# 'Fake News', Disinformation and Media Trust in Africa: A Comparative Study of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa

**Herman Wasserman,** University of Cape Town, @hwasser

**Dani Madrid-Morales,** University of Houston, @DMadrid_M

# Disinformation and 'fake news'

- Concerns about growing disinformation have become prevalent in discussions about the relationship between the media and politics in the Global North.

- The 'extraordinary' amount of attention around truth, veracity and deception is related to its centrality in debates about the role of 'fake news' in the 2016 US presidential election.

- Particularly, Donald Trump's use of the term to dismiss his critics has turned the phrase 'fake news' into a buzzword.

# 'Fake news', a problematic construct

- The term 'fake news' itself has become a matter of controversy. In 2018, the UK government opted for two alternative concepts:
    - **Disinformation**: "the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences"
    - **Misinformation**: "the inadvertent sharing of false information"

- UNESCO, in its handbook for journalists on the issue, adds:
    - "'news' means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this sense then, 'fake news' is an oxymoron"

# 'Fake news' and journalistic practice

- Journalism as an institution cannot hope to control the new communication environment - rise of a chaotic, fragmented and widely dispersed new public communication order.

- Rise of false information is rooted in more complex cultural and social shifts articulated through major shifts in communication practices and infrastructures

- Therefore, any attempt to curb the spread of false information by embarking on zealous media literacy campaigns is too limited a response to deal with the complex challenge (Waisbord 2018).

# 'Fake news' in Sub-Saharan Africa

- Like elsewhere in the Global South misinformation in Africa often takes form of extreme speech that incite violence or spread racist, misogynous, xenophobic messages

- Some examples of misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa include:
  - Mobile phone platforms such as WhatsApp in South Africa and Kenya, as well as other parts of the continent;
  - Misinformation campaigns – Bell Pottinger #wmc (SA);
  - Concerns in Nigeria about election inference;

- In this exploratory study, we had two overall objectives:
  - Quantifying the prevalence of misinformation ('fake news') is in three Sub-Sharan African countries;
  - Understanding the relationship between exposure to misinformation ('fake news') and media trust.

# Methods

- Multi-country survey ($N_{Kenya}$ = 250, $N_{Nigeria}$ = 280 and $N_{South\ Africa}$ = 225) using an online panel fielded in late 2017. Total sample N = 755.
  - For comparative purposes, we also use a 2017 US dataset on fake news from the Pew Research Centre(N = 885).
- Measures included in the study:

  - *perceived exposure to disinformation*;
  - *responsibility attribution for disinformation*;
  - *disinformation dissemination*;
  - *media consumption;*
  - *media trust.*

