



The Impact of Legal Restrictions on Media in Tanzania

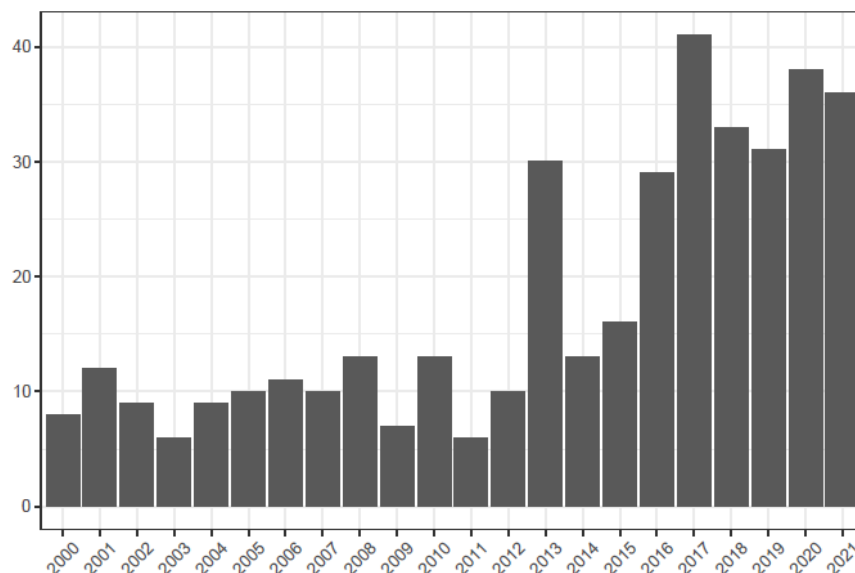
Summary

New research finds that restrictive media laws in Tanzania passed in 2016 and 2018 did not change the issues that independent media covered; however, it did change how they were covered. Independent outlets increased pro-government sentiment and decreased critical sentiment by meaningful amounts after the legislation.

The Problem

Globally, media censorship has increased dramatically in the last decade. Figure 1 uses data from the Varieties of Democracy’s (V-Dem) censorship index to show the number of countries whose index has worsened by more than 20 percent in a year. In 2017, more than one fifth of the countries in the world experienced a significant increase in censorship. Tanzania is part of this trend. Through legislation passed in 2016, the Tanzania government required the registration of newspapers, allowed the government to restrict publication of content, made it mandatory to transmit state news bulletins, and required journalists to obtain state-approved accreditations. Further legislation in 2018 targeted online content, granting the state broad authority to oversee online material, requiring online forums and bloggers to register, and requiring internet service providers to monitor online content to prevent “obscene” or “false” claims.

Figure 1: Number of countries experiencing large



Questions and Approach

How do independent media sources respond to these censorship efforts? Are they affected in what news they cover or how they cover the news? To answer these questions, the research team compared the coverage of protests, arrests and censorship by two independent news sources and two state media sources before and after legislative changes. The team used machine learning to both identify articles and code the sentiment as part of a larger [Machine Learning for Peace](#) initiative.

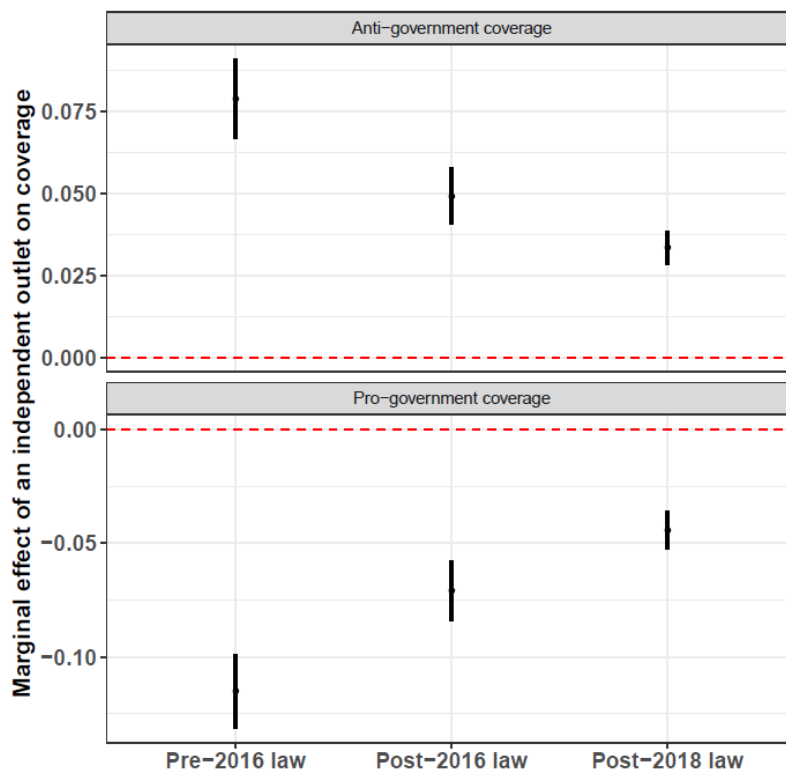
The Findings

The study finds that independent news sources do not change the amount of coverage of protests, arrests, and censorship, relative to government-affiliated newspapers. This suggests some limits to self-censorship. Nonetheless, independent newspapers do change the content of these news articles, both decreasing their critical coverage of the government and increasing their positive coverage. As shown in Figure 2, prior to the legal change, independent outlets were 7.9 percent more likely to publish a critical government article, but this difference declined to 3.3 percent after the legal changes. Given that only 13.5 percent of all articles published by independent outlets have a critical tone, this decline is substantively large. Similarly, while independent outlets were 12 percent less likely to publish a pro-government article before the restrictions, this gap diminished to 4.4 percent after 2018.

Implications

This research demonstrates that media censorship laws do have a negative impact on independent journalism and suggests that USAID should continue its efforts to support media and civil society organizations in advocating for media freedom and protecting journalists targeted by such laws.

Figure 2: Changes in the percentage of negative and positive government coverage by independent outlets over time



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Fatih Serkant Adiguzel, Diego Romero, and Erik Wibbles (2023) [The Impact of Legal Restrictions on the Content and Sentiment of Media Coverage in Tanzania](#). DevLab, University of Pennsylvania

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