The data shows consistently low usage of radio, newspapers, and magazines across all age groups, with only 5% and 9% of respondents relying on these traditional print media, respectively. This shows that print media are losing favour as news providers, potentially due to the growing dominance of digital alternatives. On the other hand, radio could be because other platforms with visual and interactive features, besides audio, are now available.

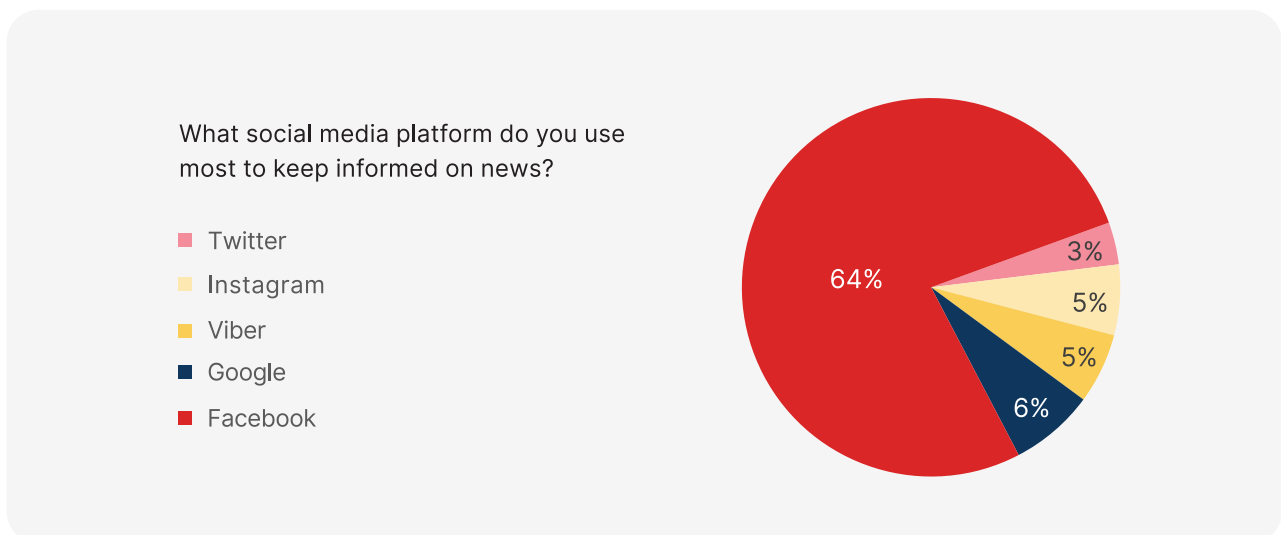


Figure 9. Social media platform commonly used to keep informed on news

The online platforms that the public uses to remain informed on the news reveal considerable differences in preferences. Facebook is the standout platform, with a sizable majority of respondents (64%) using it as their primary medium to access news. This dominance is due to Facebook's large user base and its status as a popular social networking site where news stories and updates are often shared and discussed. The popularity of Facebook derives from its capacity to enable content sharing and engaging in discussions, allowing users to readily access and participate in news stories inside their social networks. The platform's news feeds, groups, and commenting capabilities encourage news sharing and allow users to share their ideas and opinions on current events. Therefore, the platform's enormous user interaction and influence in shaping public conversation add to Facebook's status as a key source for accessing news for many people.

Google is the second most popular platform, with 6% of respondents reporting using it for news consumption. This indicates that people prefer using search engines to find news stories and obtain information from various sources. Google's popularity as a search engine makes it a natural choice for people looking for specific news articles or information on various topics. Its extensive search

capabilities and ability to aggregate news from numerous sources make it a valuable tool for users to obtain a wide range of news items.

Instagram and Viber are used similarly, with 5% of respondents relying on each platform for news. These platforms, which are noted for their visual and messaging-focused natures, have acquired popularity as alternative news sources for some segments of the population. While not built as news platforms, Instagram and Viber have garnered some momentum as alternative news sources for some groups of the public. Instagram appeals to younger populations due to its visual aspect and focuses on images and videos. While its use for news consumption remains modest (5%), Instagram incorporates news-related information and stories, providing visually driven news and updates on current events. The inclusion of Viber as a preferred medium for news reading (5%) is due to its messaging features and group collaboration capabilities and being a dominant app used in the Maldives. Users can join news-related groups or receive news updates via Viber channels, allowing for direct communication and sharing of news material within specific communities.

Twitter has the lowest rate at 3%, indicating less preference for news consumption. This could be due to the platform's character limit and the fast-paced nature of information sharing, both of which can limit the depth and breadth of news coverage. Twitter's real-time nature, characterised by fast updates and a character limit, makes it ideal for instant news updates, live event coverage, and access to breaking news. However, given its limited use for news consumption, users may prefer other platforms for more in-depth news coverage or to engage with news pieces that provide a broader context.

## Trust and Relevance of News Reporting

Public trust in different sources of news and information varies significantly. The most reliable sources are people known in person and on television, with significant levels of trust at 65% and 62%, respectively. This might be explained by the familiarity and interpersonal ties linked to these sources. As indicated before (see figure 2.1. ways of keeping informed on the news), the direct interaction and interpersonal relationships with individuals known in person contribute to a higher level of trust, as personal relationships often carry inherent credibility among the Maldivians due to the close-knit community.

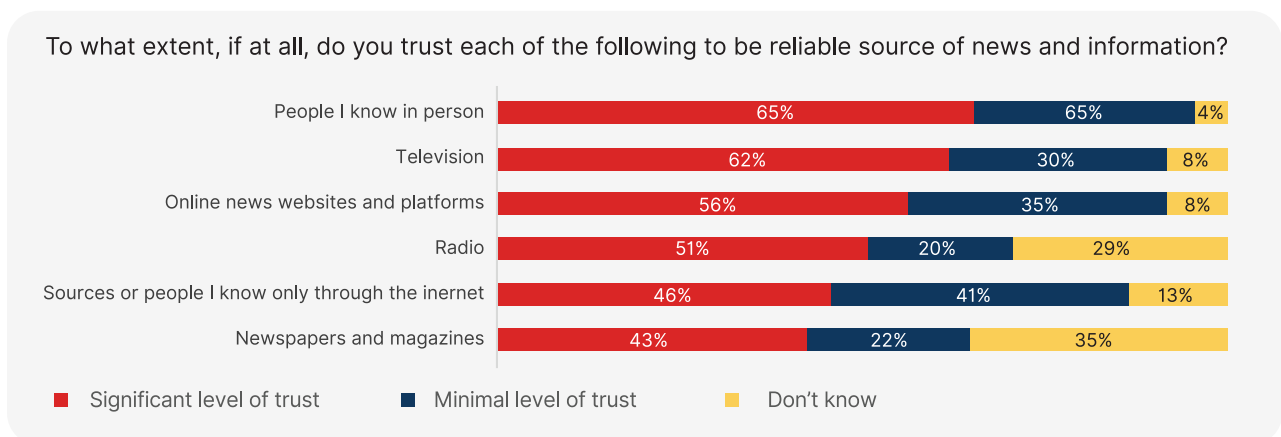


Figure 10. To what extent, if at all, do you trust each of the following to be a reliable source of news and information?

With 56%, online news platforms and websites likewise have confidence. A substantial portion of the public now trusts online platforms because of the ongoing developments in digital media that have made it possible for them to build credibility and offer diverse viewpoints and news sources. Trust in radio and newspapers/magazines is next-closest, with 51% and 43%, respectively. Despite having slightly lower trust ratings, newspapers and magazines still have a high level of credibility perceived by the public, maybe due to their longstanding existence and well-established standing as reliable conventional sources of information.

On the other hand, trust in sources or individuals solely known through the internet is lower, with significant trust standing at 46% and minimal trust at 41%. The difficulties in authenticating information might explain this exchanged online, where deception and manipulation are frequently witnessed. Reduced trust may also be caused by the absence of a human connection and the anonymity of online sources.

It is important to note that a large percentage of respondents indicate doubt or ignorance (don't know) regarding the degree to which they trust specific sources. This might result from several reasons and situations, including a lack of exposure to specific sources, shifting levels of trust depending on the situation, or general ignorance of the reliability of various information sources.

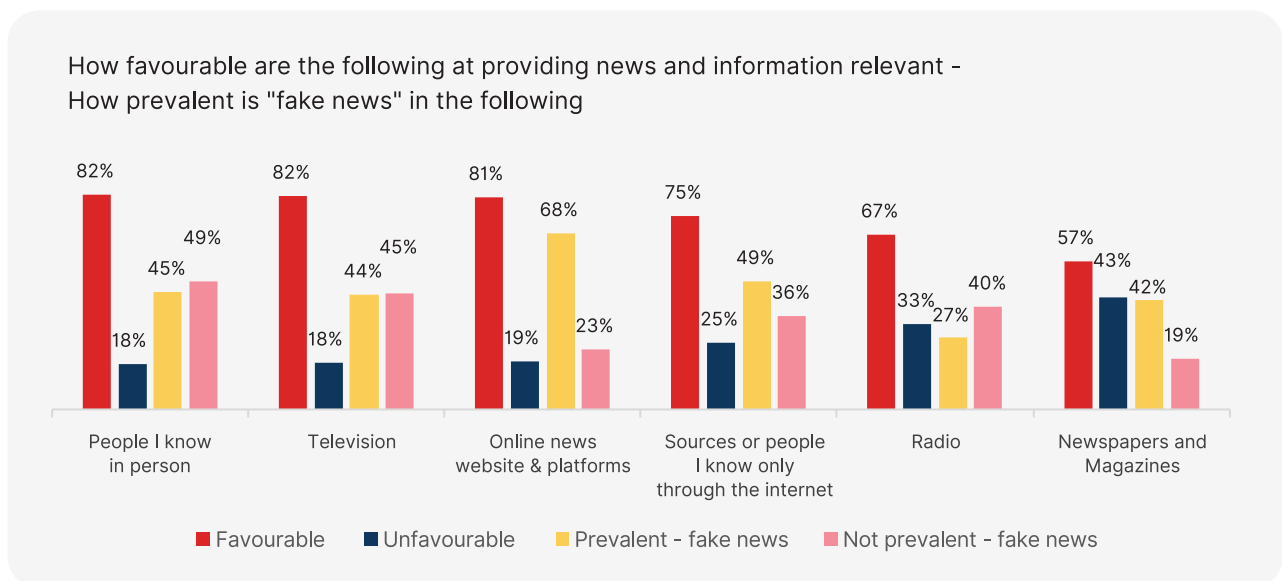


Figure 11. Favorable at providing relevant news and information vs. prevalence of fake news

The public's perceptions of different sources of news and information vary. The findings reveal that 82% of respondents have a favourable impression of individuals they know in person, showing high trust and confidence in personal relationships as a source of news and information. Similarly, television has a similar level of favourability (82%). This is due to television's longstanding presence in households and its capacity to provide timely news and information to a large audience. Online news websites/platforms also have a high level of favourability (81%), owing to the convenience, accessibility, and variety of sources available. On the other hand, radio and newspapers/magazines have lower levels of favourability, with 67% and 57%, respectively.



