

HEALTHY  
SKEPTICISM  
ACROSS THE  
BOARD – A STUDY  
ON MEDIA  
PERCEPTION  
IN SUDAN

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MICT STUDIES 2020 (3)  
AIDA AL-KAISY

Healthy Skepticism Across the Board – A Study on Media Perception in Sudan, MiCT Studies 2020 (3)

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# HEALTHY SKEPTICISM ACROSS THE BOARD – A STUDY ON MEDIA PERCEPTION IN SUDAN

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The following report describes findings from a research study that was carried out in December 2020 with audiences in Sudan in order to gain insight into their usage, perception and assessment of the media in Sudan. The study looked at key issues related to media literacy including patterns of media consumption, motivation for accessing and drivers of trust in the media, perceptions of partisanship and political bias as well as knowledge of ownership and the political economy of the Sudanese media. The study ultimately aims to inform a programme of capacity-building on political communication which is being developed by MiCT with support of Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Sudan for political parties in Sudan in the lead up to its first national elections in decades.

The study was a qualitative exercise carried out with young audiences across Sudan, in both urban and rural areas. Digital and media access, as well as education levels, differ widely in major conurbations such as Khartoum from small towns and provinces in the marginalised areas of the country. Attitudes towards the political and public spheres can also vary widely as a result. The study, therefore, aims to provide insight into media consumption habits and attitudes of many of Sudan's communal groups.

## 1.1

### Background

In December 2018, a well-organised protest movement began which eventually overthrew the 30-year dictatorship of Omar Al Bashir and saw the creation of a transitional government and institutions whose aim was to enable and facilitate democratic processes in the country. This government, comprised of a rather unstable partnership between the military and civilian protesters, is leading a number of reforms and restructuring of the political sphere including planned national elections in late 2022. However, the process of reform has been markedly slow and changes to the media scene have been slow to emerge.

The history of the Sudanese media has been one of repression, censorship and control, defined by the political sphere since Sudanese independence in 1956. Supporters of Bashir's regime eventually took ownership of much of the media either directly or indirectly and the government pressurised journalists across the media landscape to adhere to restrictive lines through pre-publication censorship, monopoly, and control of public advertising revenue. This environment of media capture resulted in the enforced

closure of a number of media outlets with those remaining left with no choice but to practice self-censorship or risk legal and political consequences. Restrictions on traditional mainstream media then saw both journalists and audiences retreat towards social media and online platforms. This is reflected in the media consumption habits of younger audiences, the subjects of this study.

A number of key events have taken place in the last few months which have further shaped public opinion of the new government and were reflected in the responses of the participants in this study. The current climate of flux in Sudan is being further destabilised by a deep-rooted economic crisis, inflated prices and a shortage of fuel, all of which are causing unrest amongst Sudanese citizens. The government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has also been criticised and public opinion of the transitional government hangs in the balance. The normalisation of relations between Sudan and Israel was enacted through a controversial agreement which came into effect in October 2020 and eventually led to the removal of Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism in December 2020 and access to debt relief and world bank loan of \$1billion a year. The move was backed by the military arm of the transitional government, in particular Abdul Fattah Al Burhan, the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, referred to as Hemeti, Deputy Chairman of the Transitional Military Council. The agreement remains a cause of discord between the civilian and military arms of the government. Another key event was the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement between the Sudanese government and members of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) rebel alliance in South Sudan in October 2020. The agreement aims to end the ongoing violence and conflict in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile areas. Ongoing changes to the government, cabinet and ministries have also played a role in shaping perceptions of both the political and public spheres in the eyes of Sudanese citizens.

Despite this environment, the involvement of the Sudanese public in the revolution that took place in 2018 and 2019 has created a sense of agency in their future, which was evident in the focus group discussions. And the demand for transparent relevant information is growing. Trust in the mainstream media is low and young people are seeking information from alternative sources and platforms. This report will show that historical events, the current transition, economic crisis and digital access are all important factors in understanding media consumption habits and developing relevant political communications in Sudan.

