
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the Archive: Oral Histories of Tanzanian Journalists and the Trajectory of Postcolonial Media

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This article explores the evolution of Tanzania's postcolonial media landscape through practitioners' lived experiences. Drawing on oral histories from qualitative interviews, the study examines how media practitioners have dealt with shifting state constraints, regulatory change, and the growing prominence of digital platforms. Practitioner narratives illustrate both the agency and limits inherent in Tanzanian media history, exposing cycles of censorship, professional adaptation, and the growing influence of new actors through social media. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the person in authority determines how freely the media functions in Tanzania. Analysing through the lens of Post Colonial Theory, Afrokology Approaches, and Oral History and Critical Hermeneutics, these findings highlight the importance of supplementing archive reports with practitioner viewpoints, as well as identifying new potential and ethical issues in an era of increased media plurality.

Keywords: Tanzania; Media history; Post-colonial; Practitioner narratives; Media landscape; Press Freedom

Introduction

Tanzania's media history is shaped by the country's major transformations following colonial rule. Independence in 1961 ushered in a process of 'patriotising' the media (Mytton, 1976), building on previous German and British control (Iliffe, 1979). The press became pivotal for nation-building and for advancing President Julius Nyerere's socialist Ujamaa ideology (Fouéré, 2014). Subsequent decades brought cycles of liberalization, the emergence of independent media (Mwainyekule, 2022), and periods of tight government and party control marked by centralized content and restrictions (Yahaya, 2023). Notably, the 1990s saw a pluralistic press expand, following market reforms and the restoration of multiparty politics.

In recent years, Tanzania's media landscape has been transformed by digital change, broadening participation beyond professional journalists. Social media has empowered citizen journalists, influencers, activists, and everyday users to shape news and public debate (Mohamed, 2012; Mwainyekule, 2022). While traditional media outlets like newspapers and radio remain

influential, online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube now enable non-journalists and grassroots actors to share news, mobilize communities, and amplify urban voices.

This article uses oral histories of Tanzanian journalists to examine the historical trajectory of Tanzania's media landscape, situating practitioner testimony within broader transformations from colonial rule to the contemporary digital environment. It primarily aims to reconstruct Tanzania's postcolonial media history through practitioners' accounts, while also drawing on Postcolonial Media Theory to interpret these experiences and highlight their wider historical and analytical significance.

The Media's Historical Role in Tanzania's Transition from Colonial Tanganyika to Independence and Nation-Building

The media played a central role in Tanzania's transition from colonial Tanganyika to independence and nation-building. Newspapers became key instruments for political mobilization and public discourse in the late colonial era. The African press—often set up by local churches or political groups—helped rally support for independence, challenge colonial rule, and foster a collective identity (Leys, 1962; Scotton, 1978).

After independence in 1961, Tanzania inherited a small but robust media environment. Key outlets such as *Uhuru*, initially tied to the ruling Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party, both promoted nationalist policies and influenced early public debate (Mytton, 1976). Recognizing the media's influence, the state swiftly moved to regulate and centralize it in support of national unity and development, with media policy and messaging closely aligned to the Arusha Declaration's goals (Sturmer, 1998). President Nyerere's 1970 Media Policy positioned the press as a tool for communication, education, and cohesion (Abdalla, 2018), but its openness to criticism was checked by tight state controls, often prioritizing national interests above independent journalism (Mytton, 1976).

The democratization process in the early 1990s saw the re-emergence of an independent press, coinciding with Tanzania's first multiparty elections in 1995 and a surge in new publications and broadcast stations (Rioba, 2009a). This era brought new laws and regulations, which were sometimes criticized for restricting information flows and limiting journalistic independence (Bussiek, 2015). Nonetheless, Tanzania's media landscape continues to evolve, shaped as much by political leadership and policy choices as by ongoing debates over regulation and press freedom.

Justification of this Study

While official records and policy research have dominated accounts of Tanzania's media development, local practitioners—journalists, editors, and broadcasters—offer vital, underrepresented insights into how historical change was experienced (Olrik, 1992). This study centres the lived experiences of Tanzanian media workers, exploring how they navigated postcolonial transformations and highlighting the gap between state narratives and journalistic realities. By focusing on practitioner perspectives, this study exposes ongoing challenges with press freedom, professional identity, and adapting to technological change.

Postcolonial Media Theory is fundamental to this approach, examining media structures and practices in formerly colonized cultures and how colonial legacies persist in language, ownership, and identity (Kumar, 2014). The theory probes how the Tanzanian media challenges imperial influences, promotes indigenous voices, and contends with issues such as language politics, hybridity, censorship, and the tension between traditional and modern identities (Fernández, 1999; Llamas-Rodriguez & Saglier, 2021).

Practitioner testimony is essential for understanding how historic shifts and daily news-room obstacles are managed in practice. While policy and scholarship document broad trends, only practitioners reveal the lived constraints, creative strategies, and adjustments behind media production. Their accounts highlight the contrast between theory and everyday reality, exposing gaps and demonstrating how media professionals respond to—and sometimes reshape—regulation, technology, and culture.

The article uses qualitative oral history to interpret and critique the experiences of practitioners from diverse backgrounds, presenting an alternative media history built on memory and daily practice. These perspectives are crucial for grasping the enduring effects of colonial legacies, the trajectory of press freedom, and the professionalization of the Tanzanian media since independence.

