



African Journalists on Social Media

Harassment or Freedom?

≡ A pilot study ≡

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frayintermedia would like to express gratitude to all journalists who participated in the research.

frayintermedia is a communication training company that promotes excellence in journalism across Africa. By anticipating changes and trends in the media industry, **frayintermedia** is able to provide tailor-made communication, training, research and multimedia solutions for corporates, media and NGOs and governments. **frayintermedia** works in countries throughout Africa and into the Middle East.

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Key findings

- 95% of African journalists used social media for professional purposes.
- 89% of the African journalists surveyed were required to be on social media.
- 66% have professional and personal accounts.
- Facebook is the most commonly used platform for professional purposes (at 96%) followed by WhatsApp (95%) and Twitter (89%).
- All Cameroonian, Malawian and Zimbabwean journalists made use of both Facebook and Whatsapp.
- All Kenyan and Zimbabwean journalists made use of Twitter.
- On the other end of the scale, Somalia had the lowest rate of WhatsApp and Facebook use, DRC has the lowest rate of Twitter use.
- Male journalists were slightly more likely to be harassed on social media.
- Journalists were most frequently trolled and verbally harassed, as opposed to other forms of harassment.
- Male journalists were more often threatened than female journalists but female journalists experienced more sexual harassment.
- A greater proportion of Zimbabwean and Malawian journalists than those of other nationalities reported having been harassed. This is in-line with higher social media usage in these countries.
- A greater proportion of Cameroonian journalists than those of other nationalities felt that the harassment was due to the political conditions in the country.

How social media is shaping journalism in Africa

The media environment has fundamentally changed in the last 15 years with development of social media and online information sources cutting into the audience of established publications (Alejandro, 2010; Barthel, 2016). According to Alejandro (2010) social media, when used by journalists, has brought new possibilities which makes it an 'influential communication and news-breaking tool'. Social media have become indispensable as both a platform and source for stories. They also allow for increased engagement with audiences (Jordaan, 2013).

Social media enable journalists to easily publish, promote content and engage with their audience (Cision, 2016). More and more journalists make use of social media to source and verify information, making it easier for journalists to acquire news. With platforms like Twitter and Facebook, journalists are able break news as it happens, rather than waiting for it to be published in print. However, engaging on social media subtly influences the news realities reported by journalists (Jordaan, 2013).

OSCE (2016) documents how online harassment of journalists threatens freedom of expression. Depending on what stories the journalist reports, his/her chances of online harassment rises. However, it is not clear how this plays out in African countries. Saying that, media freedom across Africa has been under attack, with journalists targeted for exposing corruption and human rights abuses.

Anyone who engages online may find themselves harassed or stalked. Mary Beard, a prominent English historian, having suffered harassment online, linked modern cyber stalking the ancient world and Roman objectification of women. Modern advancements in technology have simply made objectification easier based on these inherited views of women. Such norms silence women in public. Women who voice their thoughts, especially on politics, are quickly silenced by "twitter trolls" (Women in the World, 2016).

There has been little research about African journalists engaging on social media, and no pan-African study on the engagement of journalists and the harassment that journalists face online as far as we know. Some countries, like Tanzania, have made moves to clamp down on the use of social media (Cross, 2016). And Uganda has set up a social media monitoring unit to find people expressing damaging views of the government (Farahani Mukisa and Agencies, 2013).

Methodology

This study aimed to document the extent of social media usage by journalists in African countries and what platforms journalists work on. Additionally, it sought to find out whether African journalists were harassed online, how they are harassed and for what reasons.

An online survey was conducted in order to answer these questions. The survey was distributed to African journalists in **fray**intermedia's databases and on social media. Further respondents were recruited through snowball sampling as respondents were asked to recommend others for participation and pass on the survey. In this way, this is not a representative sample.

The survey consisted of 18 questions in total, but some were only relevant to some journalists. Some respondents only saw a few of these based on their answers. The survey was sent in both English and French. The survey was first sent out early 2017.

Who shared their experiences?

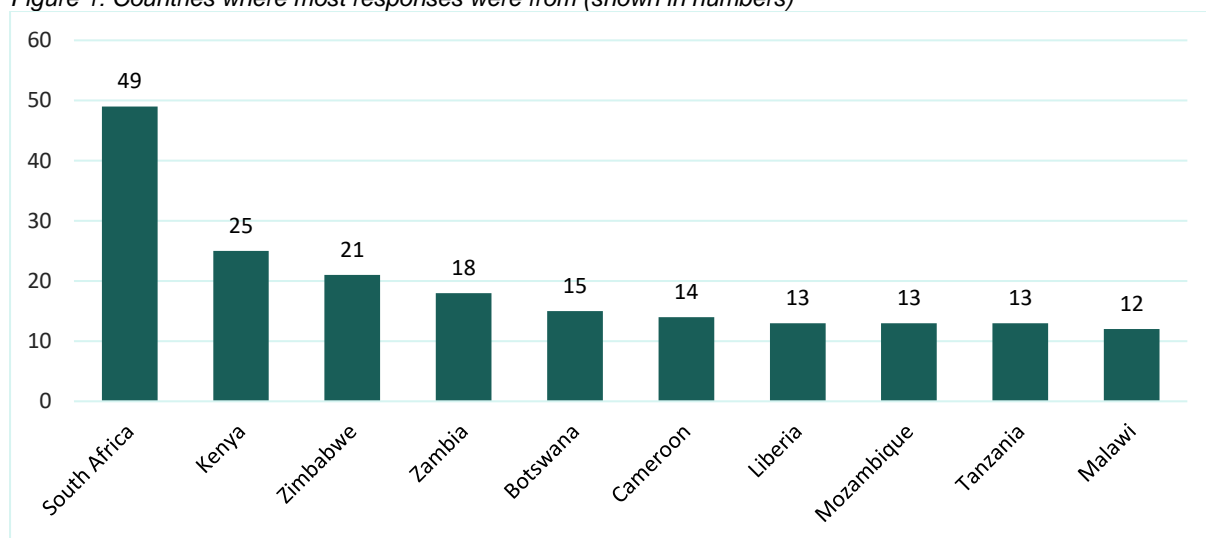


The questionnaire was sent out to journalists from numerous African countries. From these, 307 journalists participated in the study, from 36 countries:

- Algeria
- Botswana
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Egypt
- Ethiopia
- Gambia
- Ghana
- Kenya
- Lesotho
- Liberia
- Libya
- Malawi
- Mali
- Mauritius
- Morocco
- Mozambique
- Namibia
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Republic of the Congo
- Rwanda
- Sao Tome and Principe
- Senegal
- Seychelles
- Somalia
- South Africa
- Sudan
- Swaziland
- Tanzania
- Tunisia
- Uganda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Figure 1, below, presents the ten countries with the most responses. Most respondents were from South Africa (49 in total) and Kenya (25). Proportionally, more journalists from Sub-Saharan Africa participated, with southern and eastern Africa the best represented.