## 1.2

### The Research Question

The research was conducted on behalf of MICT, a German media assistance organisation that has been supporting journalists in Sudan for ten years. While previous interventions have focused on providing capacity-building support to the media, a current programme has been developed by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office to build the public communications knowledge and skills of political parties, most of whom have not taken part in free and fair elections in nearly fifteen years. Developing a better understanding of the media consumption habits and media literacy levels of the Sudanese public will enable the programme to develop more relevant and effective workshop and training content for the project.

Based on this, the research question guiding this study was the following:

**How are Sudanese citizens using local media and what is their perception and their assessment of its structures and content?**

The research breaks down into four key areas and related questions:

1. **Usage:** What media channels are used when and how often? How do media users in Sudan select information sources?
2. **Motives and Trust:** Why do people turn to specific media offers? What are the underlying purposes of use? What drives trust in the media? What channels are the most and least trusted?
3. **Evaluation and Validation:** How is media content evaluated by the public? How do audiences perceive and assess political bias in media content? How do people verify information? What role do peers and family play in these processes?
4. **Ownership Structures:** To what extent are ownership structures and political affiliations of media companies known? How is perceived bias and knowledge about ownership related to the selection and assessment of sources?

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## 1.3

### Stakeholders and methodology

A total of six focus groups were conducted with citizens across Sudan. The groups were divided evenly according to gender and were all aged between 18-36 years old. In order to include a range of attitudes in the study FGDs were conducted in different areas: Khartoum, suburbs of Khartoum and Nyala. In each of these areas we conducted two FGDs split by gender. Nyala is in South Darfur and is considered to be one of the marginalised areas of Sudan. Khartoum was included as urban centre and the suburbs of Khartoum as an area characterized by precarious conditions. The age group 18-36 was deliberately chosen because this group are considered to have very specific media consumption habits and will be engaging in elections for the first time in their lives.

The focus group discussion method was chosen because it enabled audiences from similar backgrounds to engage in conversations about topics that were relevant to them and their community, and to identify areas where they agree, or disagree. A discussion guide was developed by project stakeholders and two local moderators from the FES team were chosen to lead the focus group discussions. As well as open discussion questions, the participants were shown a clip chosen by the project to engage with the groups on their perceptions towards partisan media content. The clip was taken from a popular Egyptian political satire show called Joe Show which is broadcast on Al Araby Channel and YouTube. This particular clip focused on the contentious normalisation of relations between Sudan and Israel, a topic which has generated much debate and strong positioning. The clip was selected because it was considered to be very controversial. The show was aired by a media platform that has been accused of Muslim Brotherhood affiliations and is financed by Qatar. This provided an opportunity to understand if participants were aware of channel affiliations and political economy of the media.

The data was collected and managed by an independent research consultant who has experience of research and analysis of the media in Sudan. A framework analysis was carried out to examine the responses from the participants and summarised by emerging themes. Key findings were validated by triangulating between focus group discussions. This served to combine methodical scrutiny of data alongside the contextual knowledge that would allow for the meaningful and nuanced findings.

The media environment in Sudan is seen to be politicised and there was overwhelming sense of delusion amongst audiences that is manifesting in news fatigue and exhaustion. This is being fuelled by growing amounts of misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere.

There is little evidence of change in practices or content of the media since the transition in the eyes of the audiences except, to some extent, at the public media platforms.

Social media is the most dominant source of news, with television and radio both declining in popularity amongst young audiences. Social media is popular due to its accessibility and speed of reporting events. Countering the commonly high popularity of radio in Africa, radio was seen as outdated and out of touch by the participants. Focus group participants suggested a generational gap with their parents' generation more likely to consume radio.

Audiences are engaging with international news content that is relevant to Sudan such as the US elections, conflict in Ethiopia, but are mainly interested in home news from government formation to the normalisation of Sudanese relations with Israel.