# RQ$_1$. How often do Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans say they encounter "fake news"? ?

# How often do you come across news stories about politics and government online that you think are *not fully accurate*?
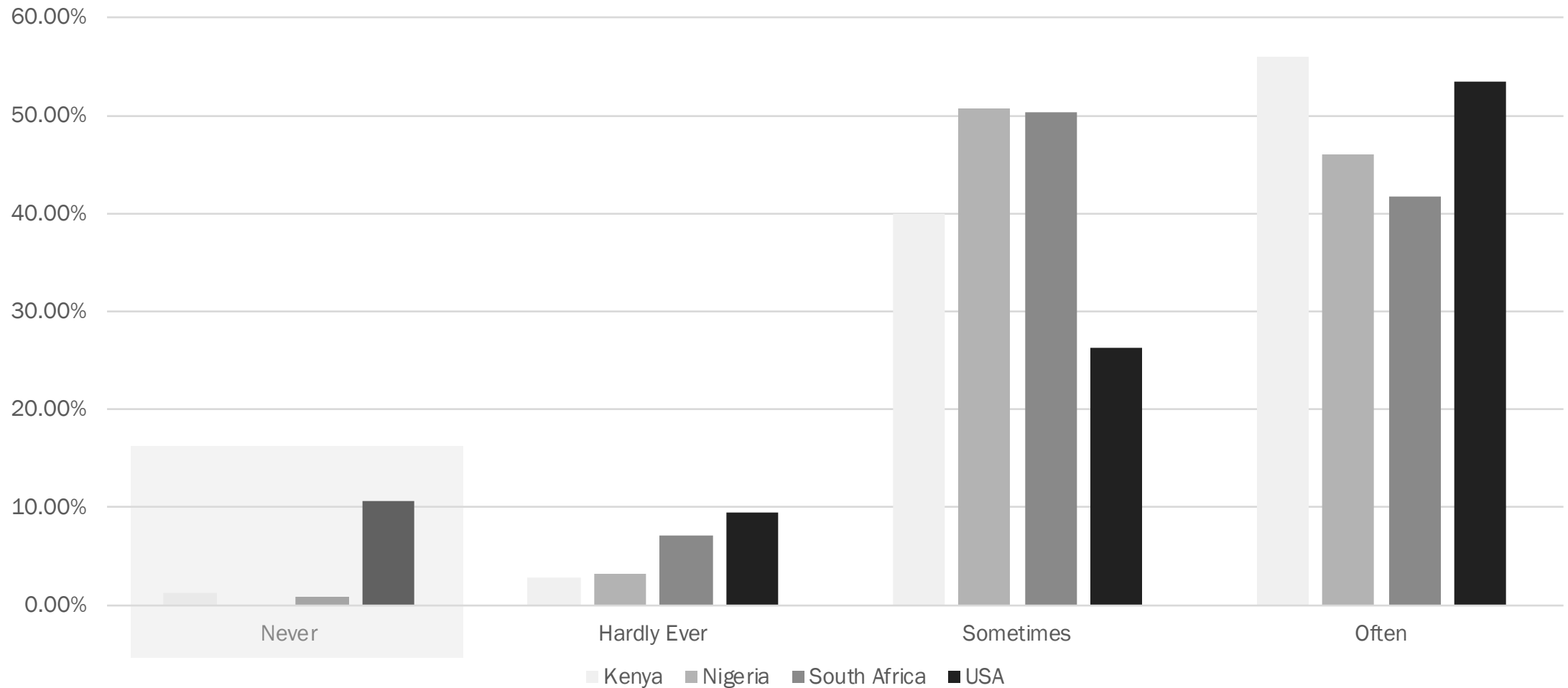
# How often do you come across news stories about politics and government online that you think are *completely made up*?
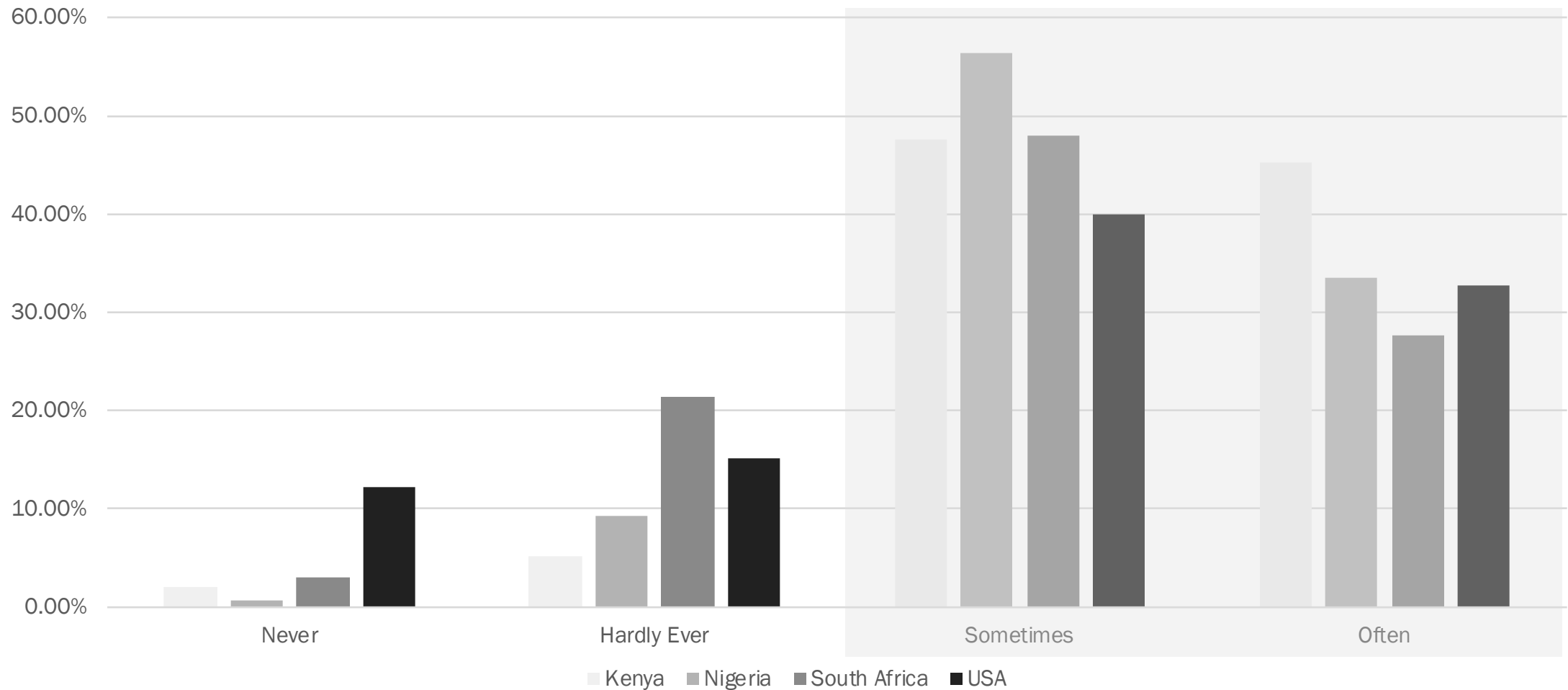
# Overall exposure to 'fake news' (0 to 4 scale)