Gap in the Literature

A key gap in Tanzanian media history scholarship is the lack of practitioner perspectives in major studies. Martin Sturmer's influential *The Media History of Tanzania* (1998), while comprehensive on regulatory, political, and institutional changes, relies largely on policy documents, archives, and official narratives, largely overlooking the lived experiences and professional voices of journalists and editors. Subsequent research has addressed themes like state control, liberalization, and media quality, yet few works explore how practitioners experienced and shaped these changes.

This omission is notable, since oral histories and firsthand accounts can reveal the tensions, trade-offs, and innovations that shaped media development—insights essential for understanding not just what changed, but why those changes mattered to those on the ground. Filling this gap promotes a richer, more dynamic reconstruction of media history and encourages dialogue between structural change and the lived realities of journalistic practice.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to critically examine Tanzania's postcolonial media history through the lived experiences and testimonies of media practitioners, in order to produce a more nuanced, practitioner-centred narrative of the country's media evolution from independence to the present.

The research objectives are as follows:

- To critically examine the evolution of the Tanzanian media from colonial Tanganyika through independence and nation building, focusing on postcolonial transitions;
- To document and analyse the lived experiences, professional challenges, and perspectives of media practitioners as agents and witnesses of media change in Tanzania; and
- To contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how media practitioners interpret, navigate, and sometimes contest state-directed policy, press regulation, and political transitions in a postcolonial African context.

Furthermore, the study will be guided by three research questions:

- How do Tanzanian media practitioners recall and interpret the major phases of postcolonial media history?
- What professional challenges and opportunities have shaped practitioners' experiences, especially during key transitions?
- How have government policies, media regulation, and shifting ideologies impacted the daily realities and ethical choices of Tanzanian journalists?

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. Although Tanzania comprises both the mainland (Tanganyika) and Zanzibar, this research focuses solely on mainland Tanzania, as Zanzibar maintains its own media regulations and institutions despite the 1964 union. Additionally, while practitioner accounts span several government phases, the study ends with the fifth phase under President John Magufuli. The current administration of President Samia Suluhu Hassan had not begun at the time of data collection.

Literature Review

Several theoretical frameworks are important for analysing Tanzania's postcolonial media history from a practitioner viewpoint. This study will examine three of them: Postcolonial Media Theory, Afrokology approaches, and oral history and critical hermeneutics.

Postcolonial Media Theory

Postcolonial Media Theory examines how colonial legacies shape media systems, representation, and narratives, with particular focus on issues of power, hybridity, and resistance, making it especially relevant for understanding the Tanzanian media's engagement with its colonial past and the resurgence of local agency (Fernández, 1999). The theory not only critiques Western perspectives and exclusions but also views decolonization as an ongoing process, whereby formerly colonized groups reclaim their narratives and identities, often through hybrid forms.

Critical scholarly analyses acknowledge that Postcolonial Media Theory extends beyond simply critiquing Western depictions or the exclusion of indigenous perspectives. It emphasizes decolonization as an ongoing process, one in which previously colonized peoples reclaim agency over their narratives and identities, often through blended forms of cultural and media expression. Importantly, Postcolonial Media Theory acknowledges contemporary issues, including how digital counter-narratives can challenge old hierarchies even as the digital divide risks perpetuating them in new ways (Llamas-Rodriguez & Saglier, 2021). Its relevance endures for media studies due to its insistence on analysing power dynamics, advocating for inclusive voices, and urging critical engagement with both legacy and digital media.

In the Tanzanian context, this theory helps illuminate how colonialism, socialist nation-building, and later liberalization have shaped journalistic practices, platform access, and the ongoing struggle for media pluralism. Ultimately, Postcolonial Media Theory challenges researchers to engage with local agency, recognize complexities, and foreground the creative role of practitioners within contemporary media landscapes.

Afrokology Approaches

Afrokology centres African experiences, philosophies, and histories within media and communication analysis. Rather than relying solely on Western-derived theory, it interprets media practices through African concepts like *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, aligning closely with Tanzania's history and supporting a decolonial, contextually attuned approach (Mano, 2021). This perspective amplifies indigenous knowledge, ensuring research reflects local realities.

Importantly, Afrokology is more than simply 'Africanizing' theory; it responds to the long-standing dominance of Western perspectives in media studies. By reclaiming 'the margin' as a site for critique, Afrokology opens up new ways of theorizing from African standpoints. Its aim is not to reject non-African thought, but to establish African intellectual frameworks as valid, necessary, and generative alongside others (Mano & Milton, 2021; Milton & Mano, 2022).

Oral History and Critical Hermeneutics

Oral history, as both theory and method, stresses the value of memory, testimony, and narrative in historical writing. This approach highlights the collaborative act of co-constructing history between researcher and participant, bringing subjectivity and power dynamics to the fore. Critical hermeneutics further challenge conventional notions of objectivity by recognizing personal and collective memory as valid historical evidence, which is crucial for accessing local knowledge and lived realities like those of Tanzanian media professionals (Murphy, 1986).

Together, oral history and critical hermeneutics offer a robust framework for reconstructing media history from those who experienced and shaped it. Oral history centres on collecting and interpreting firsthand accounts—stories and testimonies—revealing the subjective meanings practitioners attach to their roles. This is particularly relevant in post-colonial societies, where official archives may exclude or misrepresent lived experience (Skinner, 1975).