Coverage of events outside of Khartoum is seen to be weak and lacking, in particular for audiences based in marginalised areas such as Nyala who are more interested in local news from their area. They do not consider national television representative of their needs and are therefore more likely to follow local influencers on social media.

Audiences are acutely aware of the lack of accuracy in the media and ubiquity of fake news and gossip. Credibility of social media accounts was assessed according to the number of followers that the account had, the longevity and history of the account as well as by levels of accuracy. Verification processes are used and consist mainly of cross-checking with official pages and sources, family, friends and colleagues. At the same time, exchange with families and friends was also seen to be contributing to the growing amount of disinformation in Sudan.

Government communications with citizens is seen to be in disarray and this is contributing to the declining trust in institutions including the media. Trusted sources and information providers come however in the form of the individual Facebook pages and social media accounts of politicians and journalists.

Sudanese citizens still have a large sense of agency in their government and the political transition. There is an prevailing sense of unity amongst the Sudanese public despite their political differences.

Awareness of media ownership is limited amongst Sudanese audiences. They are however aware of the interplay between media and politics which can lead to

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the interference of funders in media content. Audiences in the suburbs demonstrated a higher awareness of media ownership than their counterparts in Khartoum.

Apart from a few observation, the research found almost no differences between the groups in the three areas. People in all three areas, contrary to our expectations, shared the same views and same criticism. One explanation is the age group: Sudanese young adults between 18 and 35 share similar media habits and attitudes towards the media regardless of where they live.

Across the board participants demonstrated high levels of media literacy indicated by critical reflection of bias and disinformation, healthy scepticism and deliberate selection of different sources for different purposes. Participants distinguished between trusted and non-trusted sources and they were able to explain this distinction. Verification skills and awareness of high levels of misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere had been strengthened as a result of the conflicted media environment in Sudan. Participants across the board were checking news content and information with multiple sources before trusting and sharing.

Audiences want clear honest and transparent communications from their political leaders about the issues that affect their daily lives, from the economy to the political transition. Trust in leaders is intrinsically linked to better communications.



**T**he mainstream media environment in Sudan is seen to be agenda-driven, plagued by a lack of credibility and a lack of representation and diversity.

Participants were critical of the mainstream media which was said to be outdated as a form of news provision and irrelevant to their needs. Main-stream media in Sudan was seen to be controlled by those with their own political and economic agendas. They were considered to be unprofessional and their lack of adherence to ethical principles of journalism was turning audiences away from accessing their content. Participants lamented a tendency among national media to often not cover events of national relevance. And they were concerned that there has been little observed change in the practices and therefore content of the media since the regime changed 18 months ago.

“The Sudanese media in period before the revolution, was controlled by a specific group, and news they share has an interest and it is not real and not useful. Those who presented the shows were controlled by some people, and there was no variety. This made me abandon the TV...There has been no radical change (since the revolution) but it is changing gradually, step by step.”

Male, Suburbs

“In Sudan, our media is so weak. The main headlines give me the news but the rest is not reliable.”

Female, Suburbs

“Sudanese media is very politicized. When America bombed Al Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, Sudanese TV was airing Wardi's song. We the Sudanese learnt about the bomb from Egyptian news channels. National media outlets need to improve their skills and become more relevant to the audience..”

Male, Nyala

Of all the mainstream media platforms, television was the most referenced, followed by radio and online websites. Al Rakoba, a news aggregation website with a high propensity to focus on celebrity news and gossip, was the most referenced both positively and negatively. The most recalled Sudanese television channel was the public media platform, Sudan TV. Attitudes towards Sudan TV varied with some participants suggesting that its content lacked diversity while others noted that it was the only channel that they could trust. The public media platforms were in general, however, seen to have improved since the revolution.

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‘ I haven’t watched national TV for over a decade. Now since the revolution, I am starting to trust it better. Why? Because they broadcast about protests and reflect the voice of the people. This makes me think of it as somewhat credible.’