| | Kenya | Nigeria | South Africa | USA |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Average exposure | 2.43 | 2.33 | 2.16 | 2.08 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | 2.44 | 2.32 | 2.16 | 2.06 |
| Male | 2.43 | 2.33 | 2.17 | 2.10 |
| Education | | | | |
| Primary | -- | -- | -- | 1.53 |
| Secondary | 2.40 | 2.33 | 2.11 | 1.97 |
| Tertiary | 2.46 | 2.33 | 2.23 | 2.22 |
| Age | | | | |
| 18 to 35 | 2.43 | 2.32 | 2.16 | 2.21 |
| 36 to 55 | 2.44 | 2.36 | 2.16 | 2.15 |
| Over 55 | 2.75 | 2.30 | 2.22 | 1.98 |

# RQ$_2$. Do Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans share 'fake news'?

# Have you ever shared a political news story online that *you later found* out was made up?



Kenya ■ Nigeria ■ South Africa ■ USA
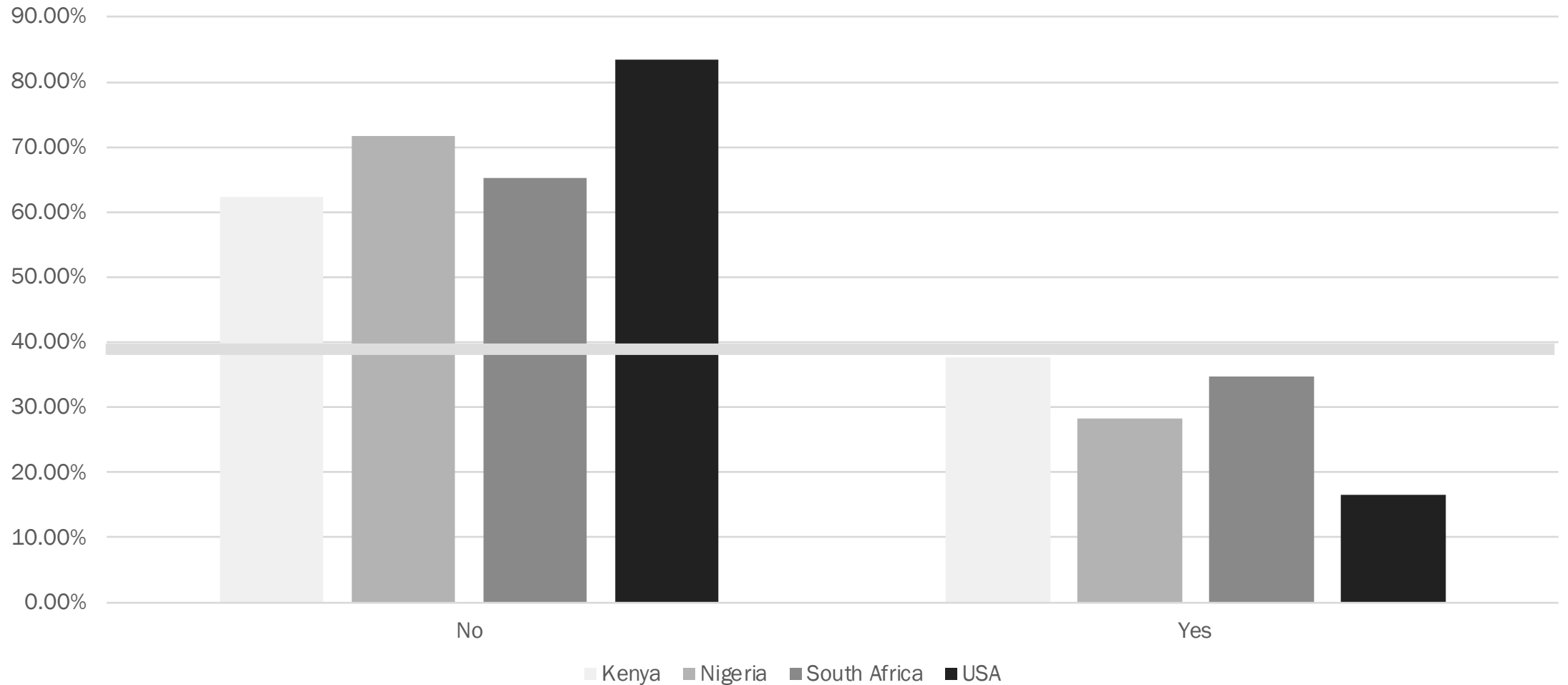
# Have you ever shared a political news story online that you thought *at the time* was made up?



