



Can Tanzania's news media maintain popular support for watchdog role?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 24 | Rose Aiko

Summary

In successive Afrobarometer survey rounds, more than seven of 10 Tanzanians have said they feel free to say what they think, placing Tanzania near the top among African countries in perceived freedom of speech. The Tanzanian news media environment, however, is only partly free, according to Freedom House assessments, and recent years have witnessed extensive government intervention in news media activity. On several occasions, the government has invoked the 1976 Newspaper Act to ban or suspend prominently critical media, defending its actions as attempts to protect citizens from unscrupulous media practices. Several extra-legal attacks and incidents of intimidation of the press have also been reported. (The state suspensions/bans and intimidation/attacks are well documented in Freedom House annual country reviews, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/tanzania>.) These events have fuelled concerns among the civil society, both domestically and internationally, about growing state intolerance to criticism and dissent.

In-depth analyses of Tanzanians' popular perceptions regarding media independence and performance are lacking, however. Data from recent rounds of the Afrobarometer opinion surveys offer an opportunity to understand public views in this regard. Using the Afrobarometer survey data, this dispatch examines Tanzanians' support for critical investigative media and independence in news reporting and their evaluations of the news media's reliability and effectiveness in exposing corruption.

Results show that a majority support investigative critical and independent news media, though this support weakened between 2012 and 2014 while support for government control of the media increased. A stable majority express faith in the reliability of news media reports, and most citizens say the media is effective in investigating and reporting on government mistakes and corruption, although this approval has weakened as well since 2012.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Tanzania, led by REPOA, interviewed 2,386 adult Tanzanians in August-October 2014. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Tanzania in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, and 2012.

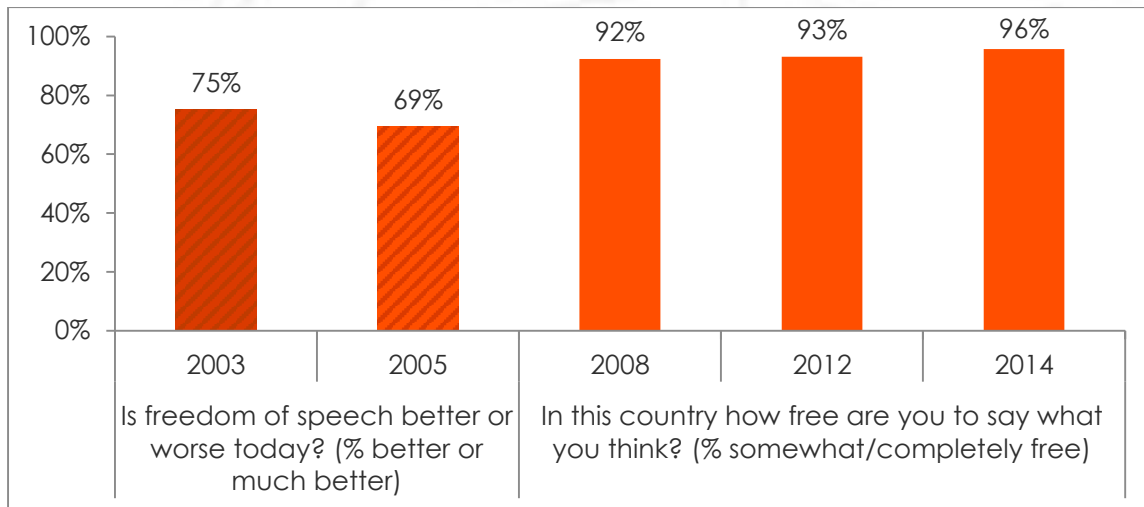
Key findings

- Tanzanians express near-unanimous satisfaction with the degree of freedom of expression in the country: 96% of respondents in 2014 say they feel somewhat or completely free to say what they think.
- Two-thirds (65%) say the media should scrutinize the government and report on corruption and mistakes. This is 15 percentage points lower than in 2012.
- Slightly more than half (53%) of respondents say the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control, a decrease of 20 percentage points since 2012. During the same period, the proportion favouring government control rose from 26% to 44%.
- A stable majority (65% in 2014, 67% in 2012) trust in the reliability of the news media's reports.
- Three-fourths (76%) of Tanzanians laud the news media's effectiveness in exposing corruption in the government. This is 8 percentage points lower than in 2012.
- The more frequently a person is exposed to news and the higher his/her level of education, the more likely s/he is to support investigative and independent media reporting, to believe in the reliability of news, and to laud the effectiveness of the news media in its watchdog role.