Figure 1: Countries where most responses were from (shown in numbers)



Numerous countries had slightly less than 10 responses. Country-specific results only include the 14 countries from where ten or more journalists participated; however, other results include all responses.

Gender of respondents

Considering the topic of the study, it was important to get responses from both females and males. Of the 307 respondents, 167 were female and 140 were males, making the sample 54% female and 46% male, as shown by Figure 2. This is likely to not be representative of the respective numbers of male and female journalists in the participating countries. There are more male journalists in most countries in the world (Franks, 2013).

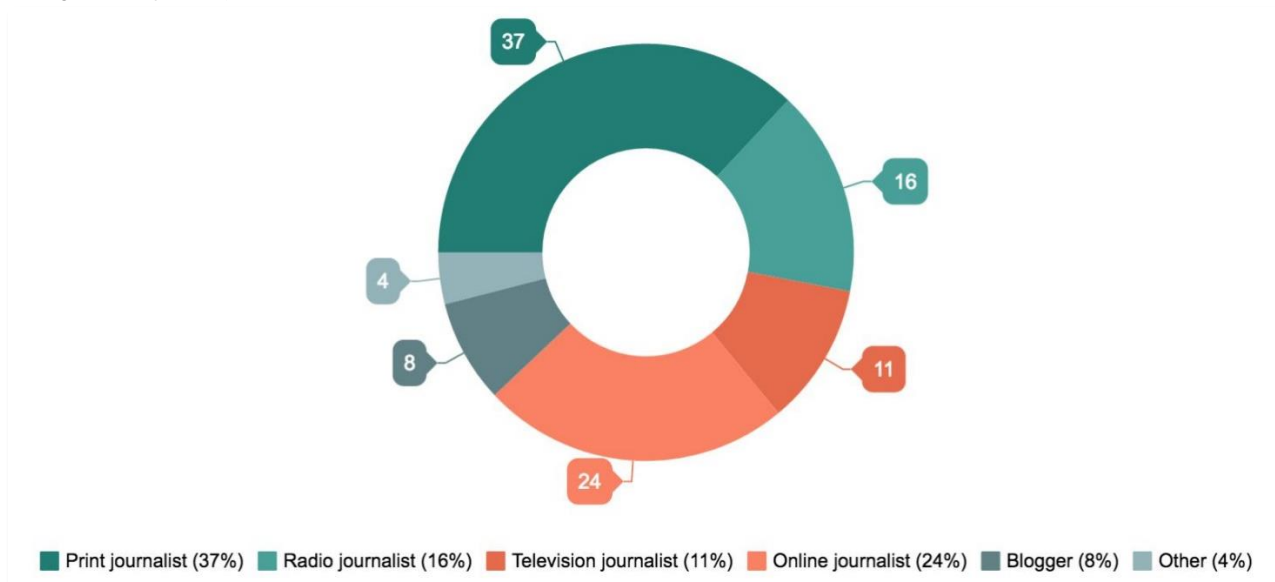
Figure 2: Gender of respondents



Type of journalist

Print journalists formed the largest proportion of all respondents at 37%, followed by online journalists, radio and television journalists.

Figure 3: Type of journalist



Internet access and social media use

To understand social media use, it is important to understand that most Africans still lack access to the internet. As such, social media usage is necessarily restricted in some countries. While social media usage is restricted via legislation in others.

Most Africans do not have access to the internet and 75% of people in Africa are not internet users (Internet Live Stats, 2016). However, access varies dramatically between countries.

South Africa has the highest proportion of the population who are internet users at 52% followed by Nigeria (46%), and Kenya (45%). Somalia (1,7%) and the DRC (3,9%) have the lowest populations that make use of the internet as show in Figure 4, below.

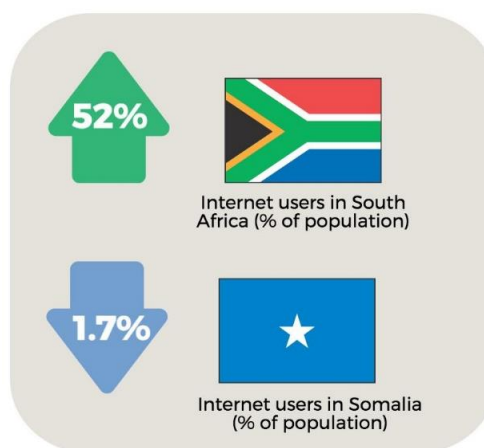
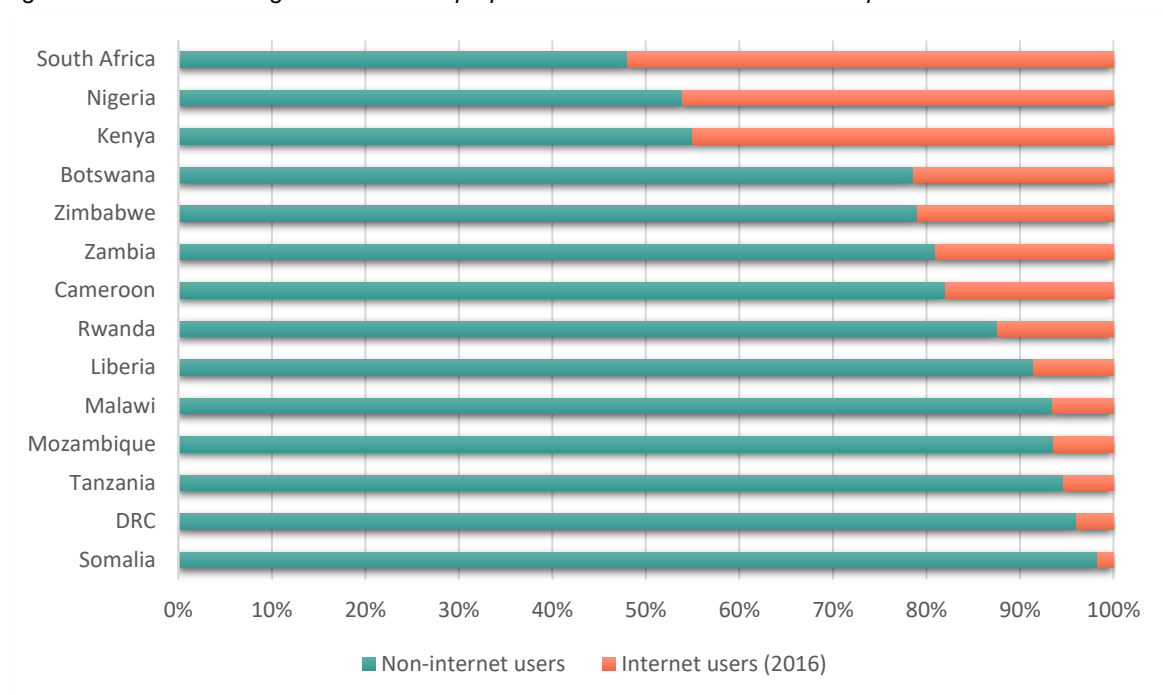


Figure 4: Countries the highest and lowest proportions of internet users for best represented countries in this study



What journalists shared

African journalists' use of social media

Across all respondents, 95% said that they made use of social media platforms for professional purposes. Eighty-nine percent of the journalists were required by their jobs to be on social media (shown in Figure 5 alongside).