Male, Nyala

‘ During the late regime period, SUNA (national news agency) had problems as the regime did not give them the space they need to work. Now they have improved and are producing all kind of news, for and against, and their objectivity makes you trust them.’

Female, Khartoum

Television consumption was mainly event-driven; for example, the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic was cited as a time when people were more likely to turn to television for their news as was the US elections in November 2020. It is likely that television was more consumed with reference to the pandemic for two reasons. Firstly, government announcements and press conferences were more likely to be televised in the early stages of the pandemic. Secondly, participants noted that disinformation and misinformation about Covid-19 were rife in Sudan, in particular across social media. They may have turned to television as this was seen as more trusted source than social media in general.

‘ The topic of COVID is very susceptible to rumours and many people are misled by this.’

Female, Nyala

‘ On social media, anyone can write anything and all Sudanese people believe them. Like the tea thing during the corona situation. Everyone believed it and drank tea the following morning...Social media is fast but not trusted. Television is better.’

Female, Khartoum

For many participants, the national media scene in Sudan lacked both the capacity and the inclination to cover news and events accurately and impartially and this was driving them to consume transnational and international news channels such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and Al Hadath as well as BBC, France 24, Deutsche Welle and in some cases even CNN.

‘ National media does not care or cover atrocities in Darfur. Tens of people could die today and you will not hear about in the national TV. Only foreign organizations will cover it but not our own media.’

Male, Nyala

That said, participants were critical of the trans-national Arabic channels and awareness of their political affiliations was high, in particular amongst the male groups. Al Hadath was the more popular of the group with BBC Arabic fairing favourably amongst the international news channels.

An interesting finding to emerge from the discussions was the lack of radio usage. Radio has historically been the most popular platform in Sudan, mainly due to its affordability. In rural and marginalised areas in particular, communities and villages will often group together in public spaces to listen to the radio. Radio is particularly popular for music and entertainment and it is possible that the groups do not use radio for news information and consumption hence the lack of reference. Radio is also popular amongst those that drive and it is likely that this age group do not own cars or drive. Participants stated that radio was outdated and out of touch and that there was a generational gap which saw their parents’ generation more likely to consume radio.

‘ Older generation prefers local radio, but it only covers local news not international trends.’

Female, Nyala

One participant in the group from the Suburbs of Khartoum did say that he trusted the radio for his news and another from the woman’s group in Nyala also mentioned listening to radio with her mother. Radio Dabanga, a Dutch-funded radio station reporting on and from Darfur, was the only radio station that mentioned and views on the station varied amongst the groups when it was mentioned.

**Social media is the main news provider and it is driving narratives that are seen in the media.**

Sudanese audiences are most likely to obtain their news from social media and via their mobile phones. Participants cited a number of practical reasons for this most of which are related to the socio-political and economic context of Sudan. Ease of access to social media as schedules had become busier and more hectic, particularly since the pandemic, meant that time spent in front of the television was more limited. Female participants noted that time spent looking after children and families at home reduced their access to mainstream media. Regular electricity cuts are also driving greater mobile usage and affecting access to television and radio. Participants were more likely to use restricted electricity to charge phone batteries than for broadcast media consumption. Cost was also seen to be a major factor in media access, which was also impacting then on newspaper consumption.

“For me I follow social media news more than anything else, because now the human being is working too much so it is hard to watch TV and the news every hour.”  
Female, Khartoum

“Accessing news through social media is easier for me. It is in my phone and TV requires electricity, which is a rare commodity here.”  
Male, Nyala

“I choose social media as a source of information because it is easier to access compared to TV and other traditional media outlets. I do not have to go and purchase the newspaper to access information.”  
Male, Khartoum