Individual freedom of expression

In 2003 and 2005, a majority of Tanzanians judged that individual freedom of expression had improved compared to how it was under the single-party system and early years of multi-party democracy. Since then, Tanzanians have continued to express a high degree of satisfaction with the country's level of openness to free speech (Figure 1). In 2012, with more than three-quarters indicating they felt completely free to say what they think, Tanzania ranked second among 34 African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in perceptions of free speech (see Mitullah W., & Kamau P. (2013), The partnership of free speech and good governance in Africa, Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 3). The proportion saying they feel "somewhat" or "completely" free to say what they think increased from 93% in 2012 to 96% in 2014.

Figure 1: Perceived extent of freedom of speech | 2003-2014



In 2003, respondents were asked: We are going to compare our present system of government with the former system of one-party rule. Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they used to be, or about the same: Freedom to say what you think?

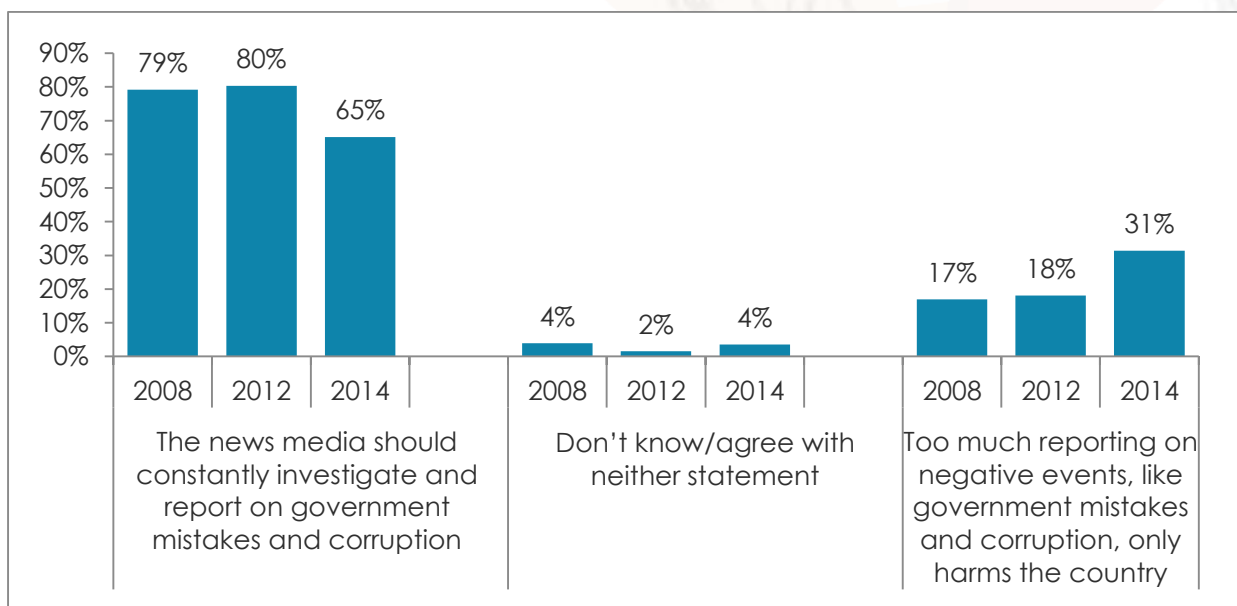
In 2005, respondents were asked: Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: Freedom to say what you think?

In 2008, 2012, and 2014, respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to say what you think?

Support for critical investigative media

While two-thirds (65%) of Tanzanians agree that “the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” this support for critical investigative media is 15 percentage points lower than in 2012 (Figure 2). During the same period, there has been a sharp growth in the proportion of respondents expressing concern that too much negative reporting only harms the country.