Legend: Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, USA
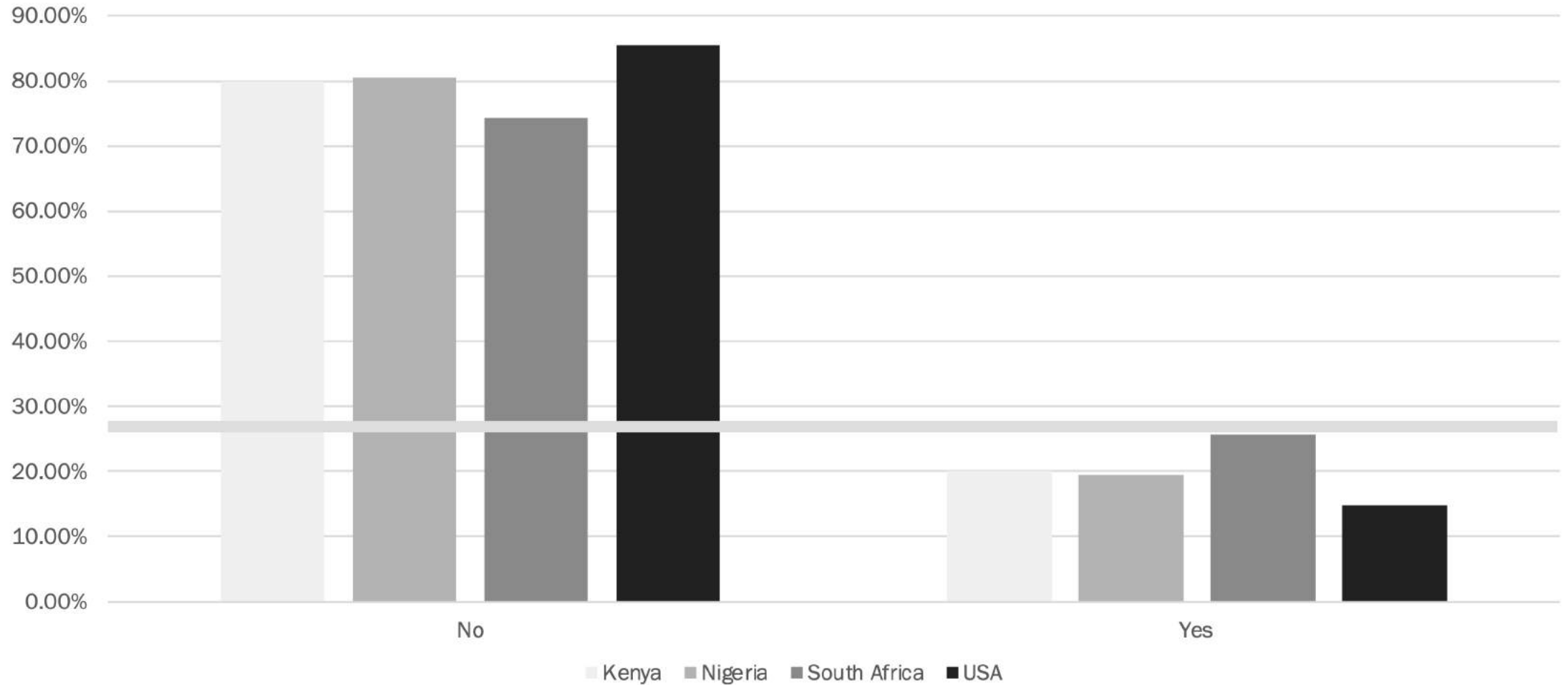
**RQ$_3$. Who do Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans believe is