Applied to Tanzanian media history, these methods illuminate not only what occurred, but also how practitioners interpret and make sense of key events, such as independence, democratization, and the shift to digital. The blending of oral history with critical hermeneutics challenges top-down narratives and brings forward the agency and struggles of voices often omitted from official accounts. This is especially important in postcolonial contexts, where lived experience complicates and enriches conventional histories, tying media transformation to deeper questions of identity, ideology, and justice.

Colonial Media Environment: Mission, Settler Press, and Information Control

The colonial media in Tanganyika, later Tanzania, was fundamentally shaped by missionary, settler, and state interests, with each group using the press as a tool for control and selective information dissemination. Missionary newspapers, often bilingual or vernacular, promoted literacy and early print engagement but mainly served purposes of religious instruction and paternalistic ambitions to 'civilize' indigenous peoples, limiting local agency (Sturmer, 1998).

Alongside this, settler-run newspapers catered to European communities, reinforcing settler privilege and colonial policy, while African voices were largely marginalized except as subjects of administration or labour. These outlets rarely questioned colonial authority, instead supporting social and economic cohesion among settlers (Scotton, 1978; Sturmer, 1998).

Information control was a core feature, with German and British regimes using press licensing, censorship, and propaganda to suppress dissent and prevent the rise of independent African journalism. News content was rigorously vetted, and official outlets stifled political mobilization, portraying colonial rule as progressive while silencing African perspectives (Mwakikagile, 2010).

Although the colonial media introduced technologies and literacies that later aided anticolonial efforts and local journalism, it entrenched exclusion, paternalism, and centralization. Indigenous agency in media only gained strength in the nationalist era, as African-led newspapers used the skills and infrastructure inherited from colonialism to subvert its original purposes and argue for self-representation, rights, and liberation.

Overall, the colonial press laid both the conceptual foundation for, and the obstacles to, subsequent efforts at democratizing and decolonizing the media in Tanzania. The legacies of cultural hierarchy, censorship, and information control established during this period continue to influence debates over press freedom, policy, and media ownership in contemporary African countries such as Tanzania.

The Ujamaa Socialist Era: Centralization, Ideological Press Role, and Language Policy (Kiswahili)

During the Ujamaa socialist era, the Tanzanian media became highly centralized under President Nyerere's nation-building agenda. The press adopted explicit ideological roles and language reforms, elevating Kiswahili as a unifying force. After the 1967 Arusha Declaration, the state nationalized major outlets and enforced strict controls, requiring media to support the one-party socialist vision: emphasizing collective development, unity, and loyalty to TANU (Mytton, 1976; Lal, 2015).

The state's approach transformed the press into a tool for civic education and mass mobilization, marginalizing independent scrutiny. Newspapers, radio, and the nationalized Tanzania News Agency (SHIHATA) relayed *Ujamaa* ideology, state achievements, and narratives of harmony (Sturmer, 1998; Mytton, 1976). Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam (RTD) became the state's main vehicle for shaping opinion and discouraging division (Moshiro, 1990). The press's focus was firmly on the ruling party's vision, rural development, and leader admiration, leaving little room for critical or investigative reporting.

Kiswahili was central to both language and ideology, replacing English and fostering shared identity. Its elevation increased accessibility and reflected *Ujamaa*'s anti-elitist ethos, while mandatory use in education and public media cemented its national role, producing one of postcolonial Africa's most successful language policies (Abdulaziz, 2017; Whiteley, 1969).

This era strengthened social cohesion but reduced pluralism and press autonomy. Centralization encouraged top-down communication, limited critical voices, and shaped journalism's alignment with *Ujamaa* values, leaving lasting challenges and expectations for practitioners in later, more liberal decades.

Post-1992 Liberalization: Plurality and the Emergence of the Private Media

After Tanzania's 1992 media liberalization, journalism shifted from centralized state control to a pluralist landscape with a rapid rise in private and independent outlets. Multiparty democracy and broader reforms dismantled restrictions on non-state ownership, ending two decades of Ujamaa-era regulation (Rioba, 2009a). This change led to a dramatic expansion in publications, radio, and television by the mid-2000s, empowering professional journalists and new community voices, including the religious and tabloid press (Rioba, 2009a; 2012).

However, increased plurality brought new challenges. Media diversity and self-regulatory efforts, like those of the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT), coexisted with persistent problems of ownership concentration, political influence, and sustainability (Mwainyekule, 2022). Despite the existence of many outlets, much ownership still clustered around business and political elites, and a lack of trained professionals produced an environment where sensationalism and biased reporting sometimes flourished.

Crucially, the rise of private media enabled more robust political debate and civic engagement, supporting Tanzania's evolving multiparty politics. However, it also exposed the fragility of media independence, with journalists and editors periodically facing pressure, intimidation, or manipulation by powerful interests. The ongoing challenge is to balance press freedom and pluralism with professional standards and true diversity of voice, resisting both political and commercial domination.

Media Regulation, Pluralism, and the Constitutional Context of Freedom of Expression

Tanzania's constitutional and legal framework for media is marked by tensions between formal rights and regulations that limit pluralism and autonomy. Although Article 18 of the Constitution affirms the right to freedom of expression (Tanzania Constitution, 1977), it

stops short of guaranteeing press freedom. This omission enables governments to enact laws restricting media operations while nominally upholding constitutional rights.