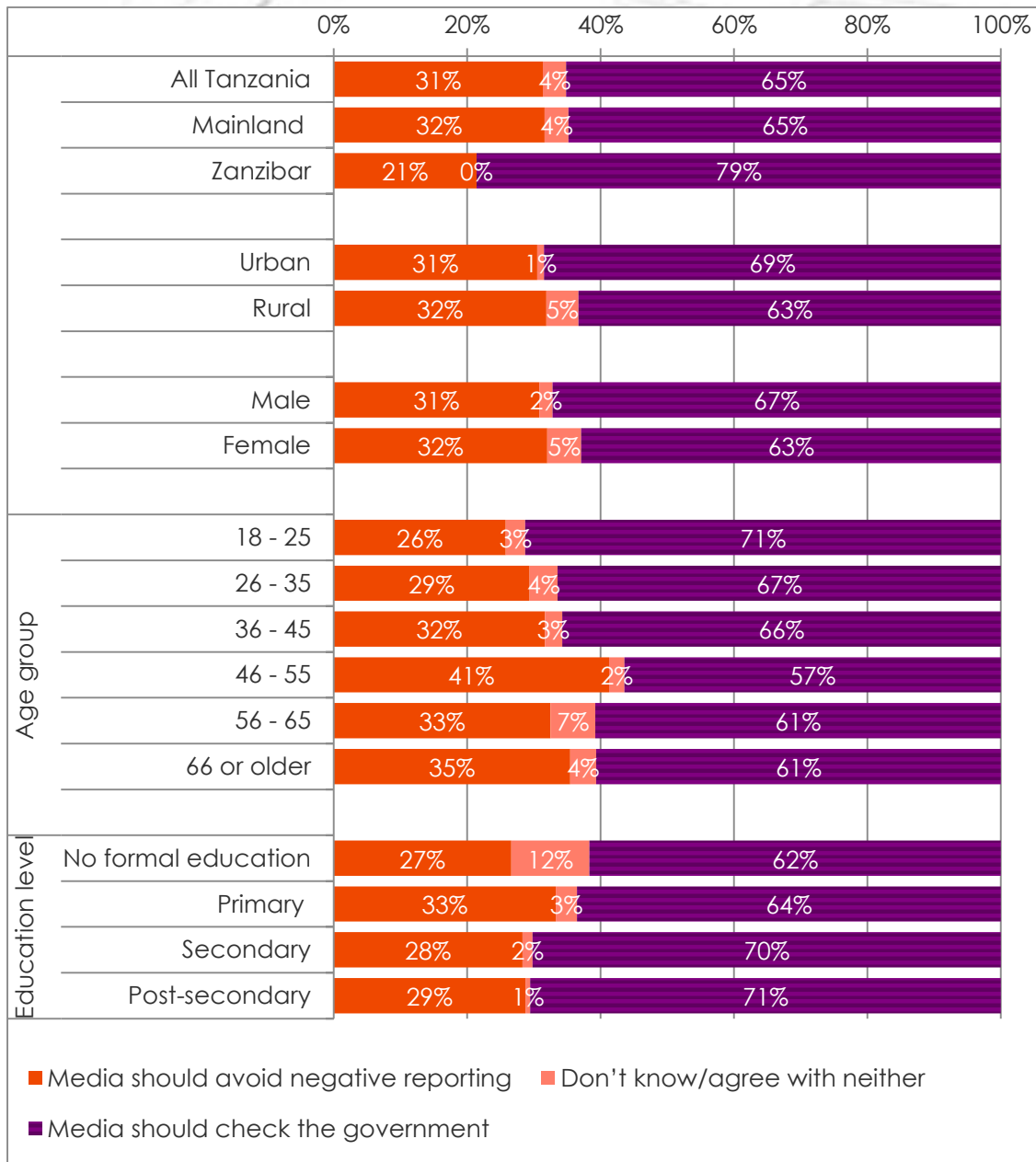
Figure 2: Support for critical investigative media | 2008-2014



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

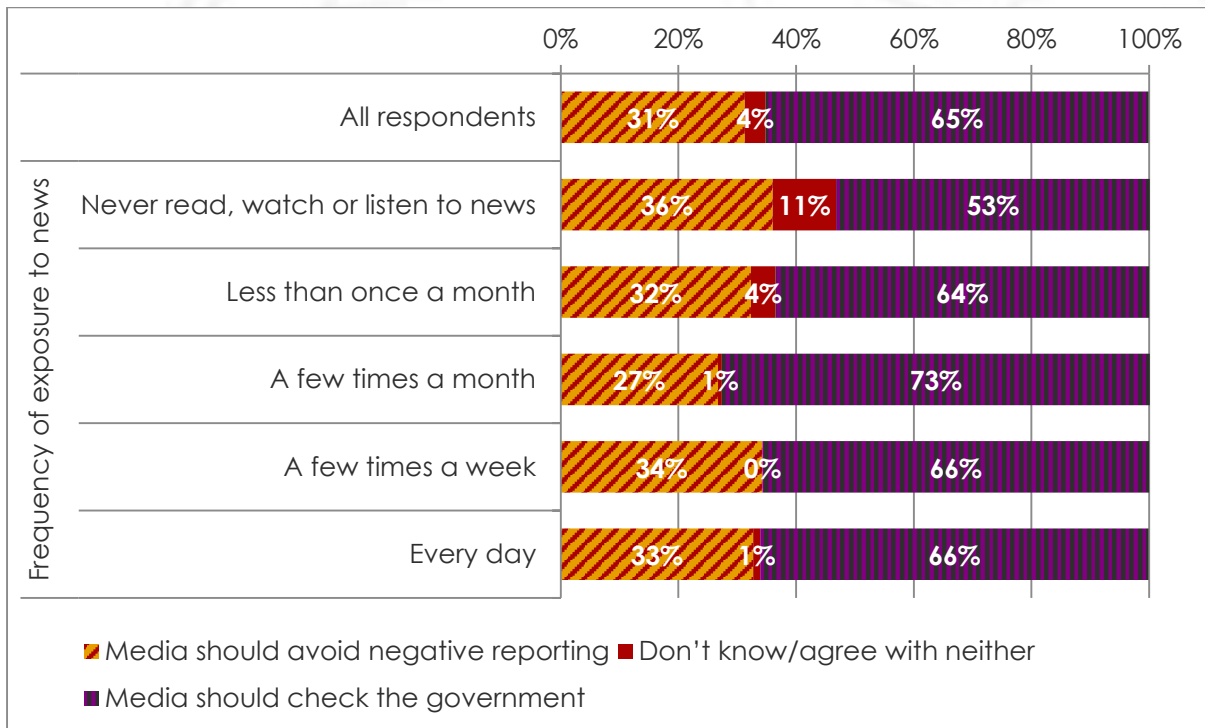
Analysis of popular support for critical investigative media by respondent category (Figure 3) shows that support is higher among Tanzanians living in Zanzibar (79%) than among mainlanders (65%), and is above average among urbanites, younger respondents, and the better educated. Men are only marginally more likely than women to support critical media.