responsible for preventing 'fake news' from spreading?**
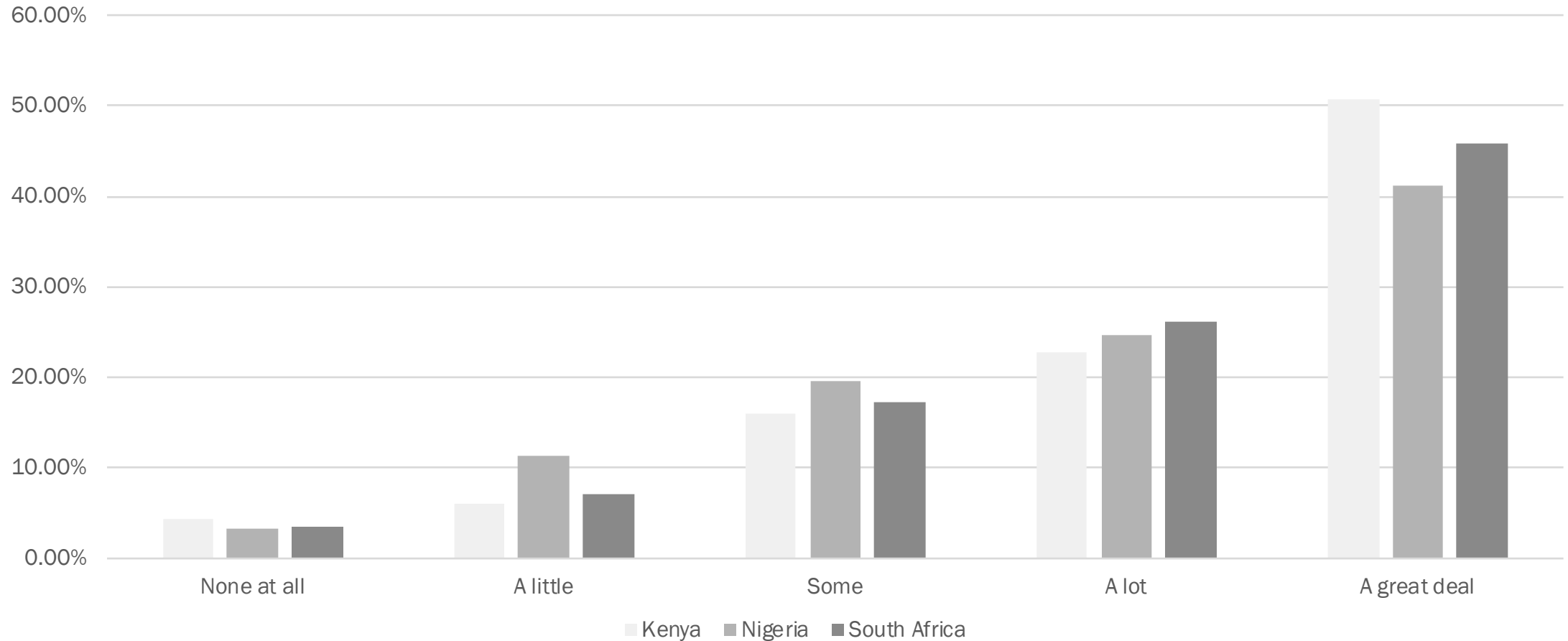
# How much responsibility do *members of the public* have in trying to prevent made up stories from gaining attention?