Currently, regulation is shaped by the Media Services Act (2016), which replaced colonial laws but intensified state control. The Act gives the Ministry of Information extensive powers to license, suspend, or close outlets and define what constitutes ‘public interest’ with limited transparency and independent oversight. Journalists require government accreditation, and the so-called Independent Media Council lacks true autonomy (Media Service Act, 2016).

These frameworks facilitate state intervention—including closures, fines, and license suspensions—that is often justified by public order, professional ethics, or national security (MISA, 2013). Online speech is further restricted by laws like the Cybercrimes Act and the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online) Content Regulations (EPOCA), which criminalize online content and compel onerous registration, targeting journalists and platforms for real or perceived criticism of government officials (MCT, 2023).

Despite increased pluralism since the 1990s, regulation and enforcement have fostered self-censorship, constrained investigative journalism, and created risks of media capture. While recent moves to lift bans and reform regulation have prompted cautious optimism, real progress on press freedom and pluralism remains fragile without deeper legal change. Tanzania’s experience highlights the complex interplay between constitutional rights, restrictive laws, and the everyday realities of media practitioners seeking true democratic freedom.

Scholarly Gaps in the Literature

Despite substantial research on Tanzanian media, critical gaps remain. Most histories, including Sturmer (1998), rely on policy records and top-down accounts, giving limited attention to the experiences, strategies, and agency of media practitioners. There is a notable lack of work highlighting practitioners’ lived perspectives, locally grounded knowledge, or oral histories, particularly beyond major urban areas. Research also tends to favour imported theories over Afrocentric models, making analyses less attuned to Tanzania’s postcolonial context and communicative practices.

Addressing these omissions is essential for developing a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of Tanzanian media history—one that links official narratives with the diverse voices and innovations of practitioners across different settings and eras.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative semi-structured interview approach, balancing questions with conversational flexibility to deeply explore Tanzanian media practitioners’ personal experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews provide a thematic yet open framework, allowing for detailed probing of agency, coping strategies, and context-specific memories (Fossey et al., 2002; Opdenakker, 2006).

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to capture generational and institutional diversity. A total of 18 interviews were conducted for this study. Of these, 14 were face-to-face and 4 were conducted by telephone. The respondents were Tanzanian journalists and media contributors drawn from different historical periods in the country’s media development. Three participants began working during the first president’s administration, six during the second president’s administration, seven during the third president’s administration, and two during the fourth and fifth government administrations, respectively. The sample comprised 13 men and 5 women, and participants’ ages ranged from 35 to 80 years. This diversity was intended to capture a broad range of professional experiences and generational perspectives on Tanzania’s evolving media landscape.

The sample covers veteran, mid-career, and younger journalists, documenting both long-term reflections on *Ujamaa* and state-owned media, and contemporary experiences with press freedom, online platforms, and shifting news audiences. Institutional backgrounds span state and private outlets (print, broadcast, digital), with attention to gender representation.

Sampling

Participants were recruited using professional contacts, snowball sampling, and intentional selection to ensure diversity in roles and backgrounds. The researcher, a former Tanzanian journalist, began with key contacts identified for their expertise or unique perspectives, then expanded the pool through participant referrals—especially targeting varied generations and media types (Parker et al., 2019).

On reflexivity and positionality, the researcher's insider status provided valuable access and rapport, enabling more nuanced interpretation of professional contexts. However, ongoing self-reflection ensured that personal experience and shared references did not unduly shape interviews or analysis. The study recognises the dual value and responsibility of such positionality, remaining attentive to bias and emphasizing ethical, transparent research conduct (Bukamal, 2022).

Data Collection

Data collection took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's main media hub, as well as via phone interviews with participants from other regions. This geographic diversity allowed the study to capture perspectives from both central and regional media, reflecting the varied realities of urban and rural journalistic practice.

Interviews were conducted in both Kiswahili and English, depending on participant preference. Kiswahili, as the national language, was primarily used, especially when discussing language policy and journalistic nuance; English was used with those who preferred it, and occasional mixing of the two languages facilitated clear, candid communication. This linguistic flexibility helped participants articulate complex reflections and personal histories with precision.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical protocols followed national and international standards to protect participant safety and research integrity. Anonymization was strictly maintained, with identifying details removed unless explicit permission was given. Consent adhered to best practices, providing all participants information about the study and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time.

Interviews prioritized privacy and comfort. Sensitive topics—such as political pressures—were carefully managed, allowing participants to set disclosure limits. All procedures aimed to respect autonomy, reduce harm, and maximize the authenticity and security of practitioner testimony.

Analytical Approach: Thematic Coding, and Triangulation with the Literature

This study employed thematic coding and triangulation with existing literature (Natow, 2020). Interview transcripts were repeatedly read and systematically coded to identify key issues, patterns, and concerns.

To strengthen validity, practitioner accounts were cross-checked against historical records, scholarly sources, and media laws for consistency and contradiction. This reflexive approach enabled rich interview material to be developed into robust, contextually grounded analysis, highlighting the lived realities of Tanzanian journalists and contributing to wider media studies debates.