Regarding the perceived prevalence of fake news, online news websites/platforms and sources or people only known through the internet stand out with higher percentages. The prevalence of fake news on online news websites/platforms is 68%, which may be attributed to the challenges posed by the digital age. Similarly, sources or persons known through the internet has a perceived prevalence of 49% fake news, underlining the importance of exercising caution and critical thinking when reading news from these sources. Traditional media outlets, such as newspapers/magazines, television, and radio, have lower prevalence rates. Survey participants perceived that fake news was prevalent in newspapers and magazines (42%), television (44%) and radio (27%). These lower percentages imply a reduced perceived occurrence of fake news in these conventional channels, which may be attributed to these sources' established editorial procedures, fact-checking mechanisms, and professional standards.

The greater favourability of people known in person could be attributed to the trust and familiarity associated with personal ties, where people rely on their social groups for reliable information. Television's longstanding presence in households and its capacity to convey timely news and information are key factors in its positive view. Online news websites/platforms gain from their convenience, accessibility, and various sources. On the other hand, concerns about bias, limited coverage, or shifts in media consumption habits may contribute to the lower favourability associated with radio and newspapers/magazines.

The data also reflects the Maldives' sociocultural, political, and technological landscape. Close-knit communities and the trust placed in known persons within these communities may impact the strong favourability of people known in person. Television's popularity can be linked to its function as a dependable and established medium, particularly in reaching a larger audience. The increased perceived prevalence of fake news on digital news websites and platforms, reflects the challenges of the digital age, in which the rapid distribution of information and the difficulty in authenticating sources contribute to the spread of misinformation.

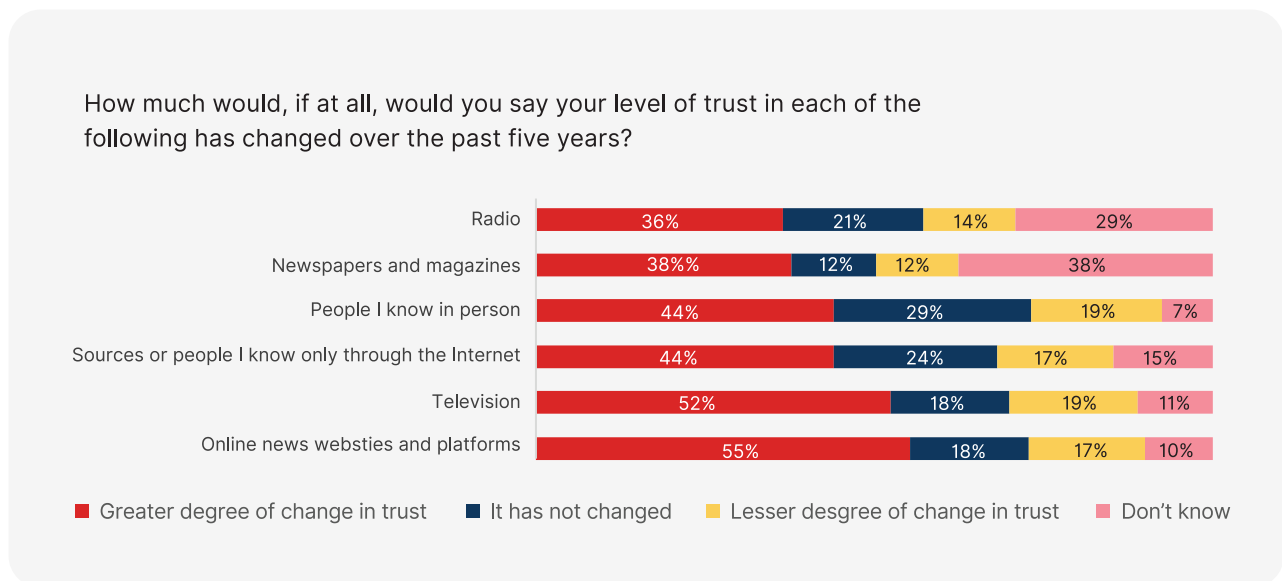


Figure 12. How much would, if at all, would you say your level of trust in each of the following has changed over the past five years

In the last five years, respondents have reported significant changes in their trust levels towards various sources of news and information. With 55% of respondents expressing a greater degree of change in trust, online news websites and platforms stand out having a deep significance. This implies that the public's impression of online sources has changed over the time, possibly due to the emergence of fake news, improved information accessibility, and changing journalistic standards. The 17% who reported a lesser degree of change may represent a section of the population who continued to be dubious or wary about the veracity of online sources. In comparison, the 18% who showed no change in confidence may reflect the stable reputation of reputable online news platforms. The 10% who recorded that they didn't know may indicate ignorance or insufficient exposure to online news sources.

Television also showed noticeable changes in trust, with 52% of respondents indicating a greater degree of change. This could be ascribed to several factors, such as the emergence of streaming services that provide different viewpoints, the growth of alternative media outlets. The 19% who reported a minor change may represent people who have grown more sceptical or critical of television news. In comparison, the 18% who observed no change may reflect stability and trust in well-established television news channels. The 11% of respondents who selected they did not know might indicate ambiguity or conflicting opinions regarding the reliability of television news.

Trust trends were similar for sources or people known only through the internet and people known in person; in both groups, 44% reported a greater degree of trust. This could be linked to the increased presence of online communities, the influence of social media, and the possibility of misinformation and biased narratives inside these networks. The 24% who reported no change in trust among online sources could be reflecting a sense of continuity in their online networks, whereas the 17% who reported a lesser degree of change could be individuals who have become more discerning or critical of information shared by online sources or acquaintances. The 15% who expressed uncertainty regarding online sources or people known only through the internet may suggest a lack of clarity or mixed experiences with these sources.

Similarly, among individuals known in person, the 29% who perceived no change may indicate a sustained level of trust within personal networks. In comparison, the 19% who reported a lesser degree of change might signify a growing scepticism or re-evaluation of the reliability of information shared by individuals in their circles. The 7% who expressed uncertainty may reflect a lack of definitive judgment or conflicting perceptions regarding trust in people known in person.

Newspapers and magazines showed a lesser degree of trust shift, with 38% indicating greater change. This could be influenced by print media's diminishing popularity and readership, the rise of digital news consumption, and perceived biases connected with specific newspapers or magazines. The 12% who claimed no change may reflect a constant reputation or loyal audience of certain newspapers. In contrast, the 12% who reported a minor change may represent a sector of the population that has grown more suspicious or critical of traditional print media. The 38% who indicated 'I don't know' may reflect a lack of familiarity with or exposure to newspapers and magazines as information sources. Radio had the lowest degree of trust change, with 36% reporting a greater degree of change. This could be ascribed to causes such as the rise of alternative audio platforms, the popularity of internet streaming services, and the perception of biased or limited radio coverage. The 21% who observed no change may represent established radio stations' solid reputation and trust, whilst the 14% who reported a more minor degree of change may indicate a

shift in listeners’ sense of radio as a dependable source of news and information. The 29% who expressed uncertainty about the degree of change in trust may suggest a lack of clarity or mixed experiences with radio as a trusted medium.

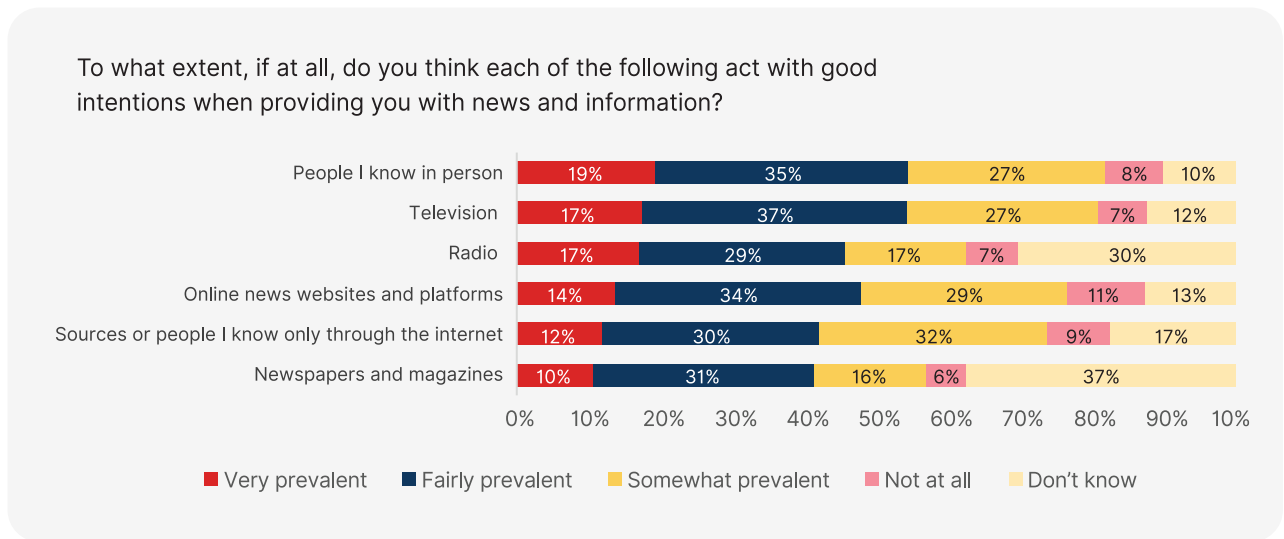


Figure 13. To what extent, if at all, do you think each of the following act with good intentions when providing you with news and information?