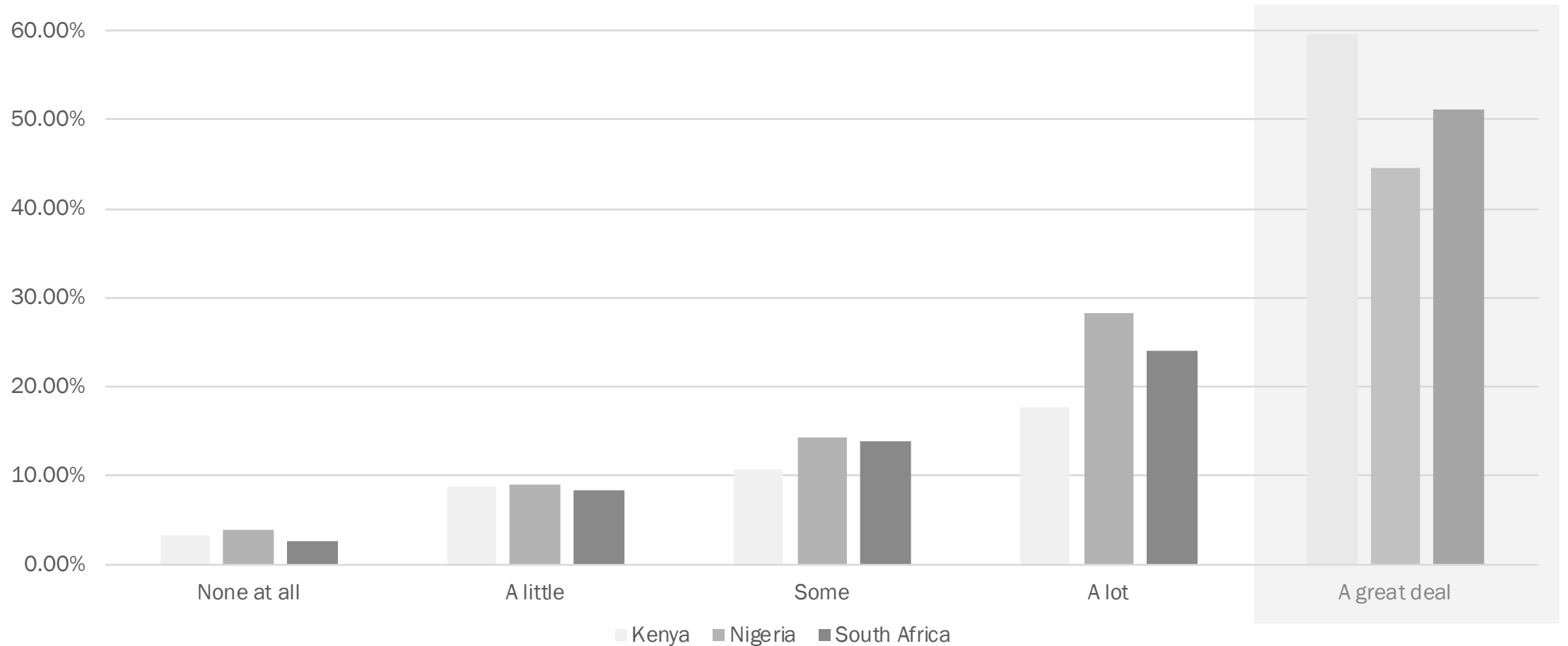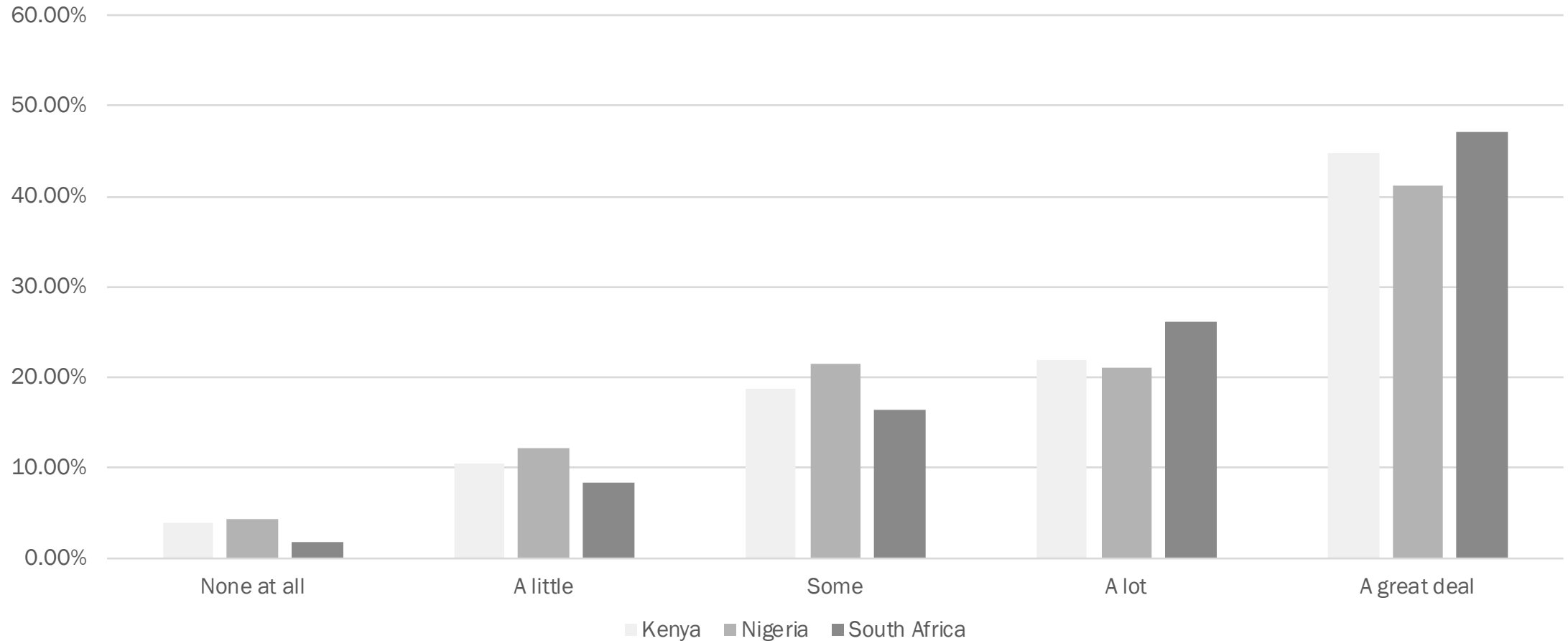
# How much responsibility does *the government* have in trying to prevent made up stories from gaining attention?