There is a significant overlap of people who are required to be on social media for their jobs and those who use social media for their jobs. Eleven percent of journalists were not required to be on social media, but only five percent were not on social media for professional purposes. This may imply that regardless of the requirement, social media is a valuable tool.

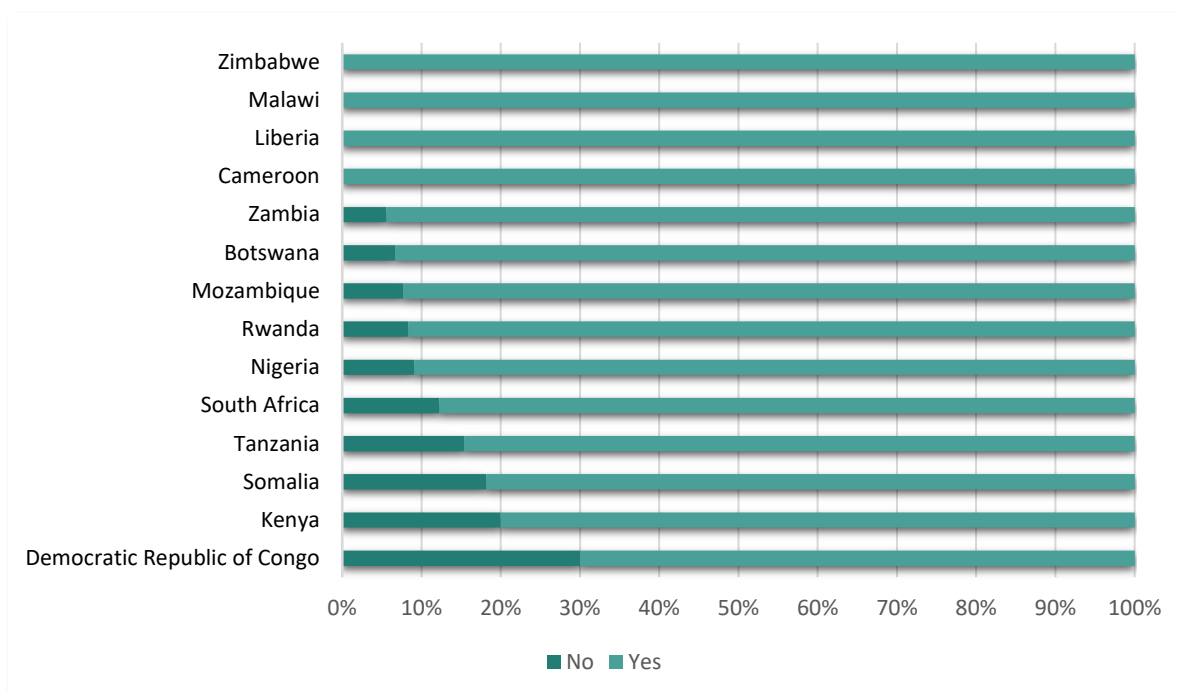
Figure 5: Social media use and requirements of job



This is not surprising, as social media engagement can improve understanding of, and engagement with audiences and assist media practitioners in meeting their audiences' content needs (Griessner, 2012). Additionally, social media can assist journalists to find sources and investigate stories.

All journalists from Cameroon, Liberia, Malawi and Zimbabwe were required to be on social media as part of their jobs. Although Kenya (80%) and DRC (70%) have relatively high numbers of journalists required to be on social media, they still constitute the bottom two countries (of those over ten responses). Seemingly, media in Africa are recognising the value of journalists posting on social media.

Figure 6: Does your job requires you to be on social media?



Sixty-six percent of the journalists made use of two accounts, one for professional use, the other for personal. In 82% of cases, journalists used their real name when posting on social media, 17% did not use their real names (possibly the name was the station, newspaper or website), 1% used both and under 1% used an account under a nickname.

Figure 6: Do you have both professional and personal accounts?

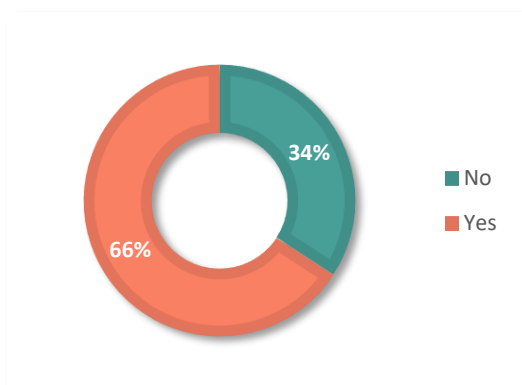
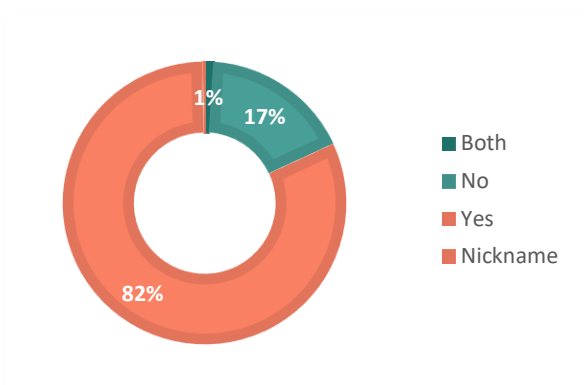
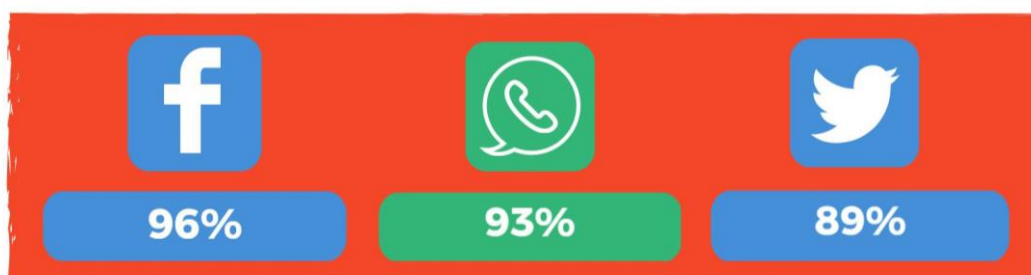


Figure 7: Do you tweet/post under your name?



