

Elites and the media in Tanzania: whither the public interest?

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This study examined the interplay between elites and journalists and the extent of media performance in serving public interest in such relationships. Central to the study was an effort to find out whether the media are constrained or not in serving public interest in such relationships. The study was informed by a public sphere model regarding operations of the media in society in which public interest should be served through presence of diverse, substantive, innovative and quality content. The study employed the following data collection methods: documentary review, content analysis and interviews conducted with elites and journalists. The following indicators were identified and used to measure performance of media: state of the media laws, policies and regulations guiding operations of media, intimidation and brutality by state security organs against journalists, the level and content of professional training in journalism, presence and adherence to codes of conduct, the state of working conditions, remuneration packages, self regulatory framework for journalists, and presence of human resource policies in media organizations. The study findings revealed that media independence in serving public interest was seriously limited due to state barriers (the legal framework) and the limits to journalistic professionalism (low pay and poor working conditions and low level in professional training) were among other factors, reflected in low quality of media content. Also it was revealed that media performance does not fit into the public sphere model rather, the media and journalists in their interactions with elites fit well into a clientelistic-patronist model. In due regard, journalists and the media operate by seeking favors from elites in a client-patron type of relationships. Thus, the media are captured, manipulated and co-opted to work as instruments to serve interests of elites in society. In such circumstances, the role of the media as watchdogs for society as envisaged by the public sphere model in which they are supposed to serve public interest is seriously challenged and constrained as this study established.