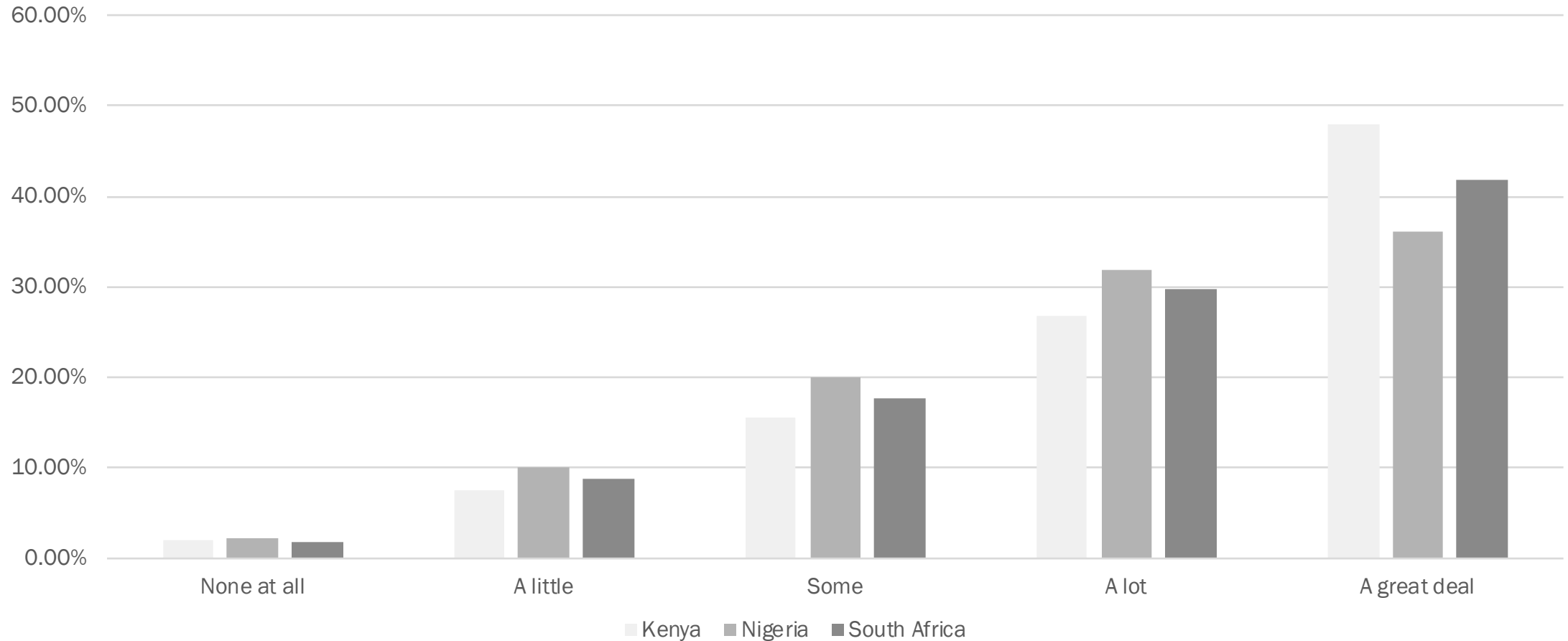
# How much responsibility do *social networking sites* have in trying to prevent made up stories from gaining attention?