Prominent platforms

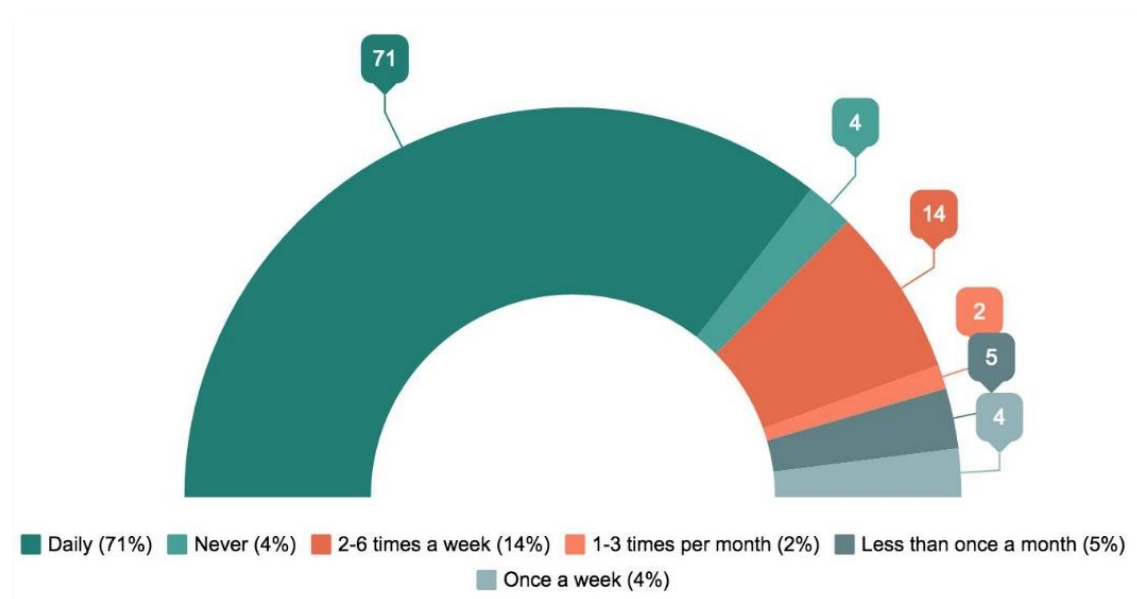
The usage of platforms varies between countries, but overall, Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were the most commonly-used platforms for professional purposes at 96%, 93% and 89% respectively, followed by YouTube at 80%.



Facebook

The great majority of journalists made use of Facebook (96%), with 71% of users engaging on the platform daily. This made Facebook the most frequently-used platform.

Figure 8: Facebook usage



All journalists who participated from Cameroon, Malawi and Zimbabwe used Facebook as part of their jobs. Eighty-six percent of journalists from Cameroon used Facebook daily. In contrast, a significant number of Somali journalists never used Facebook. However, even in low-usage countries the usage is significant.

Figure 9: Cameroon Facebook usage

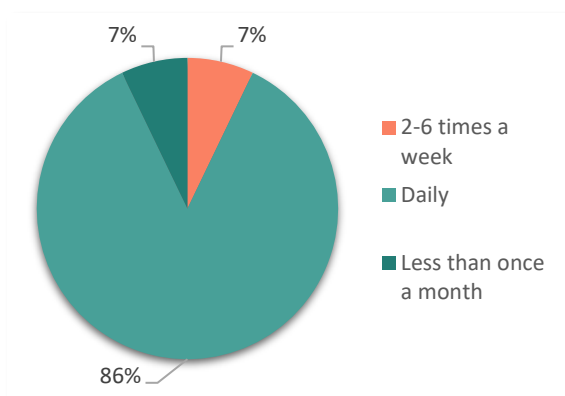
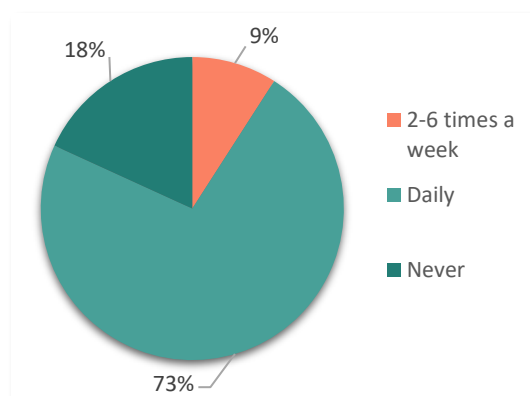


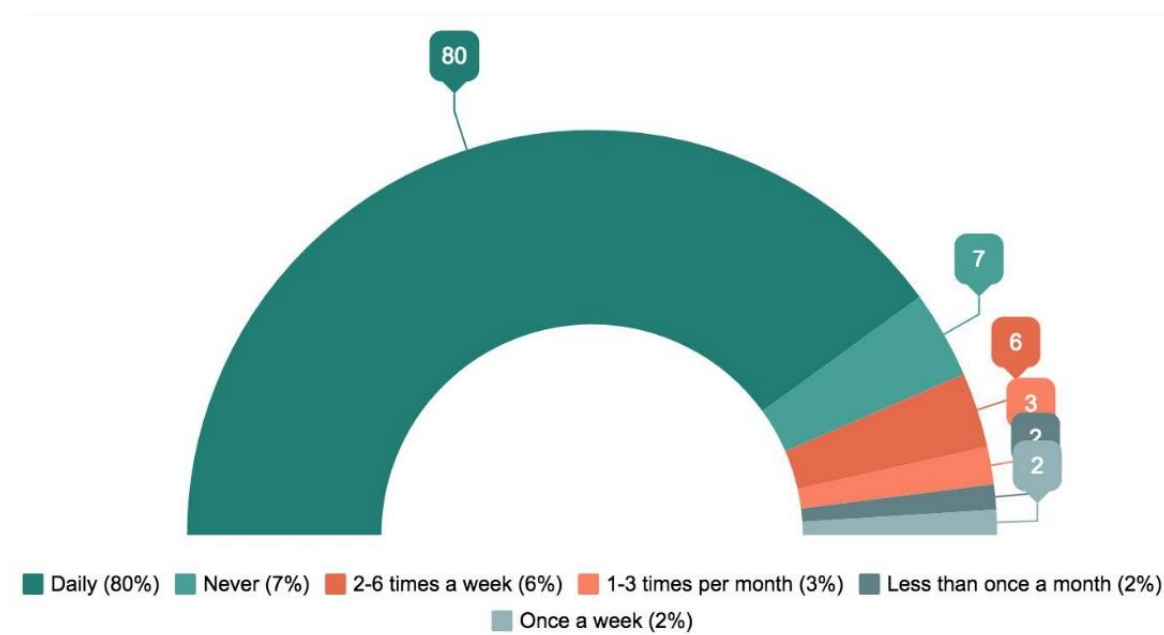
Figure 10: Somalia Facebook usage



WhatsApp

WhatsApp was the second most popular platform for journalists. Ninety-five percent used it, and 80% used it daily. This instant messaging service is for smartphones, implying that most journalists have smartphones and that social media is not only confined to their work computers and hours.

Figure 11: WhatsApp usage



All Botswanan, Cameroonian, Kenyan, Malawian, Rwandan and Zimbabwean journalists made use of WhatsApp. Among these countries, Botswana is notable in that all journalists from the country used the platform daily. Somalia boasts the lowest WhatsApp usage, with only 36% of the journalists using the platform. Somalia's low usage of both WhatsApp and Facebook may be attributed to the low number of internet users, but considering the hostile environment that journalists work in, it may also be to avoid coming to harm. More research would be necessary to determine this.