Limitations and Reflexivity: Researcher's Role, Access, and Bias

This study recognizes several limitations in relation to reflexivity, access, and bias. The researcher's experience as a former Tanzanian journalist offered privileged professional network access and trust, enriching recruitment and interview quality; however, insider status risked shaping responses or interpretation due to shared backgrounds.

While this access facilitated engagement with well-connected practitioners, it may have excluded dissenting or marginal voices, and barriers like self-censorship or institutional loyalty could have limited disclosure and analysis. Efforts were made to include a diverse range of participants, but the potential for bias remains.

To address these challenges, the researcher practiced ongoing reflexivity, reflecting critically on positionality, assumptions, and the influence of professional relationships throughout the research process.

Findings: Practitioner Narratives

Tanzania's media landscape has evolved through many stages, which have shaped its development throughout time. Interviews with media practitioners reveal how the presidents defined these periods, with each having a unique impact on issues of transparency and free expression. This section analyses the narratives by examining the media landscape during the five post-independence government administrations.

The Media under Julius Nyerere (1961–1985)

Practitioners interviewed describe different experiences with transparency across presidential administrations, influenced by changing legislation, political culture, and the expanding media ecosystem. Those who worked during the Nyerere era, for example, highlighted the nationalization and centralization of the press, with government media dominating information flows. They did, however, point out that, contrary to popular belief, there was freedom.

'During Mwalimu's (Nyerere's) era there was freedom of expression, and I dare to articulate that contrary to what many people say, there was more freedom during Mwalimu than at any given time,' stated a veteran journalist. He explained that Nyerere always promoted the publication of facts: 'that is why government scandals were published a lot during his time as president compared to now.' At the time, there were four main newspapers: the government-owned *Daily News* and *Sunday News*, as well as the ruling party-owned *Uhuru* and *Mzalendo*. The respondent continued: 'Scandals were published, and if the numbers were adding up, the president removed those who were implicated.'

Another senior writer who worked during the Nyerere era remembers writing a series of investigative articles about hidden maize in the Ruvuma region while the country was in need of this staple crop. He was working for *Uhuru*, the ruling party's publication, which carried the pieces for several days. 'Because the articles implicated regional and district officials, my editor decided not to publish the last one that was supposed to appear on a Sunday, worried that it could cause us problems.' However, when the item did not appear, authorities identifying themselves as State House representatives went to the newspaper offices and inquired as to why the series' last article had not been published. 'So, you see, even though my editor was hesitant to publish the article, the government wanted the article to be published, and action be taken,' he explained.

The accounts of these senior reporters show that, despite Tanzania's single-party system and lack of an independent press, President Nyerere's tenure was one of transparency and freedom of expression. Journalists could uncover scandals and criticize using the same media outlets that were owned by the government or the ruling party.

The Media under Ali Hassan Mwinyi (1985–1995)

Practitioners who served under the second president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, had varying perspectives about the prevalence of transparency and freedom of expression at the time. For example, one seasoned journalist said that President Mwinyi's freedom of expression came by chance. 'He was not the type of person who deliberately brought freedom. No. This was a man who was pushed by hardliners in Zanzibar to become president, so when he took office, he basically let things be.' The journalist did admit, however, that during President Mwinyi's administration, the media thrived, the independent press was established, and newspapers reported about everything and anything. He stressed, however, that the president's decision to ensure freedom of expression was not deliberate.

Another respondent, a columnist, agreed that President Mwinyi's era was one of freedom. She emphasized that this was a moment when things had just been allowed, and even Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) had begun to exist. 'People were still learning how everything worked; the President was a person who didn't care how things turned out. So, President Mwinyi's tenure was only the beginning of things in the country.' This supports the previous respondent's claim that it was not a deliberate act to ensure the protection of the good governance standards.

A journalist-turned-media trainer who began working for the private media during President Mwinyi's final years remarked that there was not only freedom of expression during this time, but 'over-freedom'. She explained how people were saying anything they thought they had to say, and newspapers published so much that you sometimes wondered, 'Haven't they really gone overboard with this?' She continued, 'I used to see published stories that may make a person unable to sleep. There was too much freedom.'

Another respondent, a publisher and managing editor, remembers starting out as a journalist during the closing years of President Mwinyi's administration. He agrees that newspapers would publish items that implicated the government, but you would never hear of the editor being jailed or compelled by the government to explain themselves.

According to the narratives of individuals who worked during President Mwinyi's government, while the media landscape thrived during this time, as did the freedom to speak and expose, this freedom came at a cost. As Rioba (2009) demonstrates, while the private press began to focus on topics such as corruption, misuse of funds, and abuse of authority, it was also marked by structural and ethical flaws in the media. Furthermore, the majority of press violations during this period occurred in the run-up to the 1995 general elections, which were the first multiparty elections since independence. Even President Mwinyi told journalists that they would live to remember this time. He was quoted as saying, 'I could not ban these newspapers simply because they had insulted me [...] I knew by insulting me the publishers were able to sell and by selling their children were able to get food and education' (Rioba, 2009b, p. 18).

Rioba contends that, while there was some journalistic freedom under President Mwinyi's tenure, it was his tolerance and understanding that governed this era, rather than the laws and regulations. The laws remained stringent, but the president was not.