Respondents believe that people they know in person are the most trustworthy, with 54% of respondents perceiving them to act with good intentions. Television is another source most often perceived to act with good intentions, with 54% of respondents believing they act very or fairly prevalently with good intentions. Sources or people that respondents know through the internet are the least trusted, with only 42% believing they act with good intentions. Due to the growing prevalence of online news websites and platforms, traditional sources such as radio, newspapers, and magazines are becoming less popular and may eventually become obsolete. Concerning the extent to which people think different news sources act with good intentions, it is likely that they do not know answers are higher for radio, newspaper and magazines since people may not be as familiar with these sources as they once were. As a result, they may not have a strong opinion on whether these sources act with good intentions.

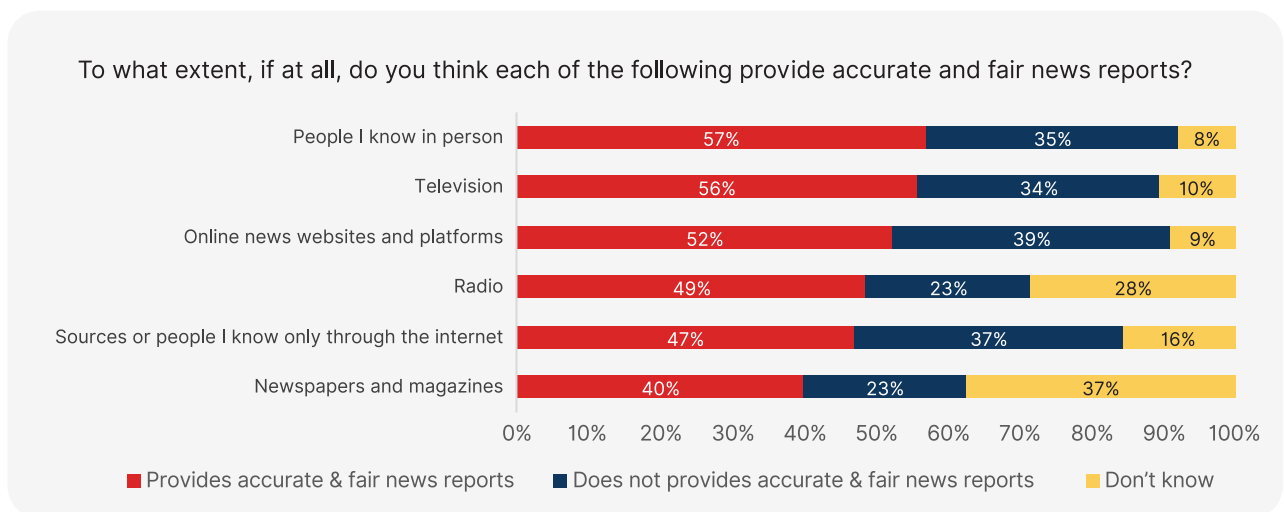


Figure 14. To what extent, if at all, do you think each of the following provide accurate and fair news reports?

TV was perceived favourable with 56% of respondents agreeing that it provides accurate and balanced news. In addition to that, online news websites and platforms were perceived favourably, with 52% of respondents feeling they provided accurate and balanced news updates. It is worth mentioning, however, that a proportion (39%) stated that they did not know which answer to select. The number of online sources, their varied degrees of credibility, and disinformation on the internet may all contribute to this ambivalence. The findings indicate a higher need for discernment and critical evaluation of internet news content. Radio received favourable scores, with 49% of respondents believing it provides accurate and balanced news coverage. However, another proportion (23%) were sceptical. The expansion of digital media platforms, the increased availability of alternative news sources, and worries about skewed or limited radio coverage could all explain this mixed opinion.

Sources or people only known through the internet scored a moderate rating, with 47% believing they provided accurate and impartial news coverage. However, a proportion (37%) responded, "I don't know". This scepticism may stem from concerns about the legitimacy and dependability of information users give on the internet and the anonymity and lack of accountability connected with online sources. Newspapers and magazines were rated the lowest for providing accurate and unbiased news stories, with only 40% of respondents believing they did. Another 23% also expressed concerns regarding the accuracy of news and information. Trust in traditional print media may have eroded due to transitioning to digital platforms. The substantial proportion of respondents who responded that they did not know (37%) emphasises the importance of newspapers and magazines regaining public trust through transparent and unbiased reporting.

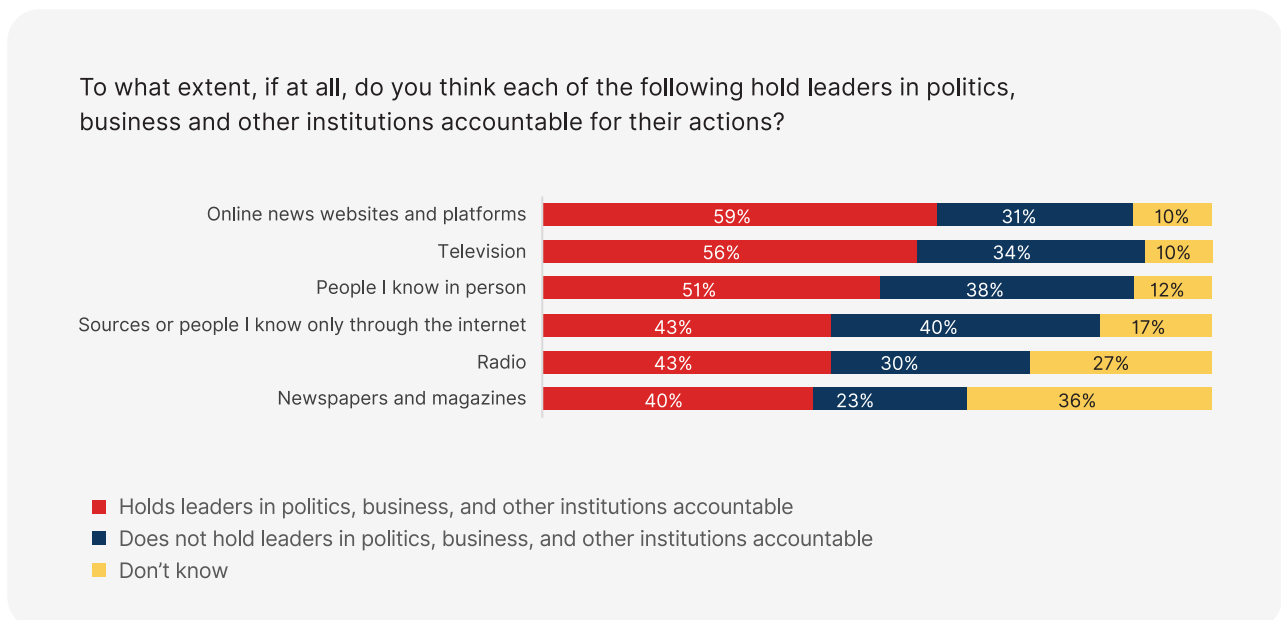


Figure 15. To what extent, if at all, do you think each of the following hold leaders in politics, business and other institutions accountable for their actions?

Notably, online news websites and platforms rank highest in keeping leaders accountable, with 59% of respondents saying they perform this function. Television comes in second place, with 56% of respondents believing it is useful in holding officials accountable. Radio is likewise ranked lower, with 43% of respondents believing it effective. Newspapers and magazines, on the other hand, are

perceived as having less impact in this regard, with only 40% of respondents believing that they hold officials accountable. Interestingly, the results differ regarding sources or people solely known through the internet. While 43% of respondents believe leaders are held accountable, 40% believe the opposite is true. This could be due to the varied and, at times, questionable nature of information supplied through internet sources and people known online. People who are known in person are perceived more favourably, with 51% of respondents holding leaders accountable. This could be ascribed to the personal trust and familiarity of real-life connections. Therefore, the higher trust in online news websites and platforms and television may be due to their larger reach, immediacy, and availability of investigative journalism or critical reporting. On the other hand, newspapers, magazines, and radio may need to look into measures to improve their reputation and perceived efficacy in holding leaders accountable.

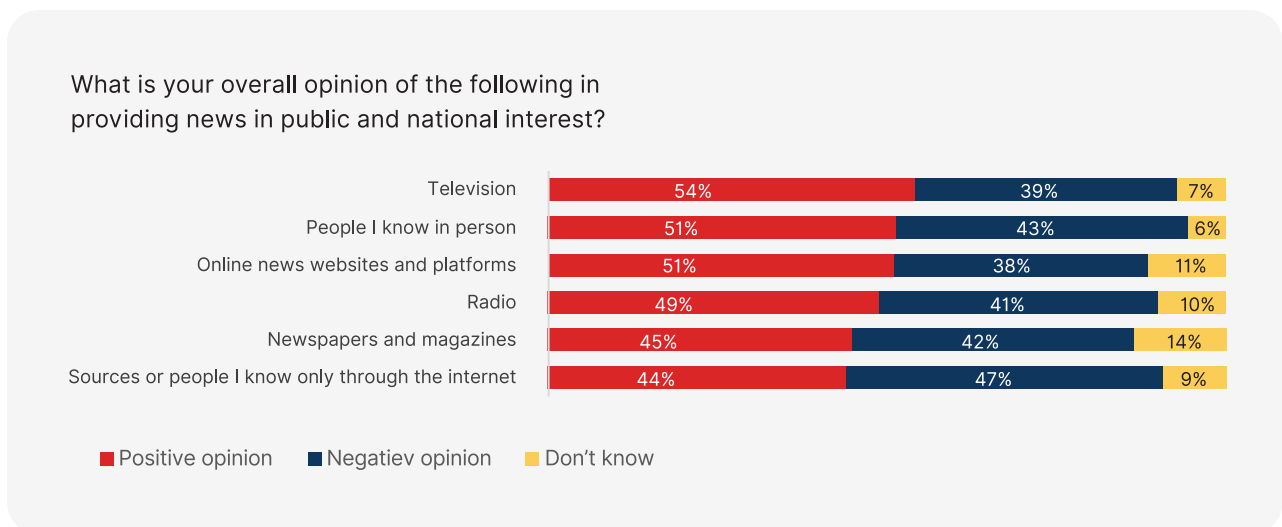


Figure 16. What is your overall opinion of the following in providing news in public and national interest?