Figure 12: Botswana WhatsApp usage

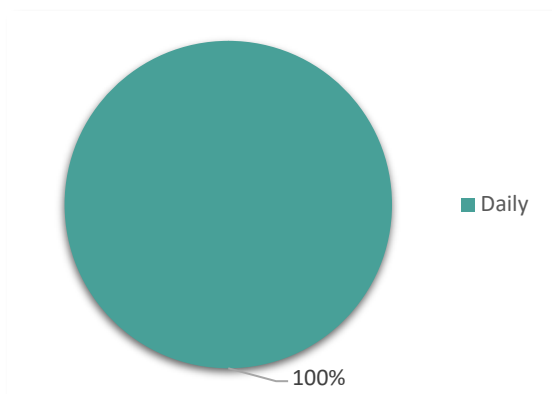
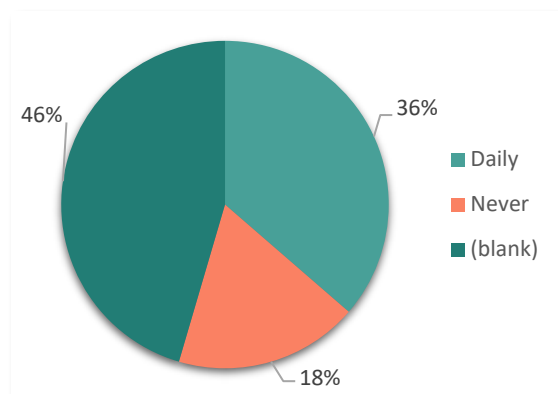


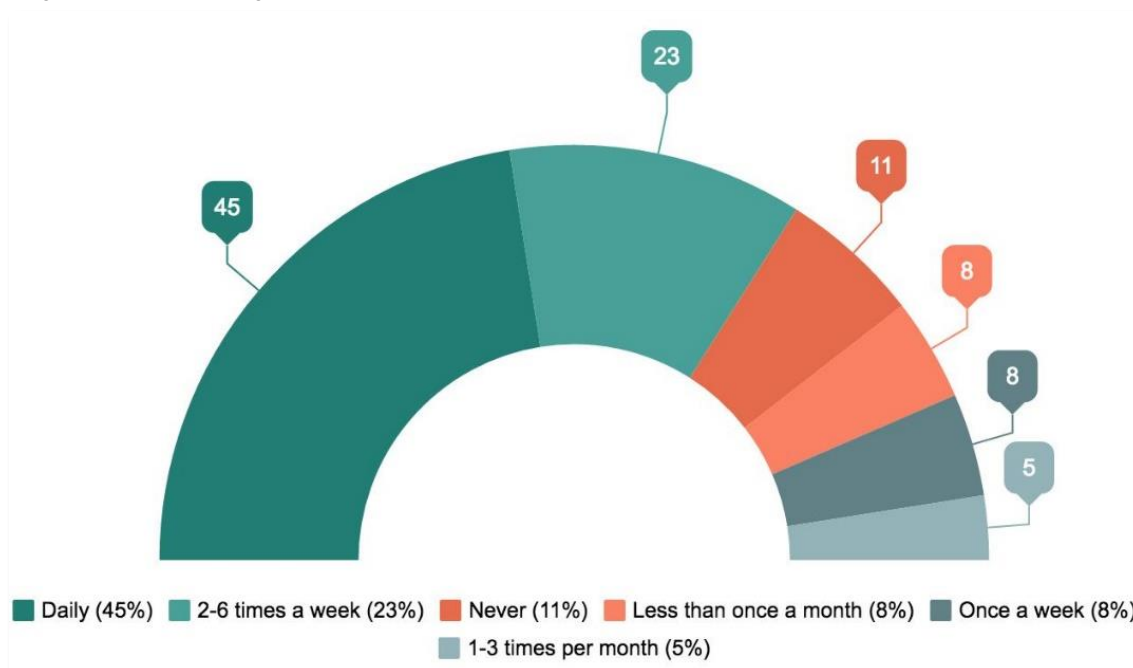
Figure 13: Somalia WhatsApp usage



Twitter

Twitter is the third most used social media platform, with 89% of the journalists using it. Forty-five percent of the journalists make use of the micro-blogging platform daily and 23% use it 2-6 times a week.

Figure 14: Twitter usage



All Kenyan and Zimbabwean journalists who responded made use Twitter, while only the DRC had the lowest usage with 70% of journalists using the platform. Somalia had 82% Twitter users.

Figure 15: Kenya Twitter usage

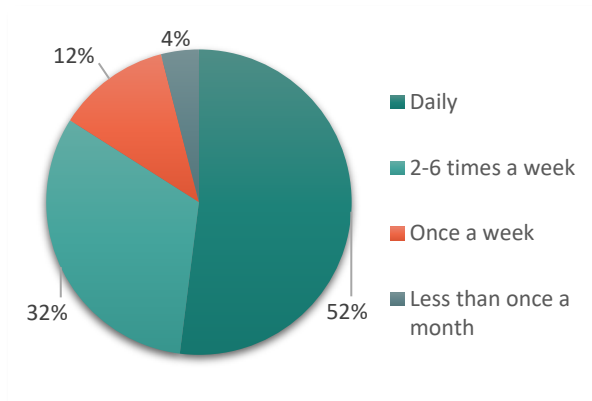
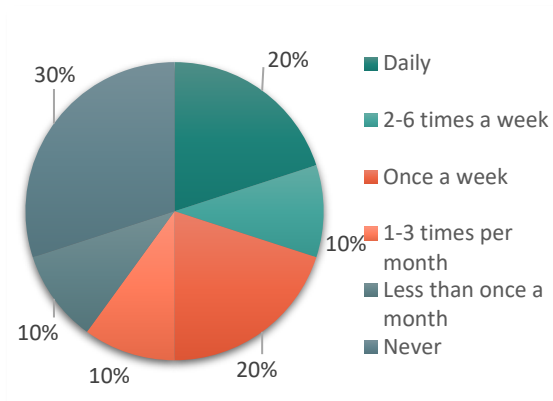


