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The Media or the Message? Experimental Evidence on Mass
Media and Modern Contraception Uptake in Burkina Faso¹

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Abstract

Mass media can spread information and disinformation, but its impact is hard to rigorously measure. Using a two-level randomized controlled trial covering 5 million people, we test both exposure to mass media (with 1,500 women receiving radios) and the impact of a high-quality, intensive 2.5 year, family planning mass media campaign in Burkina Faso (8 of 16 local radio stations received the campaign). We find women who received a radio in noncampaign areas increased contraceptive use by 5.2 percentage points ($p=0.009$) and had more conservative gender attitudes. In contrast, modern contraceptive use rose 5.9 percentage points ($p=0.046$) in campaign areas and 3.5 percentage points ($p=0.000$) among those given radios in campaign areas. Births fell 80%. The campaign changed beliefs about contraception but not preferences, and encouraged existing users to use more consistently. We estimate the nationwide campaign scale-up led to 225,000 additional women using modern contraception, at a cost of US\$7.7 per additional user.

JEL codes: J13, J16, L82

Keywords: Mass Media Campaign, Radio, Modern Contraception, Family Planning, RCT.

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Mass media can spread information and disinformation, but its impact is hard to rigorously measure. Using a two-level randomized evaluation covering 5 million people, we test both exposure to mass media (with 1,500 women receiving radios) and the impact of a high-quality, intensive 2.5 year, family planning mass media campaign in Burkina Faso (8 of 16 local radio stations received the campaign). We find women who received a radio in

noncampaign areas reduced contraception use by 5.2 percentage points ($p=0.039$) and had more conservative gender attitudes. In contrast, modern contraceptive use rose 5.9 percentage points ($p=0.046$) in campaign areas and 5.8 percentage points ($p=0.030$) among those given radios in campaign areas. Births fell 10%. The campaign changed beliefs about contraception but not preferences, and encouraged existing users to use more consistently. We estimate the nationwide campaign scale-up led to 225,000 additional women using modern contraception, at a cost of US\$7.7 per additional user.

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