Facebook was the main platform for social media consumption, although Twitter and WhatsApp groups were also popular amongst participants. These platforms were seen to be more current and faster to the news than their mainstream counterparts. They also felt that social media allowed for greater discussion and analysis of major events. For example, one participant noted that, while the newspapers claimed that Sudan would never be removed from the US state sponsored terrorism list, Facebook and Twitter provided diverse opinions and views. Participants recognised that social media has the propensity to be inaccurate and not trustworthy. In their minds, they mitigated against this

by following the official accounts of ministries, political parties and journalists. These official accounts were seen to be more accurate and trustworthy than social media in general. The accounts of the Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and various ministers from the minister of justice to religious affairs were referenced as were the social account of the resistance committees. The resistance or revolutionary committee accounts were favoured for their focus on ‘day-to-day issues that can be easily be verified’ (male, Khartoum). They also followed the social accounts of local media organisations and in some cases international media, although these were seen to be less relevant than local. The accounts of individual journalists were popular as they were seen to be divorced from the politics of the media platforms that they work for.

“Last week there was news about the interim minister of infrastructure and his decision regarding ports in Sudan and some talks about accessions to a foreign country. I checked official posts and pages to understand the issue better. This was my approach. I do not follow radios and TV. I mainly check social media because whatever airs on TV will end up on social media one way or another – in your mobile.”  
Male, Khartoum

“I consider a source credible as an official account or a channel. I don’t trust all social media unless it is from a news channel.”  
Female, Nyala

“I trust Al-Hosh, Al-Zool and Free Democratic Sudan’s Facebook accounts because they have field reporters in most of the cities, even small towns.”  
Male, Nyala

Credibility of social media accounts was assessed according to the number of followers that the account had, the longevity and history of the account as well as by levels of accuracy. There were some references to social media influencers and their increasing role in the public sphere and an investigative reporter Monem Sulim, who has a large following on Facebook, received mixed reactions when referenced in one of the groups. He was seen to be more likely to spread misinformation in order to increase the number of his followers; at the same time, he was mentioned as reference for important topical issues.

‘As for Monem Suliman, I do not trust his news but his posts give me indication on the topics discussed at leadership level. I just take it as a hint and indicator of topics that are soon to be published. I do not care how he crafts the content. The topic itself matters to me. I do not care about his motives. I follow him. Not that I trust him. I know whatever topic he discussed is a topic of discussion at the leadership level.’

Male, Khartoum

As demonstrated by this particular quote, there was a good level of discernment amongst the participants, most of whom were careful to verify and corroborate information and news that was shared on social media either with other social media accounts or by referring to mainstream media, especially television. Despite lower levels of broadcast media consumption, television was seen to be more accurate by virtue of the fact that channels were had to behave in a more official capacity than social media. Once something was seen on television, it was considered to be more likely to be accurate, despite the mainstream media’s other failings, according to the participants.

‘If it is not true, then they won’t broadcast it on the television... I noticed that there was a difference in the number of cases of coronavirus on television versus social media and I believe television.’

Female, Suburbs

‘They (national television) can’t announce false news unless they follow a tactic or directed by the country. But in social media everyone can share anything without supervision.’

Female, Khartoum

This is an interesting dichotomy, where the majority of participants are claiming to gather their news from social media yet record higher levels of trust in broadcast media. This was most evident in the female groups and demonstrates the conflicted nature of media consumption which is driven the lack of trust and plethora of inaccurate false news. Participants were overwhelmed by the amount of news that was available to them and by the increasing volume of false information, misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere. Despite the popularity of social media, it was also seen to be a reason for the entrenchment of this phenomenon.

The groups in Nyala were the least likely to consume national television as they felt that the mainstream media in Sudan did not represent their or their community’s needs. They were more likely to follow local influencers from Nyala and consume content that focuses on local issues.

‘National television is very lacking and does not follow current topics.’

Female, Nyala

‘Our national media outlets are very out of touch and irrelevant to our life in Nyala for example. I said earlier that I think our national TV is improving. But I work in the human rights field and I know for a fact the national TV will never reflect the human rights situation. They might have a reporter here in Nyala but I bet he is sleeping now and not bothered to follow human rights issues. The radio is another issue. It is completely out of touch.’