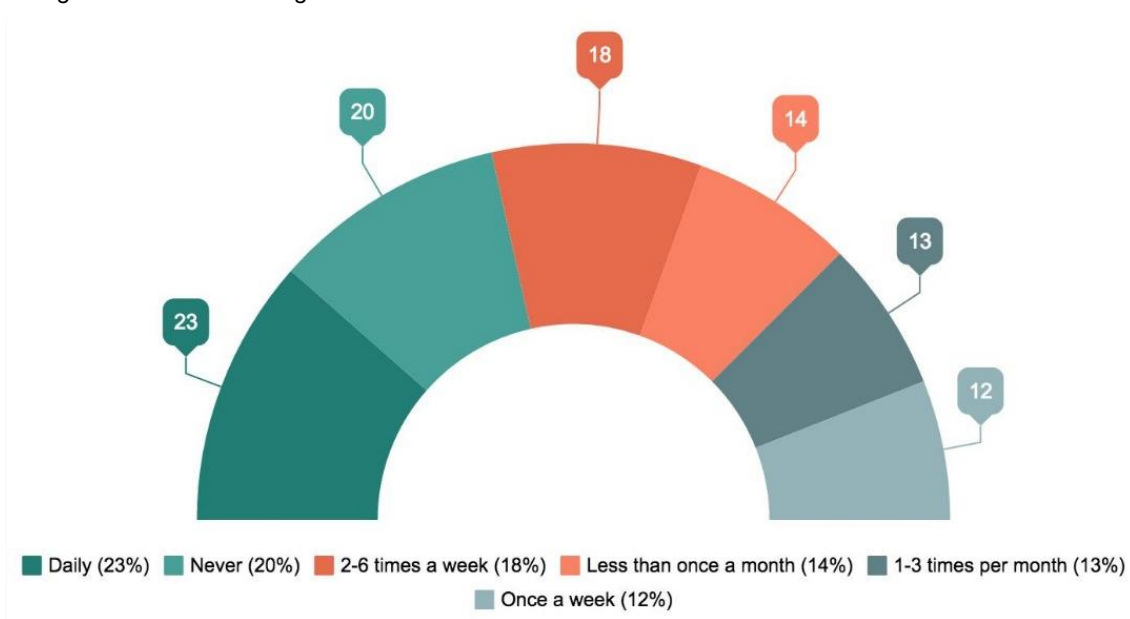
Figure 16: DRC Twitter usage



YouTube

Eighty percent of the journalists use YouTube, with 23% using it daily and 18% making use of the platform 2-6 times a week. While journalists may use it for professional purposes, it is less clear whether they are watching or posting videos.

Figure 17: YouTube usage

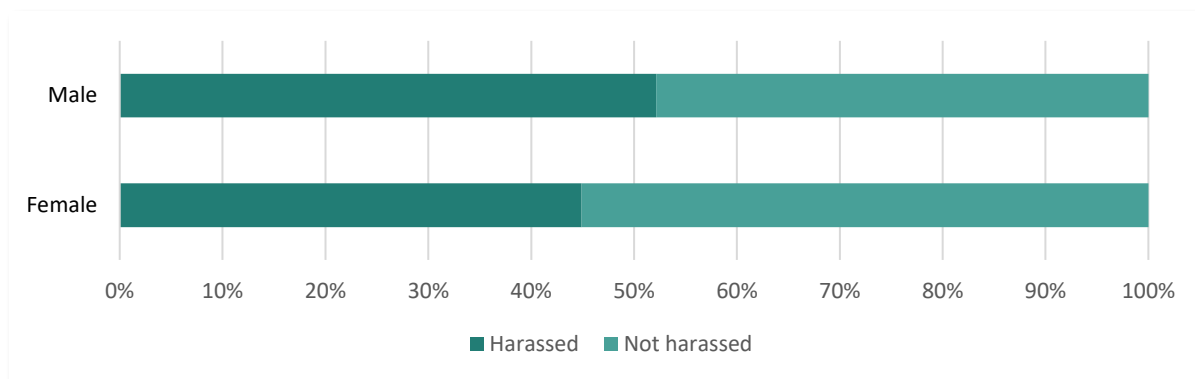


Journalists from Rwanda has the highest (92%) YouTube usage. Nigeria has the lowest with only 55% of the country's journalists using the platform. It is not clear that Rwandan journalists are posting on YouTube.

Harassment faced by African journalists

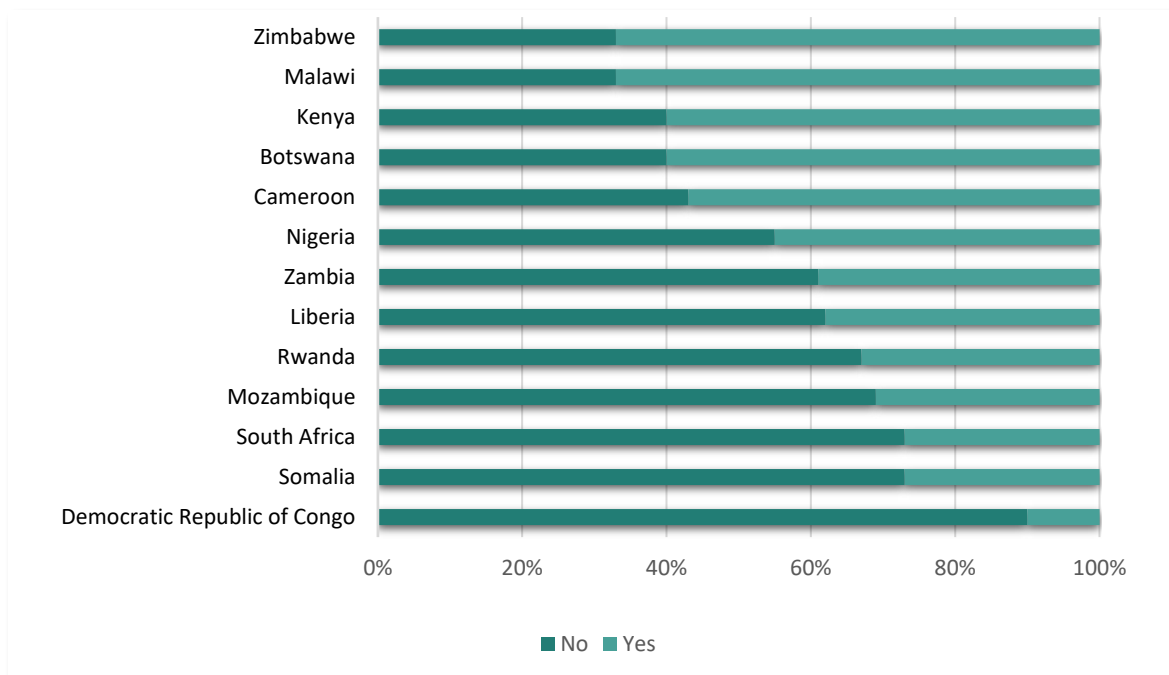
More male journalists experienced harassment than their female counterparts. Fifty-two percent of male journalists have been harassed on social media compared to the 45% female.

Figure 18: Gender of harassed



Sixty-seven percent of Zimbabwean and Malawian journalists had experienced harassment on social media. South Africa, Somalia and the DRC are the countries with the lowest rates of journalists harassed. The reasons for this are not clear, as the countries are very different in terms of media freedom and internet connectivity.

Figure 19: Countries with most social media harassment?



The most common form of harassment faced by journalists is trolling followed by verbal harassment, threats, sexual harassment, impersonation, and doxing.