The data presents insights into the public's perceptions of various news sources and platforms. When only internet sources or people are considered, the data shows a roughly even distribution of positive and negative opinions, with 44% expressing a favourable opinion and 47% having a negative opinion, while 9% remained unclear. Likewise, newspapers and magazines received somewhat better (45%) than negative (42%), with 14% expressing confusion. Radio had slightly more favourable responses (49%) than negative responses (41%), with 10% suggesting doubt. Online news websites and platforms fared better, with 51% having a positive impression, 38% having a negative opinion, and 11% undecided. People known in person (51%) and on television (54%) as a media source received the most positive feedback. These data imply that, while people have mixed feelings about various news sources and platforms, they generally have more positive feelings towards television and people they know in person. However, it is vital to highlight that a large minority of respondents are still unsure, demonstrating ambiguity and a lack of a definitive view about these news sources and platforms.

To what extent, if at all, do you think reporting in each of the following is influenced by the business/political interests of the ownership?

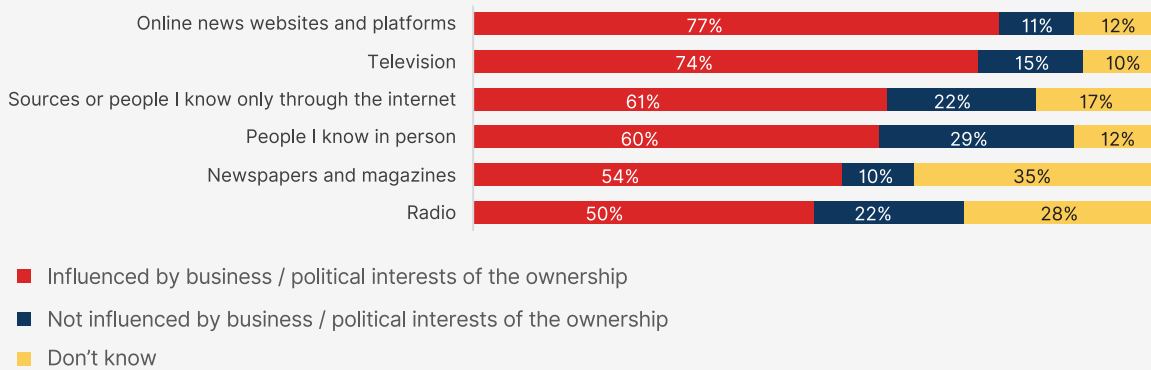


Figure 17. To what extent, if at all, do you think reporting in each of the following is influenced by the business/political interests of the ownership?

The data reveals the extent to which other news and platforms are perceived to be influenced by businesses or political interests of the media ownership. Between television and internet news websites and platforms, 74% and 77% of respondents claim that ownership's business or political interests mostly influence news reporting. This might be brought on by concerns over bias or agenda-setting brought about by the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few large, strong companies. In addition, the fact that these platforms rely on advertising revenue or political connections for their financial support may also give them the impression of having power. On the other hand, radio and newspapers exhibit considerably smaller percentages of respondents who perceive influence from business or political interests. Even though the numbers are small, it is important to note that a sizable portion of respondents still believe there is some influence, highlighting the need for ongoing oversight and openness. Sources or persons only known through the internet and those known in person have relatively high percentages of perceived impact, with 61% and 60%, respectively. Concerns about misinformation and the ease with which incorrect or biased information can spread through social media and personal networks may be to blame.

To what extent, if at all, do you think reporting in each of the following is sensational or biased?

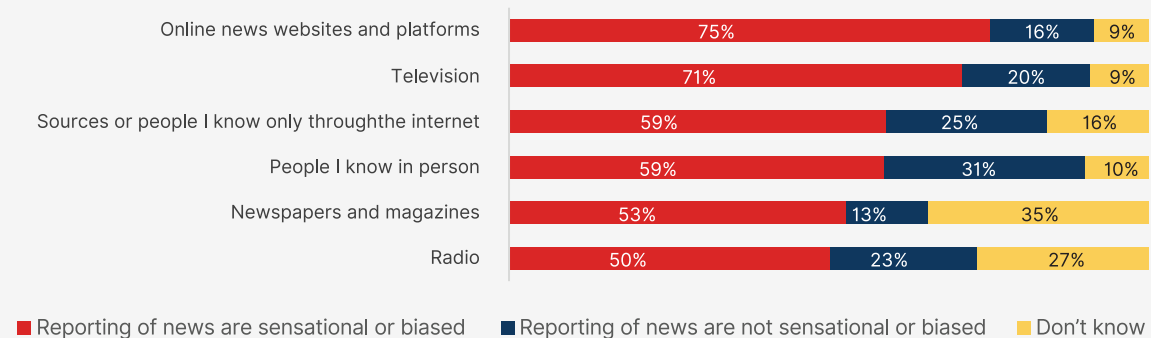


Figure 18. To what extent, if at all, do you think reporting in each of the following is sensational or biased?

Television and internet news websites were perceived by the largest percentage of respondents who believe news reporting is sensational or biased, at 71% and 75%, respectively. This could be due to several factors, including the influence of sensationalism in television news broadcasts, the competitive nature of the internet news sector, which may prioritise garnering attention through dramatic headlines, or the prevalence of biased reporting on these platforms. Newspapers and magazines, on the other hand, have a slightly lower number of people who perceive sensational or biased reporting (53%). This could be related to the idea that print media frequently conforms to more traditional journalistic standards, attempting to present a more balanced and impartial account of news events. Individuals' personal networks, including people they know in person and sources or people they only know through the internet, have equal percentages of impressions about sensational or biased reporting, at 59%. This could imply that people rely on their personal connections for news and information, whereas their social circles and tastes can impact perceived bias or sensationalism. With 50%, radio has an average percentage of people who perceive sensational or biased news. This could be attributed to the fact that radio broadcasts frequently rely significantly on spoken word content, which can be subjective depending on the presenter or host.

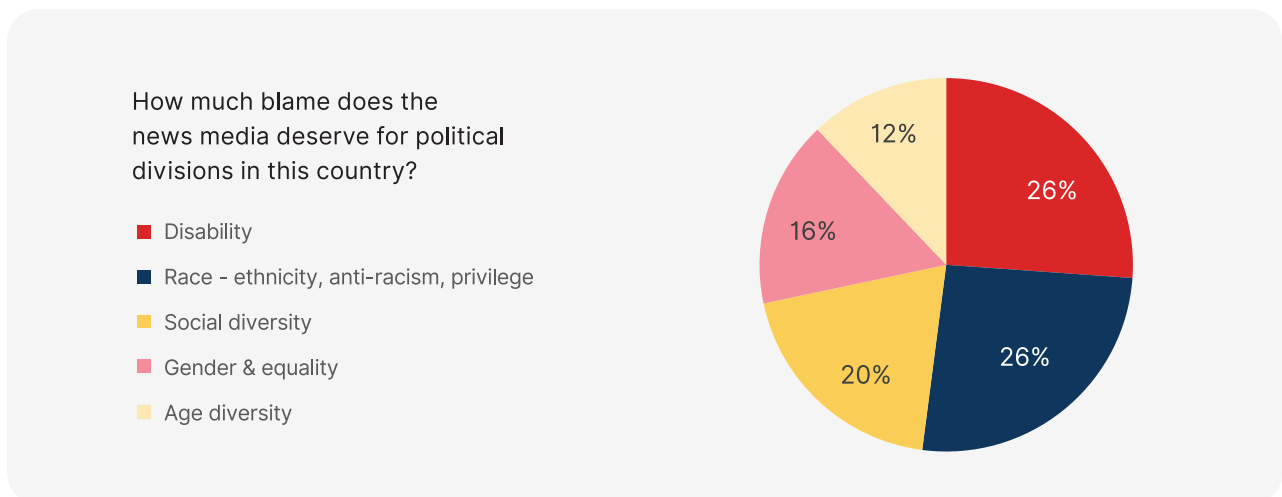


Figure 19. In general, which of the following is most lacking in terms of presenting a diversity of voices in media coverage?

A significant percentage of respondents believe that media coverage lacks diversity regarding race – ethnicity, anti-racism, privilege (26%) and disability (26%). This may reflect the growing recognition and advocacy for diversity and inclusion in the media, with more people calling for representation and recognition of marginalised voices. The 20% of respondents who believe that social diversity is lacking may also suggest a desire for more representational of diverse social backgrounds and perspectives in media coverage. The lower percentages for gender and equality (16%) and age diversity (12%) may reflect a perception that while there has been some progress in these areas, more work is needed.

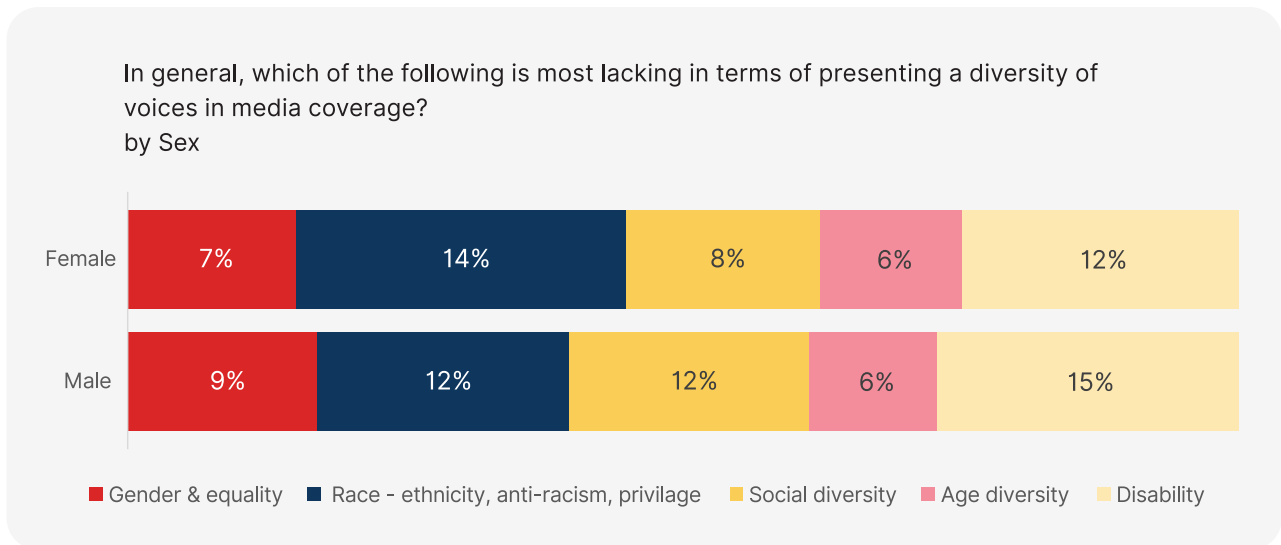


Figure 20. In general, which of the following is most lacking in terms of presenting a diversity of voices in media coverage?