Male, Nyala

Participants also saw social and public gatherings as further sources of information, that was often inaccurate, which were likely to instigate rumours and spread further false news. Workplaces and family gathering are common situations where information is shared and swapped. Shortage of fuel has resulted in long waits in front of gas stations that could last for days on end. People turned this waiting time into social gatherings sharing food and beverages and this was also seen as place where information was exchanged. It should be noted that these queues and mock social gatherings were not always convivial and outbreaks of violence have been reported at times.

**Audiences are seeking out information on topics that are relevant to their daily lives and livelihood.**

Although participants expressed frustrations with the media scene and news exhaustion which was attributed to the lack of credibility of the media, they were also keen to understand the economic and political events that were impacting their lives. Key events in the Sudanese calendar such as the normalisation of relations with Israel which lead to the removal of Sudan from the US state sponsored terrorism list, government formation and cabinet reshuffles, the signing of the Juba peace agreement were all high on the list of important topics.

‘Last week we watched the signing of the Juba peace agreement although we first heard about the signing taking place through WhatsApp.’

Female, Suburbs

International events such as the US elections and recent violence in Tigray, Ethiopia were also seen to be important. Both of these events are significant to the Sudanese public. The relationship between the US and Sudan and the delisting of Sudan from the terrorism list is one which Sudanese leaders have hailed as vital to the success of the democratic transition in Sudan. Practically it means that the country can now access much needed debt relief and international investment in its decrepit economy. Ongoing border disputes between Sudan and Ethiopia which have been aggravated by the recent influx of refugees from Tigray are resulting in violence and tensions between the two countries are high.

‘Elections was the major topic. This is the norm. Like what happened during the onset of Covid-19 and how the media was frantically covering it. The election was also similar even in the Sudanese social media.’

Male, Nyala

Interest in news on the pandemic was evident although participants talked about Covid-19 in the past tense. This is likely due to the lower number of cases in November and early December and would change should the research have been conducted at a different time, demonstrating concern with news which is affecting them more immediately. However, local news and events figure as highly important on the news agenda of participants.

‘Revolutionary committees’ Facebook pages do not discuss leaked information. They state facts about the challenges in their areas. They do not often publish news about imminent normalization with Israel or delivery of large sums of money. They focus more on day-to-day issues that can be easily verified and confirmed by local people in their areas.’

Male, Khartoum

Low trust in both mainstream and social media media is driving media literacy skills and verification processes.

Trust and credibility of both mainstream and social media was low amongst all of the participant groups, although heightened amongst the male groups. Participants bemoaned the lack of accurate content as well as the fast spread of that content across networks and media platforms. As mentioned previously, trusted sources were limited to the social media accounts of political parties, ministries, the prime minister and journalists. This is seeing trust in mainstream media platforms declining and they are becoming less relevant in the eyes of the participants. Participants were making a distinction between the individual social media accounts of their trusted sources and experts and media platforms which in their eyes were failing to provide independent accurate content.

‘It is hard to trust personal accounts. Public accounts and official accounts care more about their credibility and what impacts their reputation... I do not trust personal accounts nor Facebook groups. If news attracts my attention, I will go seek confirmation from another trusted source.’

Female, Nyala

‘When I read any news on social media, I usually assume that 50% of what I read is true. I look for more sources like officials and newspaper’s accounts before I consider a news item credible.’

Male, Nyala

A lack of balanced reporting and limited exposure to diverse opinions was also driving the decline in trust in the media. Participants wanted their media to be ‘neutral’ and provide them with the breadth of information they need to make their own decisions about political events and processes. This is likely what is compelling audiences to turn to international channels such as the BBC who in their minds have no reason for partisanship when covering political events in Sudan. It is also what might be driving them to individual accounts online, giving them the option to select a variety of news and views in order to make their own assessment of events. Accuracy was also key to ensuring trust.

“Social media is a very fast way to spread the news but fake news is very common. When I heard about the formation of the council I did not believe it. Then I watched the news on the national TV and an announcement was made by Burhan (Chairman of the Sovereignty Council) about establishing the council. Then I followed influencers and journalists to know the public opinion and know more about the council it-self.”