More females than males are exposed to sexual harassment while more males are exposed more to threats than their female counterparts. The females who had been sexually harassed say they had received inappropriate sexual texts and comments, and had had pornography posted on their Facebook walls. Though females receive more sexual harassment, a small number of males have also been victims. One of the respondents stated that he often received dating and sexual proposals from females.

Figure 20: Type of harassment faced by female journalists

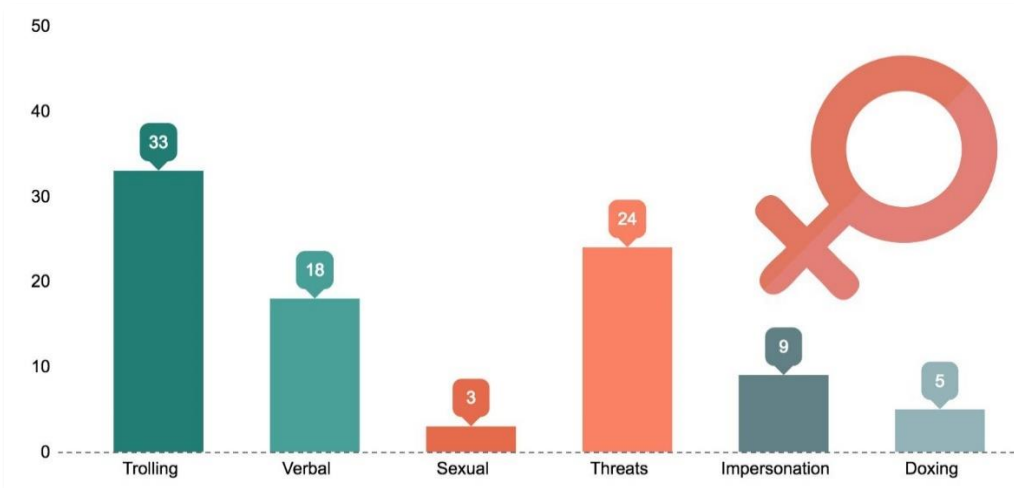
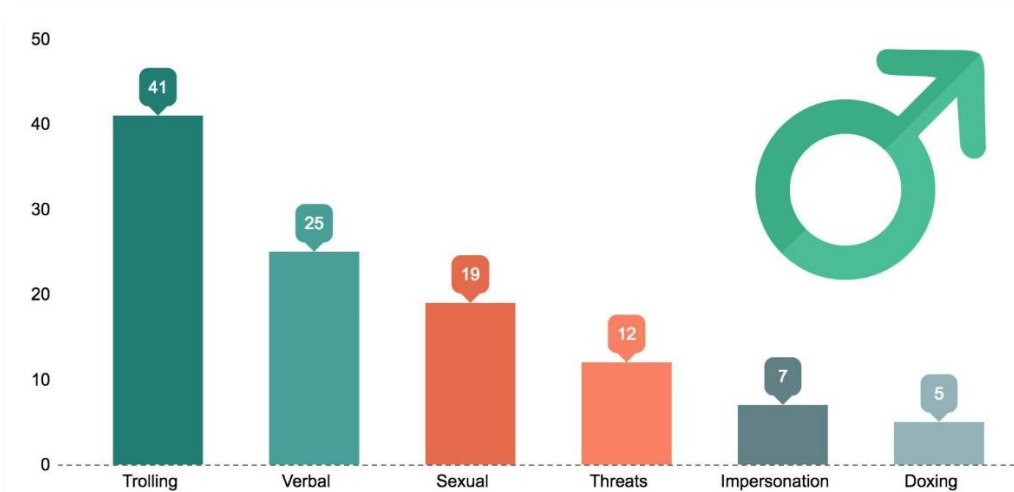
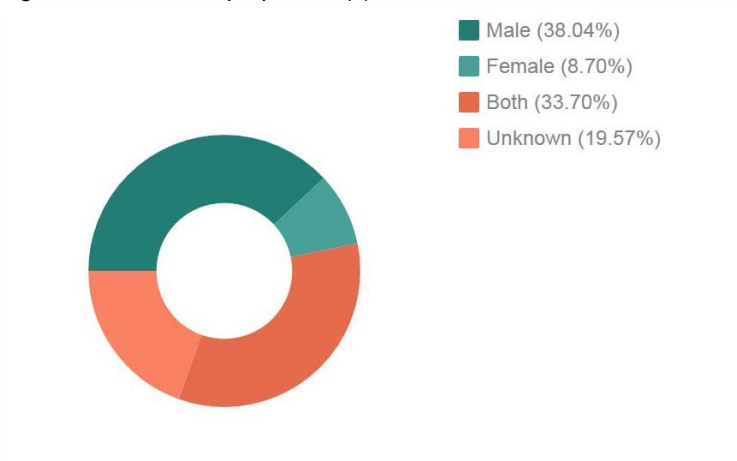


Figure 21: Type of harassment faced by male journalists



Some harassment seems to just be trolling and the reason for which is unclear, it may simply be due to a disagreement as to the content of stories with something that has been reported. Sometimes journalists complained that this was due to a misunderstanding of the reporting, rather than a valid concern. Interesting, the comments reflect that journalists are often harassed for covering human rights issues, including gender, sexuality and (for South Africans) race issues. Others have been targeted for reporting on public people (not necessarily politicians) in a way that people felt was unflattering.

Figure 22: Gender of perpetrator(s)

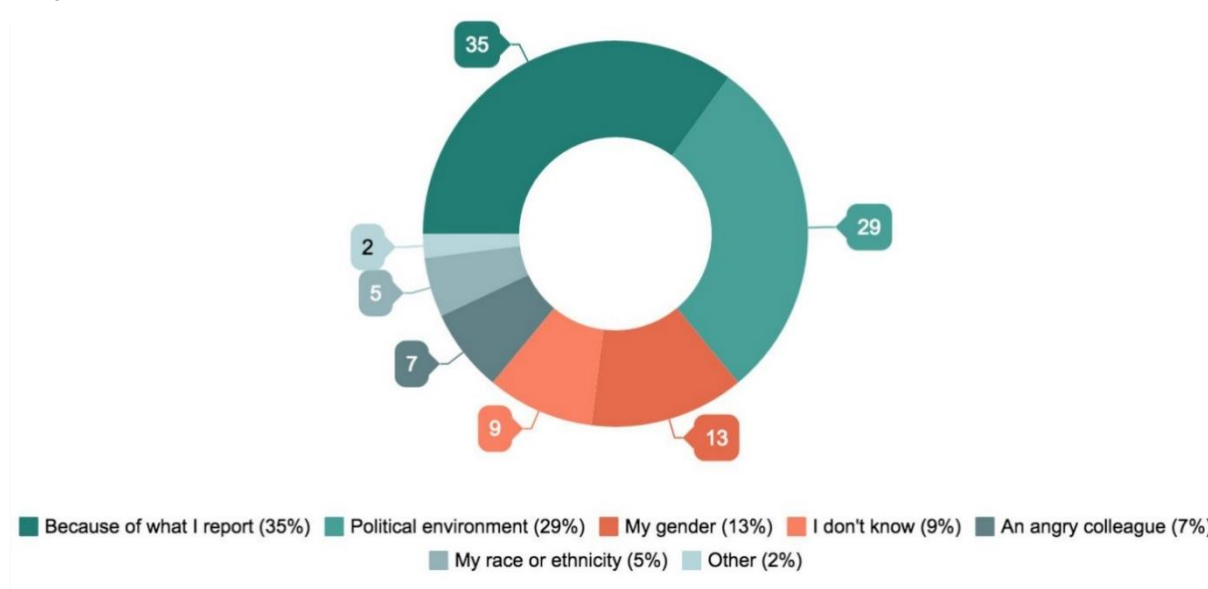


Though a larger number of journalists have been harassed on social media by both genders, more harassers were male.. Females constitute a relatively small proportion of harassers (where gender could be determined).