Among male respondents, 15% believed voices focused on disability is the representation that media coverage most lacks. On the other hand, 14% of female respondents believed that race–ethnicity, anti-racism, and privilege are the most lacking. Both male and female respondents identified race and ethnicity as the most lacking in terms of diversity in media coverage. However, a larger proportion of female respondents identified this issue than male respondents. In addition, a higher proportion of male respondents identified social diversity as a concern than female respondents. Data shows that women are more likely than men to believe that there is a lack of diversity in voices in media coverage in terms of race – ethnicity, anti-racism, and privilege. This could be due to women being more attuned to social justice and equity issues, having had personal experiences related to discrimination and marginalisation. This difference in perception may also reflect differences in experiences and exposure to different diversity issues among the genders.

## Political Media Coverage

Respondents have diverse opinions about the quality of political reporting, with varying degrees of positive and negative feedback for each media platform. Respondents agreed that people who are known in person have a good quality of political reporting, with 66% of respondents rating their political reporting during elections as good. This could be due to the trust and familiarity that come with personal connections and the capacity to engage in direct talks and discussions with people you know. Sources or people only known through the internet are perceived positively, with 64% of respondents rating their political reporting during elections as good. This could be attributed to the wide range of online sources and independent journalists offering opposing opinions.



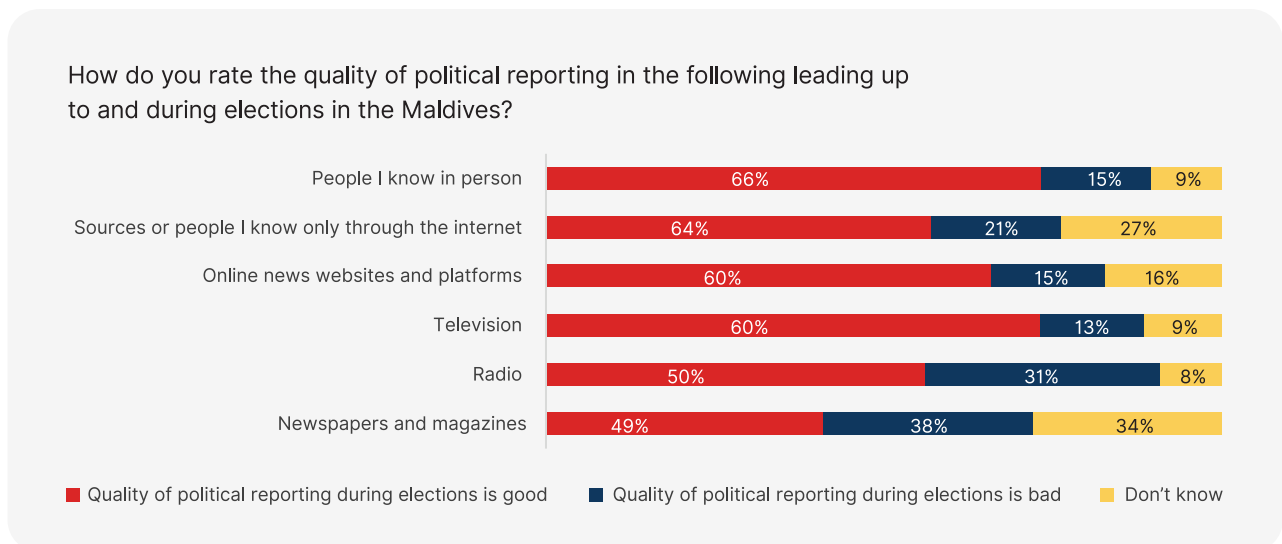


Figure 22. How do you rate the quality of political reporting in the following leading up to and during elections in the Maldives?

Both television and internet news websites/platforms had a higher level of favourable perception, with 60% of respondents rating the quality of political reporting during elections as good. Radio has a somewhat favourable image, with 50% of respondents rating its political reporting during elections as good. Newspapers and magazines have a more balanced assessment, with 49% believing that the quality of political reporting during elections is good, while 38% disagree.

A sizable majority of the populace—87%—believes that the media should be held accountable for the political division in the Maldives. From this, the media is thought to contribute to the country's political polarisation by exacerbating or fuelling it.

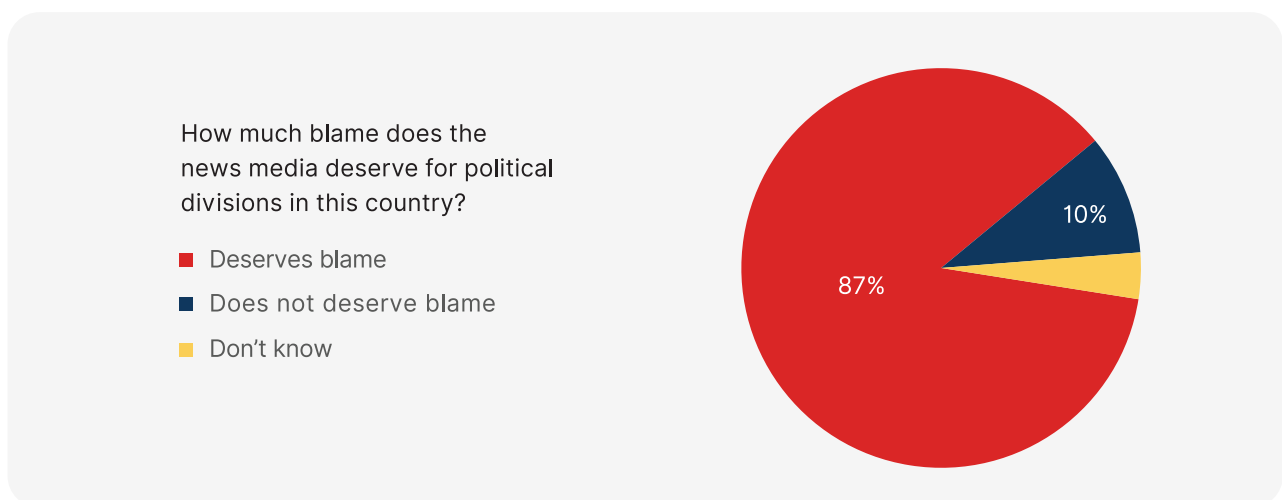


Figure 23. How much blame does the news media deserve for political divisions in this country?

Such perspectives may be motivated by a variety of factors or underlying problems. This might be attributed to how the public feels that the media is biased. The polarisation of public opinion may increase if some media outlets are perceived as supporting specific political groupings or advancing certain ideas. Biased news can reinforce existing differences by supporting pre-existing assumptions and giving one side of the political spectrum a forum.

The spread of false information and disinformation may also be a factor in the media being blamed for the political division in the country. Digital age's rapid dissemination of false narratives can undermine trust in media, leading to political polarization and eroded trust when media is perceived as endorsing or neglecting to address falsehoods. Furthermore, how controversial topics and political events are covered by the media is another reason the media is blamed. Public perception can be shaped by sensationalism, selective reporting, and framing, which can amplify political tensions. Promoting understanding, compromise, and productive discourse may be difficult when the media is so preoccupied with conflict, controversy, and opposing points of view.

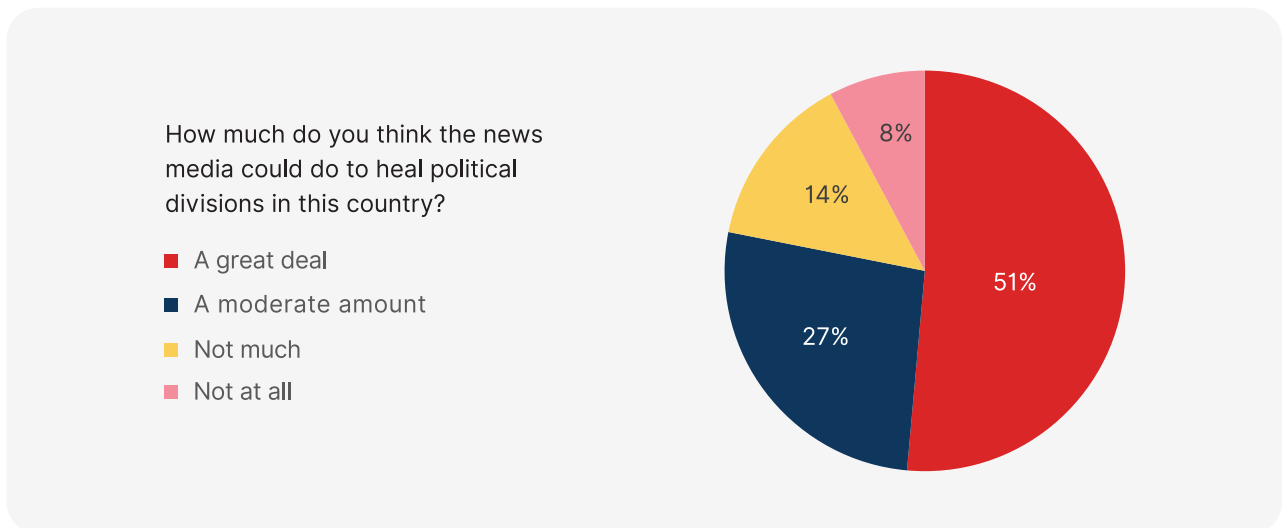


Figure 24. How much do you think the news media could do to heal political divisions in this country?

Media outlets must follow journalistic ethics, retain independence, and aim for accurate and balanced reporting in order to address these concerns. Promoting media literacy and critical thinking among the general people can also aid in separating fact from fiction. Furthermore, promoting a climate of civil and inclusive discourse within society can aid in thinning out political differences and enhancing the interaction between the public and the media.

The data shows that more than half of the respondents (51%) believe that news media could do a great deal to heal political divisions in the country. An additional 27% think the media could do a moderate amount to help with this issue. This indicates that a significant portion of the population believes that the media has the power to bring people together and reduce political polarisation. However, 14% think that the media could not do much, and 8% think that the media could not do anything at all. This suggests that some people may be sceptical of the media's ability to bridge political divides or may not believe that the media should be responsible for such efforts.

## Media and Democracy

The data shows that almost three-fourths of the respondents (71%) believe news media to be very important for a stable democracy. An additional 21% believe it is somewhat important. This suggests that most people view the news media as critical in maintaining a stable democratic society. The fact that only a small percentage (6%) think it is not that important may suggest that people are generally aware of the crucial role of the media in a democratic society. Additionally, the percentage of respondents who believe the news media is not at all important (1%) is also relatively small, indicating that even those who may not place a high value on the media recognise its significance in some way.

