



Seeking Partners for Press Freedom Media Council of Tanzania and DEFIR Teaching Note

Case Summary

To operate as a responsible member of the media in a democracy is an ongoing, and challenging, job. In order that news organizations can serve the public interest and maintain credibility, each journalist must observe a code of behavior that can be personally and professionally difficult to follow. Journalists are expected to be dispassionate in reporting the facts of a story; to be honest in their personal dealings; and to resist efforts by those who are affected by news stories to influence the reporting.

The difficulties of maintaining this code of behavior is even more difficult in a country which has only recently made the transition to democracy. This case looks at the situation in Tanzania, which achieved independence in 1961, but multiparty democracy only in 1992. Its press exploded with the reforms, providing the public with multiple and competing sources of information. But while the media often provided independent and important reporting on political and economic subjects, some journalists developed disturbing habits. Journalists were not professionally trained, nor were they well paid. This created conditions for illegal and widespread under-the-table payments to reporters as inducements to write favorable stories. Politicians and advertisers too often were seen to influence stories in the press.

The Media Council of Tanzania (MCT) in 2009 decided to try to improve the situation. The council had been established in 1997 with a mandate to ensure professional ethics and protect individuals from invasion of privacy. Its members had observed with dismay the deterioration of professional ethics. But MCT felt strongly that journalists alone could not better the situation; those who tried to influence coverage through bribes or illegal incentives had to play a role in improving

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media performance. So MCT set itself an ambitious goal: to enlist not only the media—but also those on whom the media reported—in adopting a code of editorial independence and responsibility.

For 15 months, an eight-member MCT committee worked on developing the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Editorial Freedom, Independence and Responsibility (DEFIR). MCT unveiled DEFIR in March 2011 with considerable ceremony and press coverage, inviting members of the press, government and business to sign. But by September, response was disappointing. Only 25 editors had signed, one government official and zero companies. The think tank members gathered to debate what had gone wrong. How could they get buy-in to an initiative that they were confident would benefit the country? Was their premise flawed? Or the process?

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to ask students to think about the role of the media in a democracy. How important is it that individual journalists adhere to a code of ethics? What does an ethical media establishment contribute to democracy, and how does an unethical media detract from democratic norms?

The Media Council of Tanzania believes that journalists and news organizations cannot reform themselves without the active cooperation of both government and the corporate world. Ask students to discuss whether this is a valid assumption. What other groups, if any, might be asked to sign? Could the media manage to improve its own ethical performance without the participation of other sectors? Why or why not?

A media council (or press council) is not common in North America. Ask the class to discuss how this form of media oversight came to exist in Africa and elsewhere, and why it is appealing. Students can also consider whether the model should it be more widespread. Is there something about a media council that is particularly suited to emerging democracies, be it in Eastern Europe or Asia or Africa? Who should ideally be the members of such a council, and why? Is media reform the proper concern of a media council?

In Tanzania, the council debates whether it should convert from a volunteer to a statutory body. What might be the respective advantages of each? Whether or not to self-regulate is a dilemma that faces professional bodies worldwide. Self-regulation in general ensures professional autonomy; the risk is that group members treat the rulings of the oversight body lightly. A statutory body can compel compliance, but those it oversees may see the relationship as adversarial and work hard to avoid or circumvent rulings. Which seems like the better option for media organizations? Ideally, is a media council a watchdog, or an advocate?

Finally, take some time to look at DEFIR, its substantive recommendations as well as the process of its dissemination. What in the document should appeal to all three groups of stakeholders? Which provisions seem to favor media disproportionately, or business and government disproportionately? Would the class advise the intended signatories to sign this document? Why or why not? What about the process whereby DEFIR was developed—was it well conceived and executed? Why have so few individuals or organizations chosen to sign the document?

Class Plan

Use this case in a class or course on international media; media reform; or press and politics.

Pre-class questions. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

- 1) Should MCT re-launch DEFIR, or scrap it and start over?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the question in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class. Choose any of the following questions to open an 80-90 minute discussion. The questions will depend on the goals of the class. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in the class is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) In September 2008, what is the core dilemma before MCT Chair Issa Shivji and his colleagues?
- b) What makes a media council appealing in some parts of the world and in some countries?
- c) Should MCT make media reform its priority?
- d) Would MCT have more authority as a statutory body? What are the comparative advantages of moral versus legal power?
- e) Why have so few media organizations signed DEFIR? What about politicians, or business leaders?

f) How might MCT re-launch DEFIR in order to secure buy-in from a wider group of individuals and stakeholders?

g) Looking at DEFIR itself, which provisions appeal respectively to media, business and government? Where is there overlap? Where is there conflict?

h) Were DEFIR to be updated, what would you add? What would you subtract?

i) Corruption is a core problem in Tanzanian media. What causes journalists to accept bribes? Are they always wrong to do so?

Suggested Readings

Monroe Edwin Price, Beata Rozumilowicz, Stefaan G. Verhulst, eds. *Media Reform: Democratizing the Media, Democratizing the State*. Routledge, London, New York. 2002.

SYNOPSIS: This collection of essays gives a terrific overview of the many challenges to media in emerging democracies. It takes a global view, and its African example is Uganda. But much of what the authors identify is relevant more broadly, including in Tanzania.

Herma Wasserman (ed.), *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*. Routledge, NY, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: The book brings together a range of expert analyses of the role that mass media, in particular, could play in not only promoting political debate but providing information on development to the people of the African continent. It offers case studies in several media formats and platforms.

Ayub Rioba, *Media in Tanzania's Transition to Multiparty Democracy: an Assessment of Policy and Ethical Issues*. Licentiate's thesis, submitted to University of Tampere (Finland), Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, November 2008.

SYNOPSIS: This thesis provides good, and timely, background for discussion of this case study. See especially Chapter 3, and its examination of the contradictions between the values that inform Tanzania's political and economic reforms, and the state of the media sector; Chapter 5, which gives individual journalists' assessments of ethics and the role of media in a democracy; and Chapter 6, on the role of the Media Council of Tanzania.

<http://tutkielmat.uta.fi/pdf/lisuri00097.pdf>

George Murray, *The Press and the Public: the story of the British Press Council*: Southern Illinois University, 1972.

SYNOPSIS: Written by one of the first chairman of the British Press Council, the book describes how it evolved into a self regulatory body. The drivers for the formation of the British Press Council in 1953 have parallels in the drivers for the formation of Media Council of Tanzania in 1997.