Female, Khartoum

“I used to trust the Sudanese Congress Party (SCP) page. But recently, there was a conflict between tribes in Darfur. The SCP page published a statement about the event that was not accurate. This shows you that no outlet is 100% accurate hence it impacts its credibility.”

Male, Nyala

In the Khartoum male group, a discussion about a show which is hosted on the public channel, Sudan TV, entitled “Nation Building Dialogue,” hosted by Luqman Ahmed Director General of the Public Corporation for Radio and Television was used to demonstrate the importance of diverse views and representation to participants. The show featured a number of politicians including Mohamed Naji Al Asam from Democratic Unionist Party, Khalid Silik from the Alliance for Freedom and Change, Ibrahim al-Amin, Secretary General of the National Umma Party (NUP) from Umma Party, and Amal Al Azin of the Communist party and Yasir Arman from the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement. This type of show, according to the participant, ‘allowed me to understand who is following the government strategy and who is not; who has a clear understanding of governance and who is adopting a haphazard approach.’ Verification skills and awareness of high levels of misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere had been strengthened as a result of the conflicted media environment in Sudan. Participants across the board were checking news content and information with multiple sources before trusting and sharing. They also discussed actively calling out misinformation to their friends, families and followers.

“The elders were attacking us the younger generation and warned us that we are losing our faith if we agree to normalize. We try to correct misinformation and when we see an elder comment on social media we try to be open and approach them with respect and not be argumentative.”

Female, Nyala

Despite advanced verification skills, knowledge of media ownership and financing was limited across most of the groups. Awareness of the relationship between media and politics was evident although participants were less likely to recognise or name funders of media platforms. Although the media scene is considered to be politicised and not neutral, participants were less likely to view this as problematic if diverse views were represented.

Interestingly, participants from the suburbs of Khartoum demonstrated stronger knowledge of media ownership and financing. This is likely because audiences living in the suburbs of Khartoum often moved from marginalised areas in Sudan having fled conflict. They are therefore more engaged and active in their relationship with politics and the media.

“I am concerned with knowing who owns the channels to make sure that I get the correct news. After the revolution I started to care even more because I started to understand political agendas and how they are disseminated.”

Male, Suburbs

“It is useful to know who owns which channel as it helps you establish the accuracy of the channel and also get a better understanding of how journalists might have got hold of their information and data.”

Female, Suburbs

**Government communications was seen as messy and chaotic with a lack of coherence between different government stakeholders**

To the participants, government communications through the media was seen to be in disarray. Some participants felt that the government only gave them information that they felt was necessary at their own discretion and that better and greater communication on key issues should be a priority. Participants referenced a number of examples of confused communications. One, a news story about the Sudan Higher Committee [for Health Emergencies to combat COVID 19] decision to lockdown the country, saw the public panic to prepare for a lockdown which was denied the following day.

“ In my opinion, this was a good thing [reporting that there was a lockdown], albeit there was a delay in rectifying the misinformation. This delay in response to misinformation could have a negative impact. For example, this sudden lockdown could have led to a shortage in some commodities.”

Male, Khartoum

Another example cited was a clash in communications about the dismissal of the Director of Police Forces of the Eastern Nile, which was announced by the Mayor of Khartoum but denied by the Police Force Director.

“ I was astonished at the lack of coordination. I was wondering how these people govern us if they cannot even coordinate simple interdepartmental communications... This showed major conflict between the police forces and the government at the state level. We believed the Mayor’s statement and we also ought to believe the head of the police. In an ideal situation they would be coordinating and working in harmony. To see this rift among them at the media level that speaks to the public is very sad.”

Male, Khartoum

Despite this, the groups were in unanimous agreement that the Sudanese government and political parties should be taken seriously. When shown a clip which satirised the government, even participants who found the clip relevant and funny were against the satirising of their leaders. Loyalty and support for leaders was evident, a finding which is further emboldened by the popularity of the official social media accounts of politicians.