How much responsibility do *search engines* have in trying to prevent made up stories from gaining attention?

# RQ$_4$. How much do Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans trust local, national, global and social media?

# Media trust (0 to 4 scale)

|  | Kenya | Nigeria | South Africa |
|---|---|---|---|
| **National Media** | 1.99 | 1.69 | 1.89 |
| **Local Media** | 1.93 | 1.70 | 2.03 |
| **Global Media** | 2.10 | 2.09 | 2.01 |
| **Social Media** | 1.45 | 1.64 | 1.44 |
| **Overall** | 1.87 | 1.78 | 1.84 |

**RQ$_5$. What is the relationship between perceived exposure to 'fake news' and media trust in the three countries?**

# OLS Regression Coefficients of Media Trust (N = 755)

| | Overall Trust | National Media | Social Media | Local Media |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exposure to misinformation | - 0.092 ** | - 0.101 * | - 0.083 | - 0.126 ** |
| Country | | | | |
| Nigeria | - 0.043 | - 0.240 *** | 0.264 *** | - 0.184 ** |
| South Africa | 0.017 | - 0.030 | 0.047 | 0.136 ** |
| News Consumption | | | | |
| Online News | 0.088 ** | 0.076 | 0.202 *** | 0.018 |
| Television | 0.040 * | 0.059 ** | 0.004 | 0.067 ** |
| Radio | 0.026 | 0.027 | 0.003 | 0.050 * |
| Press | 0.039 * | 0.056 * | 0.059 * | 0.045 * |
| Demographics | | | | |
| Gender (Female = 0) | - 0.010 | - 0.027 | - 0.122* | 0.082 |
| Age | 0.001 | - 0.000 | - 0.001 | 0.001 |
| Education | - 0.021 | - 0.021 | - 0.065 ** | - 0.011 |
| Intercept | 1.580 *** | 1.733 *** | 1.385 *** | 1.578 *** |
| $R^2$ | 0.069 | 0.074 | 0.068 | 0.095 |

# Final Ideas (I)

- This exploratory study in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa has shown…

    1. As expected, misinformation and 'fake news' are not phenomena exclusive to the Global North;

    2. In the three Sub-Saharan countries we studied, (the urban and educated) report higher perceived exposure to misinformation/'fake news' than in the US;

    3. There is a consistent relationship between perceived exposure to misinformation/'fake news' and declining overall media trust, and trust in different types of media.

# Final Ideas (II)

- The results in this study, while not nationally representative, point towards some areas where further research is needed:

  1. Can these results be extrapolated to non urban and less educated members of the population?

  2. Are the patterns identified in these three media saturated countries applicable to less media saturated nations in Africa?

  3. What is the direction of the relationship between exposure to 'fake media' and decreasing media trust?

# 'Fake News', Disinformation and Media Trust in Africa: A Comparative Study of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa

**Herman Wasserman,** University of Cape Town

**Dani Madrid-Morales,** University of Houston