The Media under Benjamin Mkapa (1995–2005)

While President Mwinyi's administration reinstated independent media (Sturmer, 1998), the 'over-freedom' lasted for a few years before a new administration took over, this time led by a former editor, Benjamin Mkapa. All respondents agreed that this was a period when transparency flourished. One of them, an editor, stated that discussing transparency in Tanzania would be incomplete without mentioning President Mkapa, who introduced the *Ukweli na Uwazi* (truth and transparency) concept.

Another respondent, a news website editor, agreed with this: 'Mkapa encouraged honesty and did his best. I say this because if he had not been transparent, I would not have been able to write the stories I did. He was the first president in a multiparty system, and he valued variety and plurality.' He added, 'This was a time when teachers and lawyers became journalists. They chose to become journalists because they believed there was a future in the field. President Mkapa was keen to lay the groundwork for freedom of expression and transparency.'

Another respondent stated that the only issue with Mkapa was his criticism of the media, which was not, however, intimidating. 'When we wrote unpleasant things about him, he would respond furiously and express his sentiments, but he was never intimidating nor threatening. It simply let us know that what we had published had touched him, and that as a human being, he was entitled to be angry on occasion.'

However, another respondent reported something slightly different. He pointed out that, while President Mkapa preached transparency and promised to work with the media, he did not take criticism lightly. This senior journalist added that sometimes government officials would just ask you not to attack the president too much, and, as a result, personal attacks on him and his government began to decrease. 'So, it was as if there were two sides to him. One was his soft side, which accommodated the media and promoted transparency, while the other was his criticism of the media.' The editor argued that it was neither frightening nor intimidating.

The Media under Jakaya Kikwete (2005–2015)

Perhaps Jakaya Kikwete was the first Tanzanian president who appeared to be friendly with the media during his first few years in office. Many saw him as a friend of the media, and most Tanzanians believe that the media helped him rise to power (Bariki Kaale, 2013). The majority of respondents agreed with this notion, believing that Kikwete knew how to use the media to his benefit, even though his method was destroying the media.

'Kikwete's approach was a little more spectacular because he wanted to include us in all his efforts, particularly editors. He wanted the media to support him and his *mtandao* (network) group,' a senior editor remarked during the interview. He added that President Kikwete continued his predecessor's commitment to freedom of expression, and that he cultivated this reputation of being a friend of the media. 'He actually used the media to even defeat his opponents within the ruling party and win the general elections altogether.'

Another journalist, who also serves as the head of one of the media professional associations, concurred that President Kikwete had a special relationship with the media. 'He was a true friend. There were occasions when you could simply text him about a situation, and he would call you and ask for some time to check with the minister in charge, or tell you that the minister will contact you, which actually happened,' he recounted.

Another respondent explained how the president had a team of strategists just to study the media and mould him to become president. As a result of his friendship with the media, negative stories about him were unlikely to be published. He had personally assisted most of the editors in some manner, therefore most of what was written about him and his presidency was positive. The drawback of all this was that many things were not reported during President Kikwete's tenure. Yes, there were scandals throughout his term, but the president was never personally implicated. Only those close to him were incriminated, including the Prime Minister at the time, who was also considered his best friend.

Another respondent echoed this during our interview. He believed that this friendship was gradually destroying media accountability because the media could not cover negative things about their 'friend', the president:

So, even though we may believe that there was freedom of expression throughout Kikwete's reign, the truth is that there were many things that journalists were unable to publish because of their friendship. He corrupted the media in such a way that people realized that if you wanted to corrupt the media, you simply needed to be close to them. Sit down with editors and become friends. Full stop.

However, it should be noted that, despite being viewed as a friend, President Kikwete enacted the majority of media legislation during his tenure. Even acts that became law after he had retired were processed during his tenure. Examples include the Media Services Act (2016) and the Cybercrime Act of 2015. Furthermore, despite his friendships with media figures, some publications were banned for a few days or months. Additionally, three major incidents against journalists occurred during this period. One involved Daudi Mwangosi, a *Channel Ten* videographer who was killed by police with a tear gas canister while on duty (CPJ, 2012). Another case was that of Absalom Kibanda, the Managing Editor of *New Habari* at the time, who was attacked outside his home after returning from work (CPJ, 2013). There was also an attack in the *Mwanahalisi* newsroom, where publisher Saed Kubenea and editor Ndimara Tegambwage were assaulted with pangas and acid (CPJ, 2008). All these attacks were related to the journalists' work. Although the president was not personally implicated in the attacks, the journalists were critical of him and his administration.

The Media under John Magufuli (2015–2021)

Dr. John Magufuli was sworn in as President in November of 2015. He was re-elected for a second term in October 2020; however, he died on March 17, 2021, after barely four months in office.

President Magufuli took office at a period when Tanzania had had an independent media for over 20 years and people were accustomed to sharing their thoughts. This was also a time when social media had spread throughout the country and approximately 20 million people were accessing the internet (Statista, 2025). It was a time when citizens did not have to rely on mainstream media to have their opinions heard or to obtain information, as social media was widely used. Despite technological developments, the mainstream media continued to be seen as a dependable source of information.

However, many consider John Magufuli's five-year presidency to be the worst in terms of transparency and freedom of expression. The majority of respondents admitted that the media felt stifled and threatened. As a result, they abandoned professionalism for fear of losing their careers or possibly their lives. All respondents were asked to describe Tanzania's media landscape over the past five years (November 2015–March 2021).