Figure 3: Support for critical investigative media | by location, gender, age, and education level | 2014



Exposure to news (radio, television, newspaper, internet, and social media) is also positively associated with individual support for critical media. The proportion of those saying the media should investigate malfeasance ranged between 64% and 73% among respondents who access information from any news media, compared to just 53% among those who never read, watch, or listen to news (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Support for critical investigative media | by frequency of exposure to news media | 2014

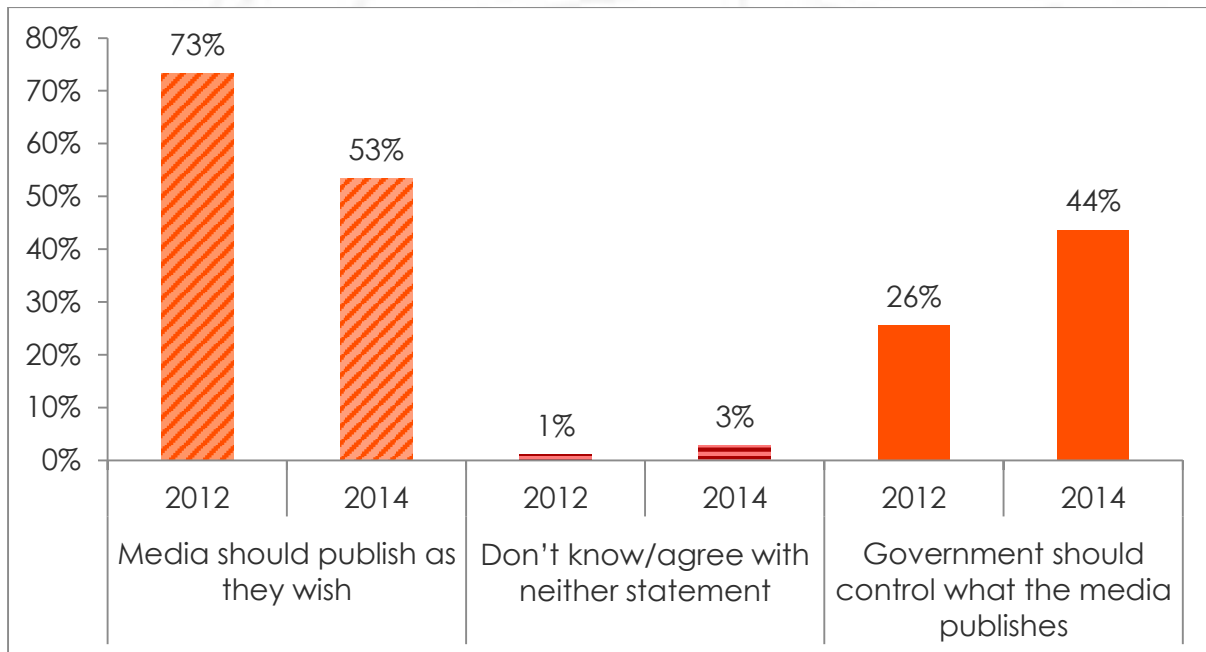


Support for independent media

Regardless of the perceived extent of individual freedom of expression, absence of media independence can hinder the expression of critical opinion, balanced debate, and accountability by engendering self-censorship on the part of journalists. Recent suspensions and banning of critical newspapers by the Ministry for Information, Culture and Sports has led to worries among the civil society about a growing inclination of the state toward curtailment of independent critical opinion. The ministry has justified its actions by saying that the media outlets have been at fault for publishing false information, derogatory content, and classified information, with the intention to mislead or incite the public.

