

Communication in Sierra Leone: an analysis of media and mobile audiences

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RESEARCH REPORT | MAY 2016

Executive summary

Since the end of the war in 2002, the media and communication sector in Sierra Leone has significantly diversified and decentralised. This period has seen the growth of emerging communication platforms such as mobile phones and the internet, and a proliferation of radio and TV stations. In order to obtain up-to-date, accurate information about how adults use and access media and mobile phones, BBC Media Action conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,500 Sierra Leoneans in late 2015.¹

The survey indicates that radio remains the most widely accessed broadcast platform in Sierra Leone. In all, eight out of 10 (81%) Sierra Leoneans have access to radio, and 47% listen to it daily. Radio listenership is fractured, however, with no single station able to reach a national audience. Around 50 radio stations are currently broadcasting, with many of these having limited, local broadcast reach. This is reflected in patterns of listenership, with different stations popular in different parts of the country. Overall in the country, no station reaches more than one-third of adult Sierra Leoneans. Reaching a national audience through radio, therefore, requires working with a large number of broadcast partners. In contrast to radio access, just under half of Sierra Leoneans (45%) can access TV or DVD content and 13% can access newspapers.

Access to mobile phones is high, now achieving a similar reach to radio: 83% of people report having access to a mobile phone. There is significant potential for leveraging this reach and the opportunity offered by 2G and 3G mobile phone platforms as a means of distributing media content to audiences. More than half of mobile phone owners (52%) have a basic feature phone without internet or app capability. It should also be noted that a quarter of mobile phone users need help to operate it to make calls or send texts, especially women, older people or those from rural areas. Usage of mobile phones is often limited to basic tasks. Almost all mobile phone users (99%) say that they use their phones to make calls, but only around a third (33%) use them to send text messages and just 13% use social messaging services such as Facebook messenger and WhatsApp.

Use of social messaging in Sierra Leone is a growing phenomenon but still small – overall only 13% of those with phones report using them for social messaging. Social messaging use is also limited to specific demographic groups – notably young people (those aged 15–24) and those in Western Area. In contrast, young people are the group least likely to listen to the radio (39% of those aged 15–24 listen each day, compared to 47% of the population as a whole). Usage of Facebook Messenger was mentioned by 2% of the population, and the same proportion report using WhatsApp. Internet usage is only slightly higher than social messaging, at 16%, and is similarly dominated by young people and those in Western Area.

The two most widely accessed media platforms, radio and mobile phones, are almost equally used by men and women and by those in urban and rural areas. In contrast, TV, newspapers and the internet show striking differences in terms of gender – men have consistently higher access to media than women – and location – those in urban areas have higher access than those in rural areas.

1. This survey conducted in late 2015 to a nationally representative sample of Sierra Leoneans aged 15 years and above. For further methodological details see the Annex 2. Findings in this report are primarily based on data from this 2015 survey. Where relevant, data from a basic media access survey conducted in 2013 is drawn on for comparison.