One editor described some of the events that occurred during this time, including a silent policy prohibiting advertisements from appearing in the private press, and government officials, such as ministers, refusing to respond to questions.

Another respondent described how the media landscape shrank during President Magufuli's tenure, to the point where several media outlets decided to close. 'It's because if they tried to publish what truly needed to be publicized, they got fined. However, when they published what the government wanted published, no one bought their publications. Why would I buy a newspaper if it didn't tell me what I expected?' She added, 'Let's just say that the mainstream media's freedom had been killed.'

Another respondent noted how the media space and transparency had shrunk dramatically during Magufuli's five years in office compared to prior administrations. He went on to say that the president's 'watch it' warning to media owners was the first sign of what was to come, since everything in the room shrank as soon as he said it. 'At that time, newspapers like

Mwanahalisi and *Tanzania Daima* were completely deregistered. And then we started seeing government-friendly newspapers like *Jamvi la Habari*, *Tanzanite*, and a few English ones,' he said.

The respondent was referring to President Magufuli's verbal warning to media owners during the swearing-in ceremony for his newly appointed Minister of Information. He issued the warning in response to media reports and images of a sacked minister obtaining front-page attention, which the president deemed inappropriate because there were 'more important' things to publish. In his warning he said, 'I would like to tell media owners, be careful and watch it. If you think you have that kind of freedom, (it is) not to that extent' (Reuters, 2017). The president's warning was interpreted as a direct directive for the newly appointed minister to monitor and take action against outlets that were critical of the administration.

Another editor pointed out that, while there have always been laws and regulations governing Tanzania's media, what happened between 2015 and 2021 was similar to what the country's first president, Julius Nyerere, once said: if Tanzania elects a certain type of president under the current Constitution, that president may take a very different approach than what the country has been used to. He went on to say, 'I believe the main issue is the type of leader in place. The past five years in Tanzania have demonstrated that the type of person, how they approach situations, and their ideas are more powerful than the laws and regulations in existence.'

Another respondent agreed with this during our interview:

This guy [President Magufuli] does not believe in something called independence. He doesn't believe in the rule of law. He is the type of person that wants to rule the country with his ego and gut. He does not believe in respecting the Constitution, thus the mere existence of the media frustrates him, especially if it does not support him. He is the type of individual who wants to return Tanzania and Tanzanians to the single-party system that we abandoned 20 years earlier. In general, Tanzania no longer has what is referred to [as] free expression. He said it personally at the State House: "watch it".

However, another journalist and editor believed that, while the media environment in Tanzania began to worsen in early 2016, it eventually reached a point where it became easier. 'I think it became easy because journalists and editors appeared to be content with what was going on. They knew which stories they could and couldn't write. So, despite the obstacles and hardships, they simply decided to give up.'

Another veteran journalist criticized the lack of investigative journalism, claiming that what happened between 2015 and 2021 was not journalism at all. 'I think what we were doing could be seen as singing praises,' she explained in the interview. 'We were like a megaphone, repeating only what the leader said. We entirely forgot about things like investigative journalism, which I believe happened primarily because the administration in power did not appreciate seeing journalism practiced openly.'

Another senior journalist compared President Magufuli's approach to the media to that of former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin:

I was a keen observer of Uganda under Idi Amin, and this is exactly what happened throughout his reign. In reality, this guy [President Magufuli] is not coming up with anything new. Amin used to call journalists and threaten them. He would watch TV, listen to the radio, and then threaten. Tanzania has never had this. Imagine, the president phones individuals, threatens them, and some have even vanished.

On the other hand, several respondents believed that the media itself needed to step up during this period. For example, one media trainer said that, while the previous five years had been described as the most difficult in Tanzania's media landscape, journalists themselves needed to comprehend the circumstances and how not to get themselves into trouble. Another concurred, noting that for any journalist who loved their job and wanted to do it well, problems posed by new political administrations just provided an opportunity to accomplish something different from before.

Accounts by the interviewed respondents suggest that despite the laws and regulations being there ever since the first president's administration, it was indeed the president who personally decided to implement them and whether or not to limit freedom of expression.

Discussion of the Findings

Tanzania's media landscape has undergone distinct phases, shaping levels of transparency and freedom of expression. The colonial era began with the absence of African media voices, followed by the rise of nationalist newspapers during the independence struggle. In the post-colonial period, each administration established its own media policy—sometimes through legal reform, sometimes through leadership style.

Comparing practitioner accounts to published histories such as Sturmer (1998), Mytton (1976), and Scotton (1978) reveals clear differences. While published works often focus on institutional development, legislation, and the quantitative expansion of outlets, practitioner narratives emphasize agency and the complex, often hidden challenges that have defined journalism over the years.

Crucially, lived histories examined through Afrology, oral history, and critical hermeneutics frameworks highlight the analytic value of centring practitioner experience. For example, though much scholarship casts Nyerere's era as one of state control (Mytton, 1976), journalists who worked at the time recall it as a period of transparency that permitted investigative reporting and critical coverage, illustrating just how much interpretive nuance is revealed when practitioner voices are brought to the fore.