In 2012, 73% of Afrobarometer survey respondents expressed support for media independence to publish as it wishes, free of government control. This placed Tanzania among the three countries with the highest popular support for independent news reporting among 34 African countries surveyed. Results from the 2014 survey show a decline in support, with only 53% of respondents favouring independent reporting. Instead, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion favouring government control (44% in 2014 compared to 26% in 2012) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Support for independent media | 2012-2014



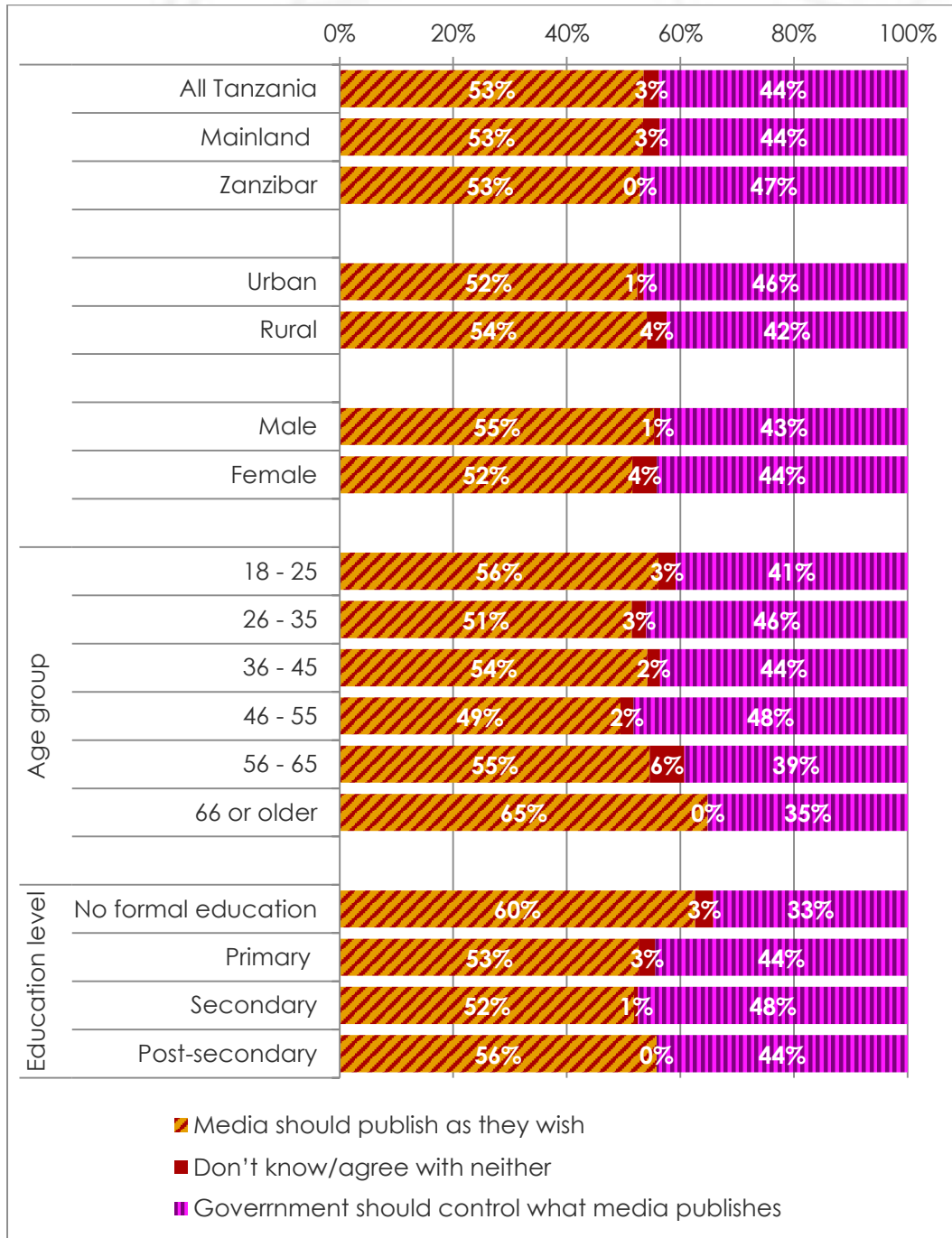
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your views? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (% who "agree" or "agree strongly")