The results also show that a relatively large proportion of female journalists are harassed by males. This gives the impression that the harassment might be gendered and its intention is to silence female journalists. There is also a high number of harassers whose gender is unknown to the victims. This is due to the difficulty of determining the gender of some social media profiles.

The research findings show that 35% of the journalists believe they were harassed because of what they report, while a further 29% believe the reason behind their harassment is the political environment of their country. The rest of the journalists believe they were harassed because of their gender (13%), race or ethnicity (5%), and by someone they know, such as an angry colleague (9%).

Figure 23: Cause of harassment

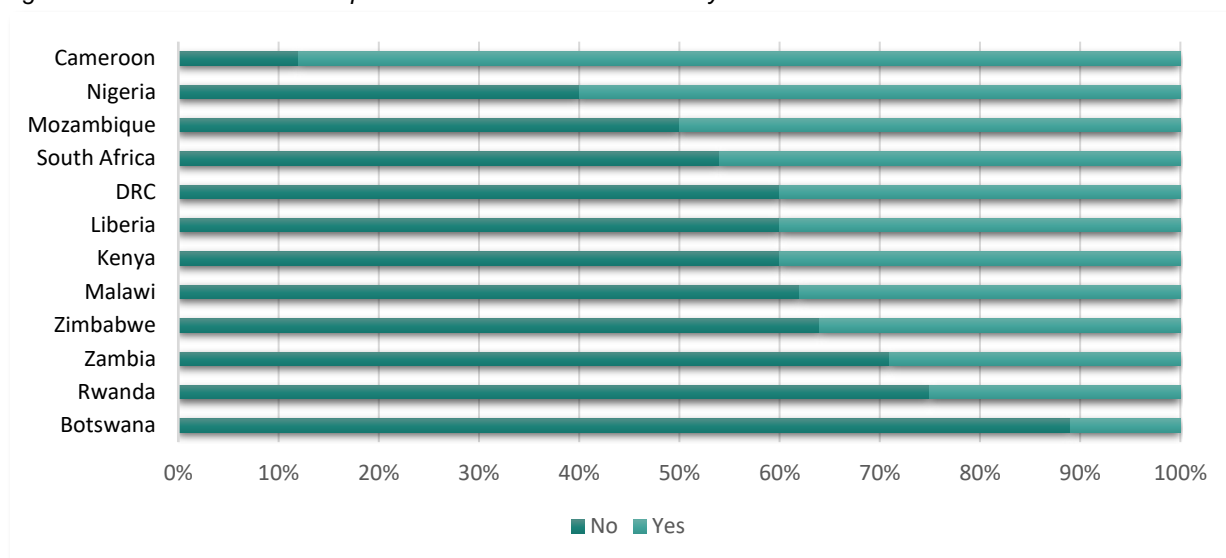


According to Freedom House's Jennifer Dunham (2016), some African countries are known to censor news by targeting and harassing journalists that dare to report against the government. Journalists who report on politics or matters related to politics often face harassment in various forms including threats and trolling from either a supporter, the institution they are critical on and even at times from

the government itself. This is a reality for many African countries especially those with unstable political environments.

The Cameroonian journalists are testament to this. Eighty-eight percent of the country's journalists had been harassed on social media cited the political environment of their country being a reason for their harassment. Nigeria (60%) and Mozambique (50%) also have a high number of journalists who believe their harassment was political. For these journalists being critical of the government, political parties and other relevant institutions, or reporting on diverging views is met with dissent.

Figure 24: Harassed because of political environment in the country



A Cameroonian journalist who participated in the survey, cited the political environment of the country as the reason for his harassment. He had received personal messages from individuals who threatened to arrest him. The threats were a result of him reporting on a topic considered too sensitive to report on in the current political climate of Cameroon. Another Cameroonian journalist said that some pressure groups, including the government want people to report in their favour.

Social media may also cause real-life consequences. For instance, a Botswanan journalist had been arrested and been imprisoned for posting news via social media.

Conclusions and recommendations

For the clear majority of journalists in Africa, social media usage is a prerequisite to perform their work and even for those who are not required to be on social media used numerous platforms to perform their jobs.

The access that social media grants journalists to other journalists, sources and their audiences can also mean that they are available for harassment, both by angry members of the public and from security forces. The study has revealed the extent of harassment of journalists on social media throughout Africa. This includes trolling, verbal abuse, threats, sexual harassment, and other forms of harassment. Such behaviour impedes the ability of journalists to do their work freely and securely.

Social media may also be a site for oppression and silencing journalists. There were disturbing indications that journalists attract ire for reporting on human rights issues such as gender, sexuality and race. Harassment also appears to have a gender bias. Although slightly more men are likely to have been harassed, women were more likely to have been sexually harassed and men threatened. The types of stories covered by male and female journalists may provide further information on why men are threatened and potentially what leads to the sexual harassment, trolling, verbal abuse.

There are also other security implications to using social media for journalists. Social media use may make journalists' computers more vulnerable to information collection from social media companies. As WhatsApp and Facebook are so commonly used and are both owned by the same company, a considerable amount of information can be collected through using the services. Although Facebook is supporting journalism via tools and sponsoring journalism conferences, it has also in the past handed over user information to governments. In this way, Facebook data can compromise journalists' safety under oppressive or authoritarian governments and journalists need to be cautious.

Journalists also face the risk of their social media accounts being hacked and their personal information being stolen, possibly compromising sources. The security practices of journalists would have to be explored in a future study.

The use of WhatsApp by journalists may reveal interesting details about changes in the newsroom. Are journalists in community WhatsApp groups to cover stories or in groups with other journalists? Is WhatsApp used to contact sources and what are the security implications of this? How does WhatsApp and social media use impact on journalists' personal lives as it means that journalists are potentially always available? This would also require further inquiry to determine.

There are other questions related to media freedom that could be studied in the future. If there are attempts to silence journalists through social media, are they successful? Do journalists leave the profession because of such harassment or drop investigations? Is social media harassment part of broader mistreatment? There are many questions that still need to be answered about African journalists on social media.

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