Previous research has shown that Tanzania's regulatory logic, censorship, and professional boundaries originate in colonial systems (Scotton, 1978; Sturmer, 1998). Most governments inherited the tradition of state involvement in media; for instance, practitioner narratives describe President Kikwete's approach of befriending journalists to prevent negative coverage. This aligns with Postcolonial Media Theory, revealing that state interventions and media–state conflict remain rooted in historical power dynamics. Much post-independence legislation, like the Newspaper Act of 1976, was drawn from colonial ordinances such as the Newspaper Ordinance of 1944 (Law et al., 1950), perpetuating broad government powers for licensing, content control, and censorship.

Importantly, practitioner narratives also capture journalists' emotional responses and ethical reasoning. Many recall feeling unable to fulfil their duties under Magufuli due to fear and intimidation, offering detailed personal testimony. This resonates with oral history and critical hermeneutics theory, which recovers subjective viewpoints shaped by generational experience, positionality, and dynamic interactions with the state and media (Skinner, 1975).

Media experts consistently note that the fortunes of Tanzania's media depend heavily on who holds power. For instance, during President Nyerere's administration, no laws blocked the registration of private newspapers, but growth was hindered by ideology, limited resources, and high taxes (Mwakikagile, 2010; Mytton, 1976). Nevertheless, journalists were generally free to report on scandals, with the government expecting and acting on such reporting.

During President Mwinyi's era, research shows and practitioners confirm that media freedom expanded significantly as Tanzania democratized. A surge in sensational reporting, which worried both professionals and officials (Rioba, 2009b), reflected what some described as an 'over-freedom' of expression. Importantly, practitioner accounts suggest that this high degree of freedom stemmed from the broader democratic environment rather than deliberate efforts by the president to promote transparency or free expression.

Both scholarly and practitioner accounts of President Mkapa's administration highlight his active promotion of transparency through the *ukweli na uwazi* policy. Rioba (2012) notes that this was a period marked by the registration of more newspapers and nationwide broadcasting growth, with interviewees recalling a vibrant media environment and professionals from other sectors joining journalism due to its perceived opportunity.

During President Kikwete's tenure, the internet era began, with the introduction of controversial regulation such as the Cybercrimes Act of 2015. Scholars like Ndumbaro (2016) argue that the Act constrained online freedom of expression, especially on blogs, online media, and platforms like WhatsApp, while Paget (2017) notes that it limited political discussion online. At the same time, practitioners reported that Kikwete's personal rapport with journalists led to a decrease in critical coverage about him, as many avoided negative stories due to these close relationships. As one respondent stated, 'We covered up information because the president was our friend.'

The years 2015–2021 stand out as the most concerning for Tanzanian journalists. Both literature and practitioner accounts identify this period as one in which existing media laws were rigorously enforced and fear became widespread. The Media Council of Tanzania's State of the Media 2017–2018 Report (2019) documents how the government used threats, intimidation, and force to control the media, with opposition leaders, critical journalists, and rights activists frequently arrested, political gatherings banned, independent outlets closed, and protests tightly restricted (MCT, 2019).

The climate of fear grew so intense that some newspapers were unsure if they had violated any rules. A notable example is IPP Media's suspension of its own weekly, *Nipashe Jumapili* (Nipashe on Sunday) in 2018 after publishing an 'untrue story' and apologizing to President Magufuli, an act that drew government praise (DW, 2018). Every journalist interviewed described this era as uniquely repressive in the country's history.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the continual tension between state power, regulatory frameworks, and journalistic agency at the heart of Tanzania's media history. Each political era has impacted transparency and freedom of expression, demonstrating that periods of liberalization and optimism have been fragile, easily reversed by regulatory ambiguities, enduring colonial legacies, and government censorship. The analysis, confirmed by both interviews and the literature, is that the climate for open, independent journalism in Tanzania remains contingent on shifting political agendas and leadership styles.

A key strength of this research lies in its focus on practitioner narratives, which illuminate how Tanzanian journalists navigate and adapt to both explicit regulation and informal political pressures. These firsthand accounts capture the micro-histories of negotiation and ethical compromise that standard policy or institutional histories often overlook.

The main finding is that Tanzanian journalists' lived experiences demonstrate that press freedom is shaped less by written laws than by how each administration chooses to interpret and enforce them. Shifts in leadership—such as presidential elections—tend to trigger immediate changes in the media environment, frequently alternating between periods of expansion and restriction as political priorities fluctuate.

Ultimately, this research establishes the value of practitioner perspectives as an essential supplement to official or archival histories. These insights provide a foundation for future policy dialogue, comparative African research, and continued exploration of the evolving relationship between digital innovation, political change, and freedom of expression in Tanzania. Moving forward, deeper collaboration between oral and archival methodologies, as well as attention to practitioner testimony across diverse African settings, will be crucial for building richer, decolonial understandings of media transformation.

Future research could compare the role of media in nation-building across different African countries in order to identify both similarities and differences from the Tanzanian case. Such comparative work would deepen understanding of how state–media relations, language policy, ideological goals, and political contexts shape the media's contribution and its role in shaping political and social cohesion across the continent.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Mwainyekule, L. (2026). Beyond the Archive: Oral Histories of Tanzanian Journalists and the Trajectory of Postcolonial Media. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, XX(X), 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.2075>

Submitted: 09 November 2025 **Accepted:** 02 July 2026 **Published:** 06 October 2026

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