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

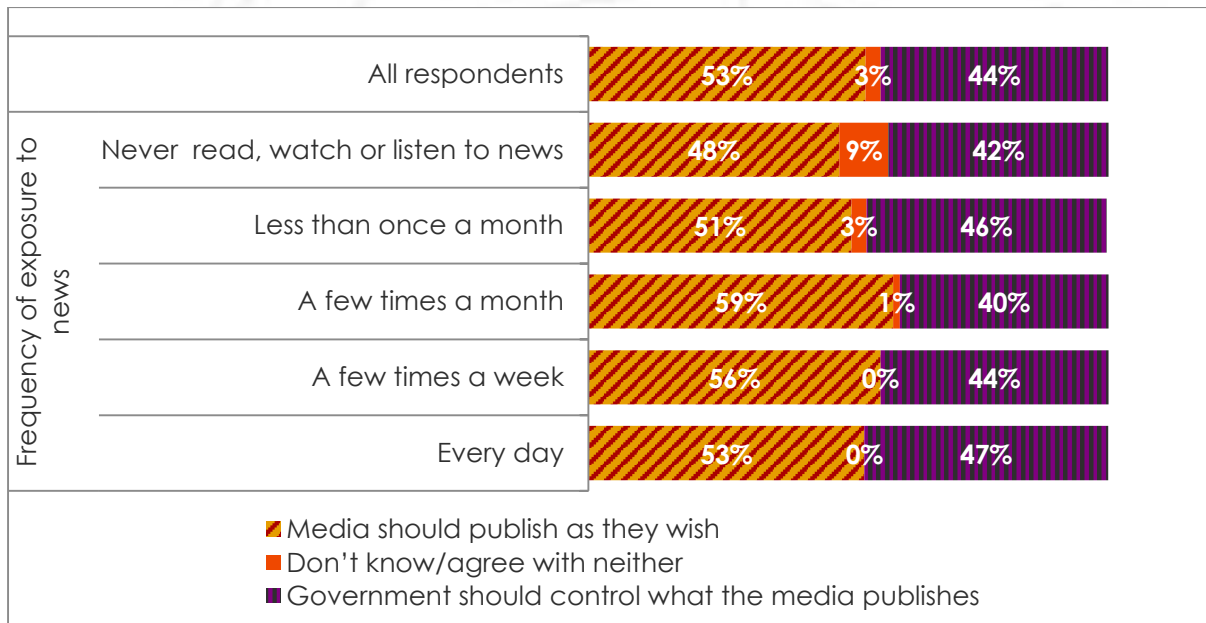
Analysis of survey results by respondent category reveals that there is above average support for independent media among older respondents (ages 56 and older) and the youngest respondents (ages 18-25) as well as among those with no formal education (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Support for government control vs. independent media reporting | by location, gender, age, and education level | 2014



In addition, people who are exposed to news media are more likely to support media independence than those who do not read, watch, or listen to news (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Support for independent media | by frequency of exposure to news | 2014

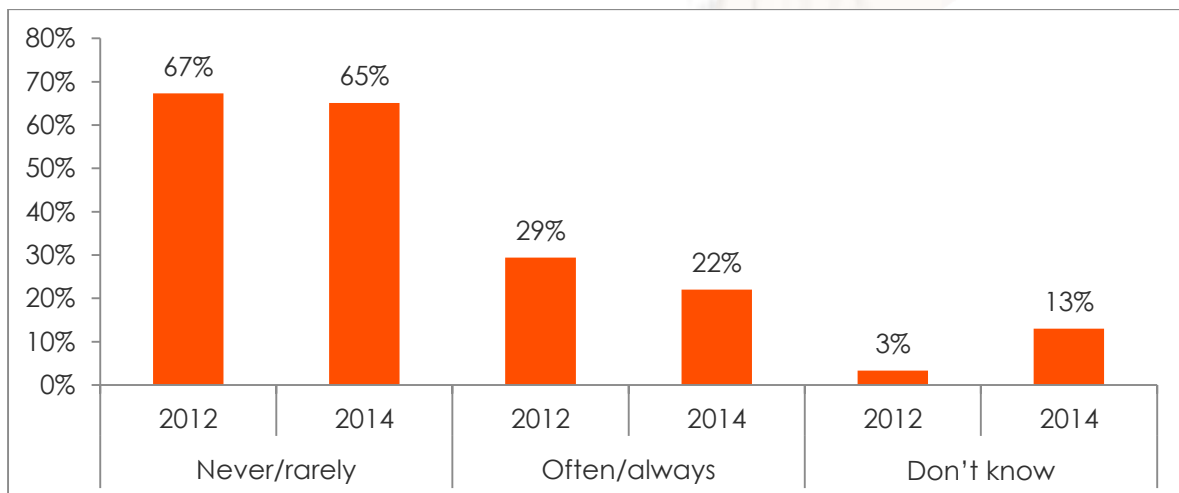


Reliability of the news media

The power of the media to inform and shape societal opinions comes with the risk that this power can be abused through the publication of false information and use of the media for aims that undermine the common good. To what extent does the public share the Ministry of Information's stated concerns about misleading or false information?

Two-thirds (65%) of Tanzanians say the media "rarely" or "never" publishes news it knows is not true (Figure 8). This is almost unchanged from the 2012 proportion of 67%, which placed Tanzania fifth among 34 surveyed countries in terms of perceived media reliability, after Burundi, Malawi, Mauritius, and Zambia. However, far more respondents are noncommittal in their assessment compared to 2012 (13% vs. 3%).