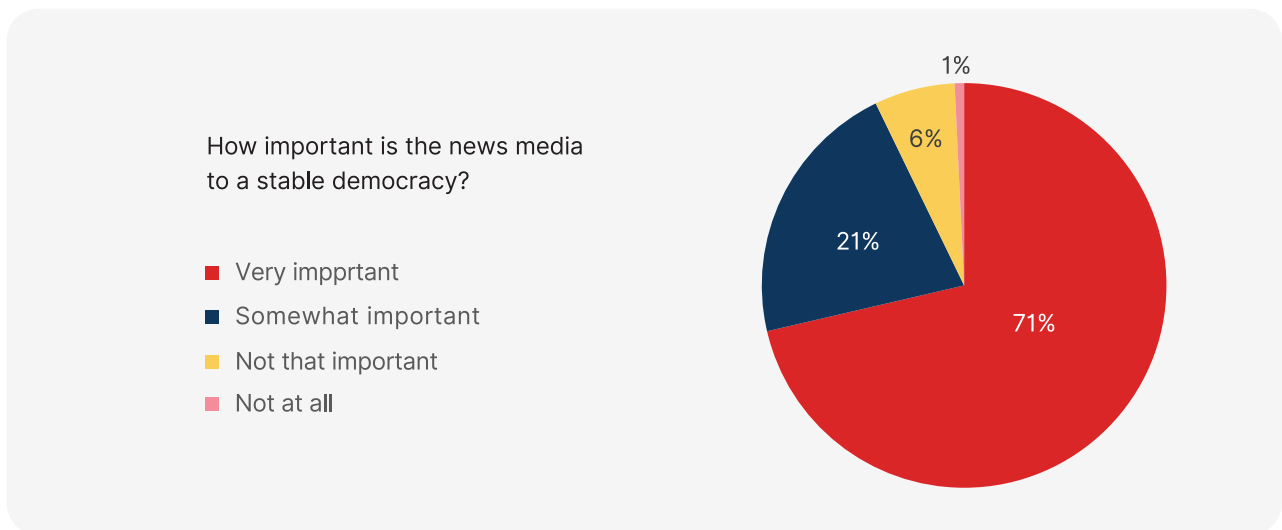


Figure 25. How important is the news media to a stable democracy?

The data (figure 5.2) shows that a significant portion of the population believes that the news media's support for democracy in the country has improved over the past five years, with 30% saying it is "much better" and 33% saying it is "somewhat better". On the other hand, a smaller percentage of people (14%) think that the media's support for democracy has decreased to some extent ("somewhat less" and "much less" combined). However, 22% believe there has been no change in the media's support for democracy. The reasons for these perceptions are likely to be complex and varied, including changes in media ownership, the quality of reporting and analysis, the emergence of new media platforms, and the political and social context in which media operate. It is also possible that personal biases, experiences with the media, and broader societal trends and events influence perceptions.

Compared to five years ago, how well does the news media support democracy in the country today?

- Much better
- Somewhat better
- No change
- Somewhat less
- Much less

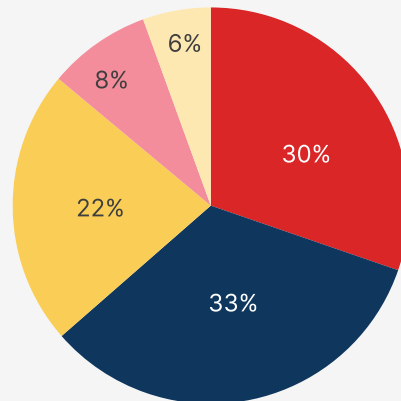


Figure 26. Compared to five years ago, how well does the news media support democracy in the country today?

The data (figure 5.3) shows that most respondents (64%) consider it very important that Maldivian governments and political leaders respect and support efforts to make media more sustainable. Another 23% of respondents consider it somewhat important. Only 13% of respondents believe that it is not that important. This indicates that the public recognises the importance of media sustainability and the role of the government in supporting it. It suggests that the public values news media as an important societal institution and believes it should have the necessary resources to carry out its functions effectively. Additionally, it could indicate a desire for greater accountability and transparency from the government in relation to its support for the media.

How important is it to you that Maldivian governments and political leaders respect and support efforts to make media more sustainable?

- Very Important
- Not that Important
- Somewhat Important

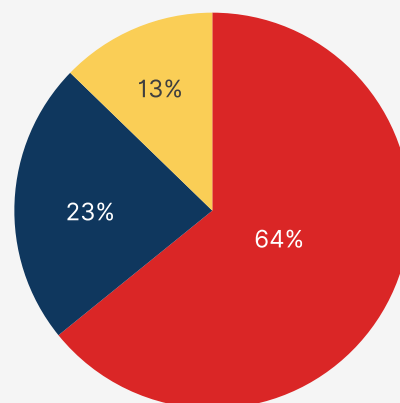


Figure 27. How important is it to you that Maldivian governments and political leaders respect and support efforts to make media more sustainable?

## Trust in Public Versus Private Broadcasters

The trust in public TV and radio broadcasters is slightly higher than in private-sector TV and radio broadcasters as sources of news and information, with 54% of respondents indicating that they trust public media more and 46% indicating that they trust private media more. Almost three-fourths of the respondents (72%) agree that public TV and radio broadcasters provide a necessary service, with 30% strongly agreeing and 42% somewhat agreeing. Only a small percentage of respondents (11%) disagreed with this statement to some extent.

The fact that nearly three-quarters of respondents agree that public broadcasters provide a necessary service suggests broad support for these institutions and their role in providing news and information to the public. However, the 18% of respondents who indicated a neutral stance on the statement could suggest some ambivalence about the importance of public broadcasters.

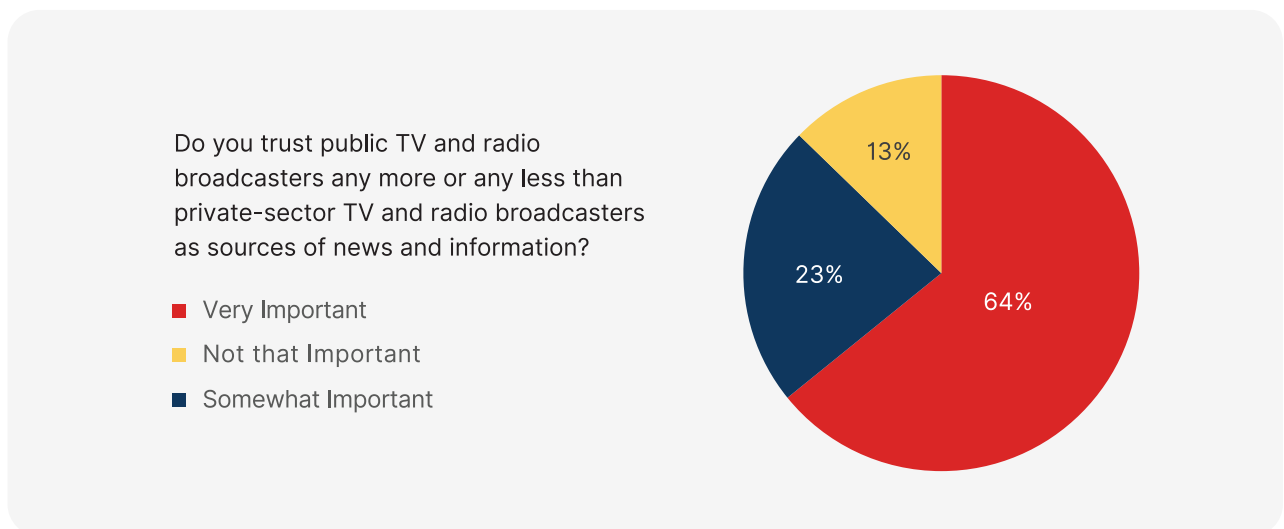


Figure 28. Do you trust public TV and radio broadcasters any more or any less than private-sector TV and radio broadcasters as sources of news and information?

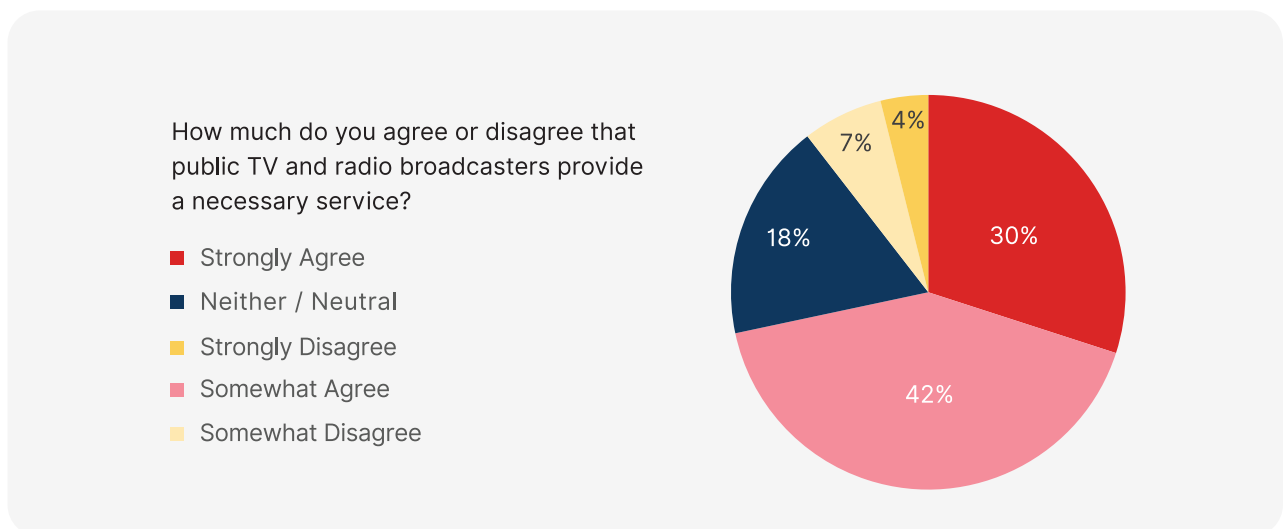


Figure 29. How much do you agree or disagree that public TV and radio broadcasters provide a necessary service?