“ I did not want him [Hemiti] to be part of the new government but they forced him on us to keep national security so we agreed. But we can’t accept that anyone is making fun of our government members.”

Male, suburbs

This points to the underlying sense of hope that Sudanese citizens seem to have in the transitional government and the possibilities for the future. The sense of agency in their lives and potential prospects was palpable across all of the groups. Despite an entrenched economic crisis and ongoing conflict, there is hope for change and a better future.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**his research analysis aims to assess perceptions and attitudes towards the media amongst audiences across Sudan. It also looks at media consumption habits and the key drivers of trust and credibility. What the report has shown is that young Sudanese media consumers are demonstrating refined consumption and verification habits. Social media are key sources of information but met with strong scepticism because of its' perceived lack of accuracy. While mainstream media is criticised for a lack of journalism ethics and patchy selection of topics, television is still seen as a trusted source and a means of verifying news and information. Also, official social media accounts of politicians and journalists are highlighted as trustworthy sources. Young audiences are moving across different sources and platforms in order to ensure that the news they are consuming is authentic and accurate.

This report concludes that young Sudanese audiences are media savvy. They display media literacy skills and a propensity to seek out what they believe to be the truth. They are interested in news and events that affect their daily lives and are concerned with political matters and changes to their government and leaders. Participants were informed and made intelligent arguments about the role of the media and of political parties, displaying respect and regard for politicians and leaders. None of the groups disparaged any of the political parties or leaders at any point in the discussions, which is rare in this type of setting and discussion.

The report also finds that audiences are becoming overwhelmed by unprofessional practices of the media and the growing amount of both misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere. News fatigue at this key point in Sudan's history will be dangerous and hinder the democratic transition.

Taking these conclusions into account, the following key points should be highlighted in order to inform any future activities to support the media and audiences in Sudan:

- 1. The current political situation in Sudan is very fluid but people are ready to trust and support the new political elites.** At the time that this research took place, Sudan had recently been removed from the US state sponsors of terrorism list, which is likely to be viewed positively by many, in particular a younger generation who crave the economic stability and opportunity that this might bring. In that same spirit the research demonstrated that young people are ready to trust in politics, politicians and the new order. This is an extraordinary vantage for parties to build trust-relationships with their constituencies through honest and transparent communication. This opportunity should not be squandered.



**2. Political elites in Sudan should call the local media to account and should make themselves available.**

It is unlikely that media practices will change significantly in the short- to-medium term. Political parties and leaders have a role to play in ensuring that the media can behave more professionally. They can call the media to account, request airtime and column niches, and behave fairly and transparently with their opposition counterparts. Politicians and parties should request and be available for debates that include the opposition. They should interact equally with their counterparts and audiences on political events and strategic affairs. They should also be able to speak clearly and transparently about their own policies and strategies.

**3. Social media can be both friend and foe.**

Participants of focus group discussions did exhibit a surprisingly high level of trust and interest in social media pages of politicians. Thus trust and interest must be nurtured. Pre-publication verification of the accuracy of information that is posted on social media is integral to the success of political communications online. Providing information that can help citizens deal with the challenges they face in their daily lives will also ensure that the social media accounts of political parties remain relevant.

**4. Younger Sudanese audiences are displaying media literacy and a strong knowledge of political events and the challenges of the transition. It is therefore vital that political communications are transparent and intelligent and do not patronise their audience.**

Although they display some scepticism, the Sudanese public want their political transition to work and are currently supportive of their leaders. They are the products of a media scene where social media is the main player in their media consumption. The focus group research highlighted a number of areas that will need to be addressed in messaging in order to gain further support. In the main, these areas include the growing amount of false information in the media ecosystem, a lack of coverage and concern with conflict in the marginalised areas, the economic crisis, relationships between parties and different factions in government. Messaging should be inclusive of all of Sudan's diverse groups, women and men.

About the author:

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