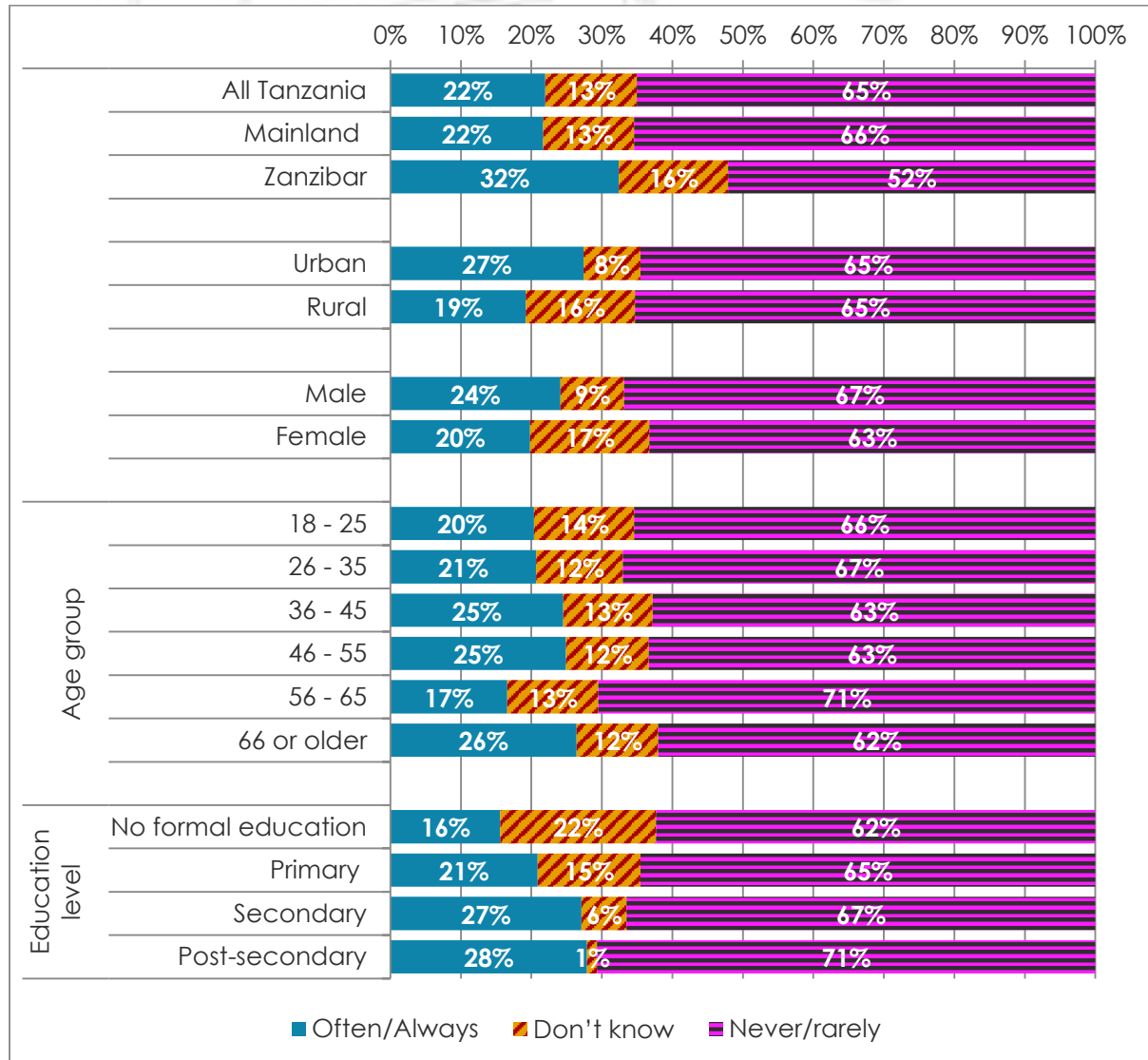
Figure 8: Does the media abuse its freedom by publishing things it knows are not true? | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the news media abuse its freedoms by printing or saying things it knows are not true?