Data shows that males are more likely to trust public media than females, with 30% of males stating they trust it more than only 24% of females. On the other hand, 23% of males trust private media more, while only 22% of females trust private media more.

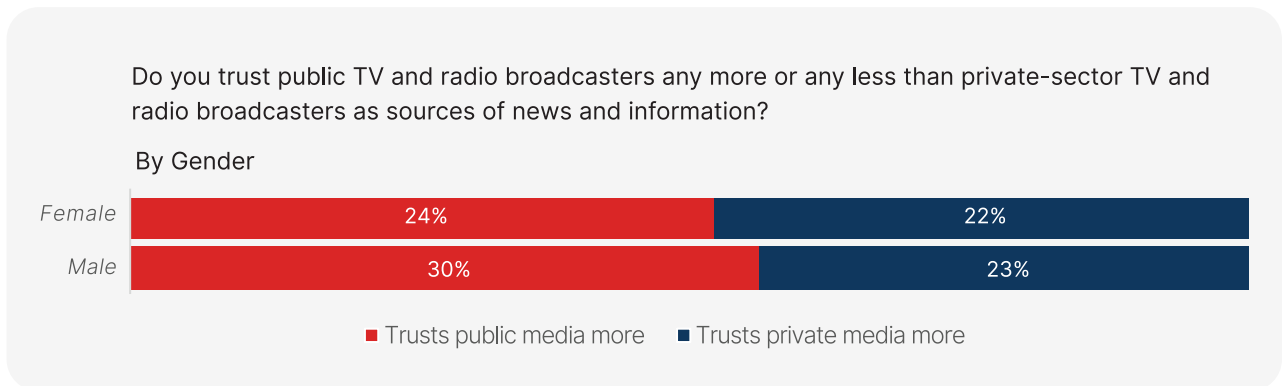


Figure 30. Do you trust public TV and radio broadcasters any more or any less than private-sector TV and radio broadcasters as sources of news and information?

# CHAPTER THREE: INSIGHTS FROM KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW

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The selection of stakeholders was conducted through purposive sampling, whereby key informants were chosen based on their potential to provide valuable insights as key experts in the field of media. MJA identified government functionaries, journalists, editors, human rights activists, and civil society organisations. A total of 17 key informants (13 males and 4 females) were interviewed, including individuals and media outlets selected from both public and private sectors, who work in the media or possess experience in media-related matters. Annex A presents the key stakeholders interviewed for this study.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were completed concurrent to the survey. The interviews were semi-structured and interviewer questioning, and prompts asked participants about: media regulations, transparency of funding, and challenges faced by journalists.

This section describes the general themes derived from the KIIs, including quotes from the informants (quotations highlighted in red) to emphasis the findings. In respect to the wishes of interviewees, quotations have been anonymised.

## Media Regulations

Media stakeholders identified three distinct categories of media ownership: publicly funded media outlets under government control, privately owned media establishments owned by influential businesspersons and politicians, and several independent media outlets led by experienced journalists.

A nationally applicable code of conduct is mandatory for all media outlets. The Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) mandates that every media outlet must comply with a code of conduct regulated by legal statutes and regulations, which only

applies to broadcasting stations, radio, and television. This code of conduct does not apply to online and print news, including online streaming platforms, as Maldives Broadcasting Commission has no jurisdiction over these media outlets<sup>27</sup>. If there is a failure to comply with the code of practice, the broadcasting commission will take appropriate measures, while the licensing department will ensure compliance. The revised code of conduct has undergone recent modifications and has been subsequently submitted to the relevant authorities for further examination. In addition to adhering to a universal code of conduct,

individual media outlets possess unique editorial policies and teams responsible for overseeing their organisational structure and functions.

***“Every media station must follow the code of practice in the Broadcasting Commission, which comes under our laws and regulations. So, if they do not follow the code of practice, the broadcasting commission will intervene if there is a complaint. Each media outlet has its own editorial policy. MBC does not intervene in their editorial policy as it is a different thing. However, the Code of Practice is general to everybody, and all journalists should follow the code of practice.” [KII 9 – Government]***

State resources fund public service media. The primary purpose of this media is to report and disseminate relevant content to the public across various domains such as politics, economics, social issues, and individual interests. Stakeholders stated that the public service media bears a greater responsibility in its operation of radio and television.

***“Public service media (PSM) is a local operation funded by the state and responsible for reporting and bringing out content relevant to the people. PSM is made up of a set of regulations and policies that mandate broadcasting should be done for citizens, such as bringing balanced stories. Recent changes to the PSM policies have made it a state-owned enterprise (SOE), acting like all other companies in the privatisation board.” [KII 9 & KII 15 – Government]***

In 2008, the Maldives opened for private broadcasting, leading to the emergence of media outlets established by individuals with significant business and governmental influence. According to stakeholders, media outlets that political parties or the government owns tend to prioritise their own interests and often employ propaganda tactics to exert control over the media.

***“The private media in the Maldives are highly rated, with Mihaaru, Sun online, and Avas online platforms owned by businessmen and journalists. Tier 1 media outlets are run by businessmen in collaboration with journalists, while Tier 2 and 3 are smaller media outlets owned by journalists who have worked in media for a long time or people who get experience in the field.” [KII 4 – Government]***

Followed by the democratic movement, some media outlets were established to spread proper news without any other interests. According to stakeholders, self-affiliated media outlets led by senior journalists have limited resources and reach but their news organisation upholds a strong sense of independence and ethical standards. However, according to survey findings, public trust in public broadcasters is slightly higher than in private-sector broadcasters.

***“Maldives media has been affiliated with the government for a long time, but in 2008, influential businessmen with influence in the government made their own media. Before that, in the democratic movement, some places began media companies to spread proper news without other interests. Until recently, business owners were looking to benefit their business interests, such as VTV, Sun TV, Sun Online, and DhiTV. Haveeru, which gave birth to the news media we see today, was run in a way that was beneficial to the government and business owners’ interests.” [KII 12 – Editor]***

Haveeru, the second ever and, at the time, sole newspaper in the country, was initially started by one of President Maumoon’s Cabinet Ministers. Reportedly, he instructed the paper’s founder to establish a paper and provided funding to serve the need for press. This



approach played a key role in shaping today's media landscape and explains how politicians have managed to integrate themselves within the media without raising too many eyebrows - until now.

The stakeholders noted that the ownership structure of media outlets in Maldives affects their operations in various ways. Media outlets owned by influential business owners and politicians often promote individual agendas, leading to highly polarised reporting that lacks objectivity and balance. These media outlets also prioritise financial interests over journalistic values which, in turn, compromise journalistic quality and credibility. Media outlets also face political pressure to promote government propaganda or withhold information critical of the government.

***“Media ownership has a significant impact on the editorial content of media outlets. This is because the people who work in the media have to follow the instructions given by the higher executives. When a billionaire or millionaire decides to buy a media, the pieces written by that media, the direction, what they decide to write about, and how they write about things, all change. The message that the media wants to provide also changes. Who owns the media does matter.” [KII 2 – CSO & KII 1 – Activist]***

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of ensuring editorial independence to foster a vibrant and diverse media landscape that serves the public interest. They noted that editorial independence is crucial to countering the impact of media ownership on journalistic practices. Editorial independence can be achieved through a combination of factors, including strong ethical standards, codes of conduct, and a culture of professional journalism. Journalists and editors must be trained to uphold these standards and resist

pressure from owners or external actors. It was also noted that the public is essential in promoting editorial independence by supporting independent media and holding media outlets accountable for their reporting. However, due to the absence of news models that operate on a subscription basis, it remains challenging to substantiate the validity of news models that rely on public support.

***“The politicisation of the media has caused a misinformed and uninformed generation of young people due to the non-independence and divisiveness of politically affiliated and politically motivated media outlets. This has huge repercussions in the longer term, as it deprives children of developing a sense of civic understanding and civic participation and responsibility as citizens. This has a direct impact on the lives and opportunities of young people.” [KII 7 – HRA]***

## Transparency of Funding

Stakeholder response highlights the primary funding sources for media outlets. While some sources are quite apparent, there are several media outlets for which the funding sources are ambiguous. In Maldives, there are concerns about media independence and impartiality. When suspicions that funders may be influencing coverage arise, it has a direct, detrimental effect on trust<sup>28</sup>. In this context, stakeholders have highlighted several key points related to the transparency of media funding to the public.

Firstly, stakeholders noted that there is no precise mechanism to ensure transparency of media funding in Maldives. Media outlets may receive funding from various sources, including advertisers, political parties, and other organisations. However, there is no clear way to track or disclose who these funders are. This lack of transparency can create potential conflicts of interest, where media outlets may prioritise their funders' interests over their audiences' interests.

***“Most media outlets are now financed by state-owned enterprise (SOEs), private institutions, politicians, and business owners. To date, there is no mechanism where media outlets can receive financial backing without compromising editorial independence and integrity. Activists worry that the general public has not pressured the state to demand transparency in funding, but it is important given the restrictions. civil society organisations (CSOs) have a lot of restrictions within the legal system, such as having to inform if a project exceeds a certain amount. CSOs are also restricted to these limitations in the name of transparency, so why can't this be applied to media outlets?” [KII 5 – Editor, KII 1 – Activist, KII 2 – CSO]***

One incident involving transparency and state funding was revealed in the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-23<sup>29</sup>, which states that in early 2022, it was disclosed that the President's Office (PO) distributed more than MVR 1 million for positive coverage of governmental initiatives. With the recovery of the Maldivian economy following the Covid-19 pandemic, a more legitimate advertising revenue facilitated more prominent mainstream outlets to restore deducted salaries. Some popular proposals include government subsidies, affordable internet packages, and a selection process based on merit for obtaining advertising from SOEs.

This incident aligns with the point highlighted by the stakeholders. The PO incident only came to light after one opposition-aligned news sought this information via the Right to Information (RTI) mechanism.

To date, the International Press Institute has recorded 162 media freedom violations worldwide, all linked to COVID-19 coverage. Governments in some parts of the world have used such recession periods to their advantage, pulling the benches out from under those meant to hold them accountable, then throwing their arms into the air cursing mysterious 'economic forces' for creating the situation<sup>30</sup>.

Secondly, while policies exist to enable media funding transparency, stakeholders noted significant loopholes that prevent these policies from being effective in practice. For example, media outlets may be required to disclose their advertisers but may not be required to disclose their other funding sources. Furthermore, there may be exemptions for certain types of advertisers or specific donation amounts.

***“In Maldives, some policies enable transparency in monetary transactions, but there are ways to spend money without it showing on the billing system. Sponsorship matters can be seen from the media outlets website, and people fund some news media to benefit their business or spread their propaganda. Companies may also fund the news media without ads to use it for PR, to avoid the news media talking bad about the company.” [KII 12 – Editor]***

Finally, stakeholders emphasised the importance of maintaining transparency in media funding to make donors accountable and strengthen public trust. By requiring media outlets to disclose their funding sources, the Maldives can help ensure that the media is transparent, accountable to the public, and acting in audience’s best interests.

***“Even journalist-led media outlets do not declare their funding sources to the public, and there is no uniform mechanism. Additionally, there is no legal framework for this, and even the public does not demand to know this. Furthermore, there is no funding agreement with the media, and even if there is an agreement, it would likely include clauses that prevent them from interfering with the reporting of specific content. If such an agreement is to be made, it should be available to the public. If this system is maintained, even the donors and sponsors will be careful not to interfere with editorial independence and maintain ethical standards.” [KII 2 – CSO, KII 8 – CSO]***

Verbal agreements occur among media marketing agents to inform of any upcoming negative coverage before publishing. This is a common cause of clashes between the corporate side of news outlets and the newsroom leadership.

Additional points that some stakeholders highlighted were the struggle for independent media who rely heavily on funding, especially in a country where media is perceived as a free commodity.

***“Print and online news is now seen as a free commodity even for broadcast media, and independent media in the Maldives is struggling due to a lack of funds, secure funding avenues, and a culture of not having to pay for media. Independent media have tried to move online news media outlets to a subscribed model, but only a few small media are willing to pay for a subscription. This will only happen if the majority of big major news media come on board to adopt a subscribed model. So far, all media collectively could not come to a common understanding on this.” [KII 2 – CSO, KII 7 – HRA, KII 5 – Editor]***

To date, a subscription model has never been implemented in the Maldives. Although obvious factors such as a limited pool of subscribers and high living expenses impact feasibility, the conclusions being drawn are premature and without trial.

Overall, stakeholders emphasised the need for greater transparency of media funding in Maldives. Policymakers and media organisations should work together to develop more effective mechanisms for ensuring transparency of media funding and addressing the loopholes in this area. By doing so, Maldives can help to ensure that the media is impartial, independent, and accountable to the public.

# Challenges for Media Outlets & Journalists

The stakeholders' insights were quite illuminating, revealing the many obstacles journalists face in their line of work.

One of the major challenges that journalists face in the Maldives is pressure from sponsors to alter reporting. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) influence journalists' autonomy and safety by sponsoring media outlets, which can lead to indirect threats if they write about political corruption or employee treatment.

This often leads to compromised reporting that may not be entirely objective or accurate. As many journalists lack financial independence and depend on state-owned enterprises for funding. This dependency creates a conflict of interest where financial interests may override independent reporting.

***“Media outlets in the Maldives rely heavily on financial backing from state owned enterprises (SOEs), making them hesitant to print the truth on the news related to these SOEs. This has led to media outlets not objectively assessing these public companies. The main problem in most media is placing the financial interest above independent reporting, and there are few senior journalists in the media community. The government has a fundamental role in creating this problem, as many media depend on the revenue sources that come from state-owned enterprises, which the government heavily subsidises.” [KII 2 – CSO, KII 5 – Editor, KII 7 – HRA]***

The Maldivian government and politicians also exert pressure on journalists, especially

when it comes to sensitive issues. This often leads to self-censorship and compromised reporting. Furthermore, the culture of secrecy in the Maldives and the spreading of false information further complicates the work of journalists, making it difficult to obtain accurate information and gain public trust.

***“The Maldives has press freedom. However, the news reported on finance and taboo topics is subjected to self-censorship. This self-censorship is caused by the media houses that have political backing or power due to fear of being labelled and limitation for job opportunities. Many, especially the political classes, are abusing journalism, which is counterproductive to democracy and stability. The media's actions are important, such as apologising if they publish false information or retracting it. Transparency in the ethical guidelines and practices that media practices adhere to and how media deal with false information identified by readers is not seen in the Maldives, making it a barrier to providing information to their readers.” [KII 3 – CSO, KII – HRA, KII 8 – CSO]***

## Threats and Harassment

Gang-related violence and fear threaten journalists in the Maldives, limiting their ability to report on specific issues. Journalists in the Maldives also face disrespect, threats, and physical harm, discouraging them from reporting on sensitive issues. In addition, female journalists face gender-specific harassment and threats, exacerbating the difficulties they experience when investigating and reporting the news.

*“There are risks associated with publishing, especially certain kinds of views and news about certain kinds of people. These include the abduction and murder of one journalist and the brutal murder of another. News reporters cannot write with freedom except in very few places, and people who give information are also harassed, especially women journalists in particular. Online harassment and intimidation are not considered, and the legislative framework does not uphold freedom of the press.” [KII 7 – HRA, KII 13 – Journalist, KII 3 – CSO]*

These events, plus gender-specific threats against women journalists, were also identified as a concern in the report on Maldives study in impunity for crimes against journalists. The perpetrators range from online threats and harassment to sexual harassment. Few journalists report online and offline violence to law enforcement authorities, as they believe the police will not investigate these crimes. Additionally, journalists have little to no trust that the police will not tip off the perpetrator by leaking information<sup>31</sup>.

### **Lack of Training and Professionalism**

The lack of trained journalists in specific areas and lack of high-quality reporting also remains a challenge, with many journalists lacking the necessary skills and training to produce quality content. The absence of reliable sources of information, like research centres and the limited scope for investigative journalism further exacerbates the problem. In addition, limited time and staff regarding news coverage were also identified. Furthermore, limited journalism courses are available in higher education institutions in the Maldives.

*“The Maldives has a dearth of trained journalists due to a lack of training and lack of community engagement. Additionally, there is no source of information like a Research Centre or Media Hub, which is a common practice in other countries.” [KII 3 – CSO, KII 9 – Government]*

Overlapping roles as activists vs reporters create confusion and compromises reporting integrity.

*“In the Maldives, journalists who cover protests get into the middle of the protest when police use their force to disperse it. Journalists would give way in other countries and come to the sidelines. In politically driven protests, some journalists would enter the protest to get news but would later get involved as activists. When police attempt to arrest them, they take out their press card and claim to be media, abusing the rights of being in the media. They use it to create a negative image of us, and one side of the story is elaborated and published to the public, leading to trust loss.” [KII 4 & KII 11 – Government]*

The government and regulatory bodies have few guidelines for navigating protest coverage, and individual journalists/newsrooms have poor knowledge of best practices. This is due to the Right to Assembly Act, which has stipulations that are unfair to journalists. For example, Section 55 of the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act requires assembly organisers to delay any purchased live broadcast for at least 60 seconds to block content that fails to conform to broadcasting standards<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the role of activist versus reporter is not clearly distinguished.

## Insensitivity in Reporting

Some stakeholders highlighted specific challenges in covering and airing social news and audience-based programmes. They emphasised a lack of empathy or indifference when the media reported on sensitive issues such as violence against children. They indicated that a lack of awareness of the use (or avoidance) of 'identifying information' and the media's responsibility in maintaining victim privacy may be at play.

*"The biggest issue we currently face is the reporting of violence against children. The Police reports the news in general and does not mention the exact island, while some media outlets disclose specific information of the victim. Additionally, critical, and sensitive information cannot be provided to journalists in the speed they want due to certain precautions. This is demonstrated by the example of a murder case, where the police released a statement within 24 hours explaining how the incident happened, but the media had already published the story with many variations, making it difficult for the public to identify the truth." [KII 3 – CSO, KII 11 – Government]*

## Annex A: LIST STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

#	Stakeholders	Stakeholder Type
1	Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC)	Government
2	Public Service Media (PSM)	Government
3	Dhauru	Media outlet
4	President Editors Guild	Editors
5	Human Rights Activist (Individual)	Activists/Human Rights Activists (HRA)
6	Activist (Individual)	Activists/Human Rights Activists (HRA)
7	National Democratic Institute (NDI)	CSO
8	Adhadhu	Editors
9	Maldives Police Service (MPS)	Government
10	Bar Council of the Maldives	Government
11	President's Office	Government
12	Freelance Journalist (Individual)	Journalists
13	Transparency Maldives (TM)	CSO
14	Journalist (Individual)	Journalists
15	Advocating the Rights of Children (ARC)	CSO

## Annex B: SAMPLING PLAN

	Island Selected	Atoll	Classification	Target Population (18+)	Area	Regional Distribution % (CENSUS)	Calculated Sample	Sample Size Distribution per Sample Island Selected
1	Greater Male Area (GMA)	GMA	GMA	86,685	GMA	28	185	185
2	Hithadhoo (Capital)	S	URBAN	6,776	South	13	86	47
3	Kulhudhuffushi (Capital)	HDh	URBAN	5,485	North			38
4	Naifaru (Capital)	Lh	SEMI-URBAN	2,550	Central	14	95	56
5	Dhidhdhoo (Capital)	HA	SEMI-URBAN	1,751	North			39
6	Lhaimagu	Sh	RURAL	377	North	45	297	47
7	Fulhadhoo	B	RURAL	117	North			15
8	Bodufolhudhoo	AA	RURAL	391	Central			49
9	Dharan'boodhoo	F	RURAL	257	Central			32
10	Gaadhiffushi	Th	RURAL	160	Central			20
11	Maabaidhoo	L	RURAL	407	South			51
12	Dhaandhoo	Ga	RURAL	676	South			84
				<b>105,631</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>663</b>



## Annex C: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, RISKS, AND SAFEGUARDS

Phases	Ethical issues	Risks	Safeguards
Data collection	Consent of the participants/ respondents and accessibility to the sample population		Informed consent was integrated into the questionnaire.
Data analysis	Respondent details	Identification of respondents and participants	Each respondent was given a unique identification number to maintain the confidentiality of the case recorded.
Reporting	Details of the participants	Exposure of the individuals	Each respondent was given a unique identification number to maintain the confidentiality of the case recorded. Data was only disaggregated based on sex, age group, Strata located in, and education level.
Dissemination	Accessibility to the raw dataset		The dataset was only available to the parties involved in this study under the written contract.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Holbert, R. L. (2005). Back to basics: Revisiting, resolving, and expanding some of the fundamental issues of political communication research. *Political Communication*, 22(4), 511–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600500311436>
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