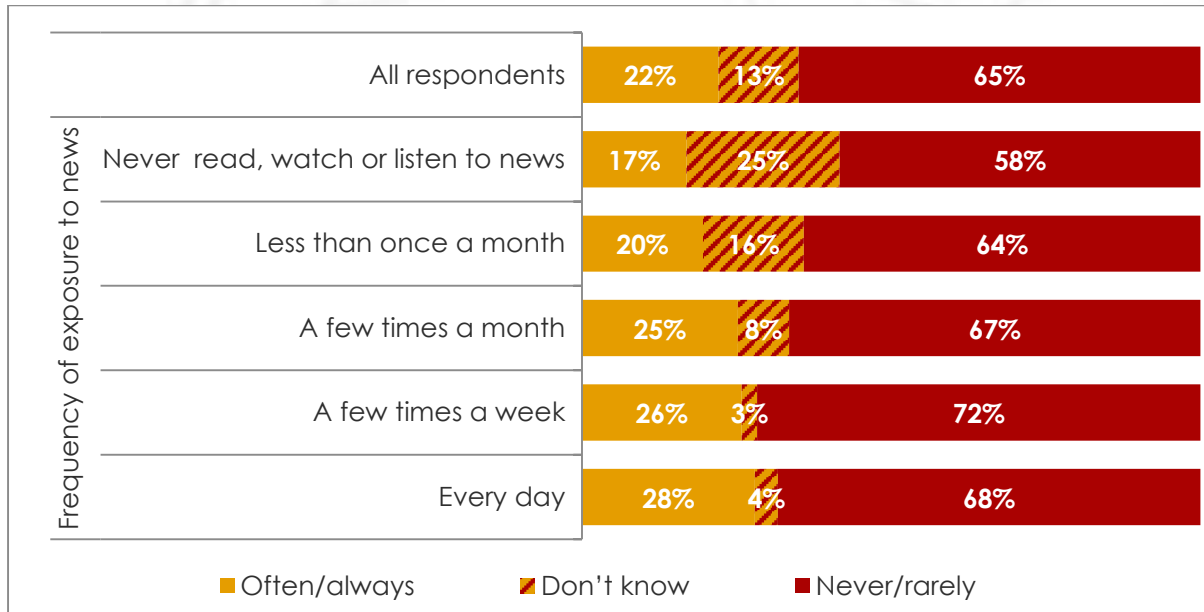
The level of concern about news reliability is more pronounced among urbanites (27%), residents of Zanzibar (32%), the elderly (26%), and more educated persons (28%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Perceived reliability of news reports | by location, gender, age, and education level | 2014



People who read, watch, or listen to news more frequently are less likely to say they “don’t know” about the reliability of news reports. But compared to those who are not exposed to news, they are more likely both to affirm and to doubt the reliability of the media (Figure 10).

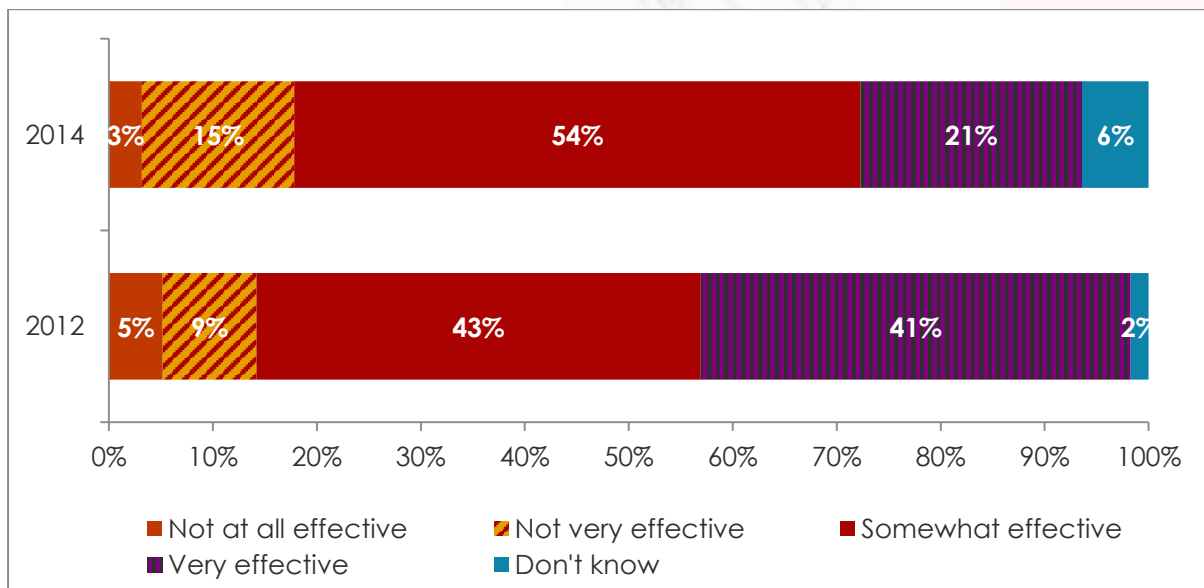
Figure 10: Perceived reliability of news reports | by extent of exposure to news media | 2014



Media effectiveness in exposing corruption

Three-fourths (76%) of Tanzanians say the news media is “somewhat” or “very” effective in exposing government mistakes or corruption (Figure 11). This level of approval is 8 percentage points lower than the 84% response in 2012, which placed Tanzania second, after Mauritius, among 34 surveyed countries in positive perceptions of media effectiveness in monitoring government.

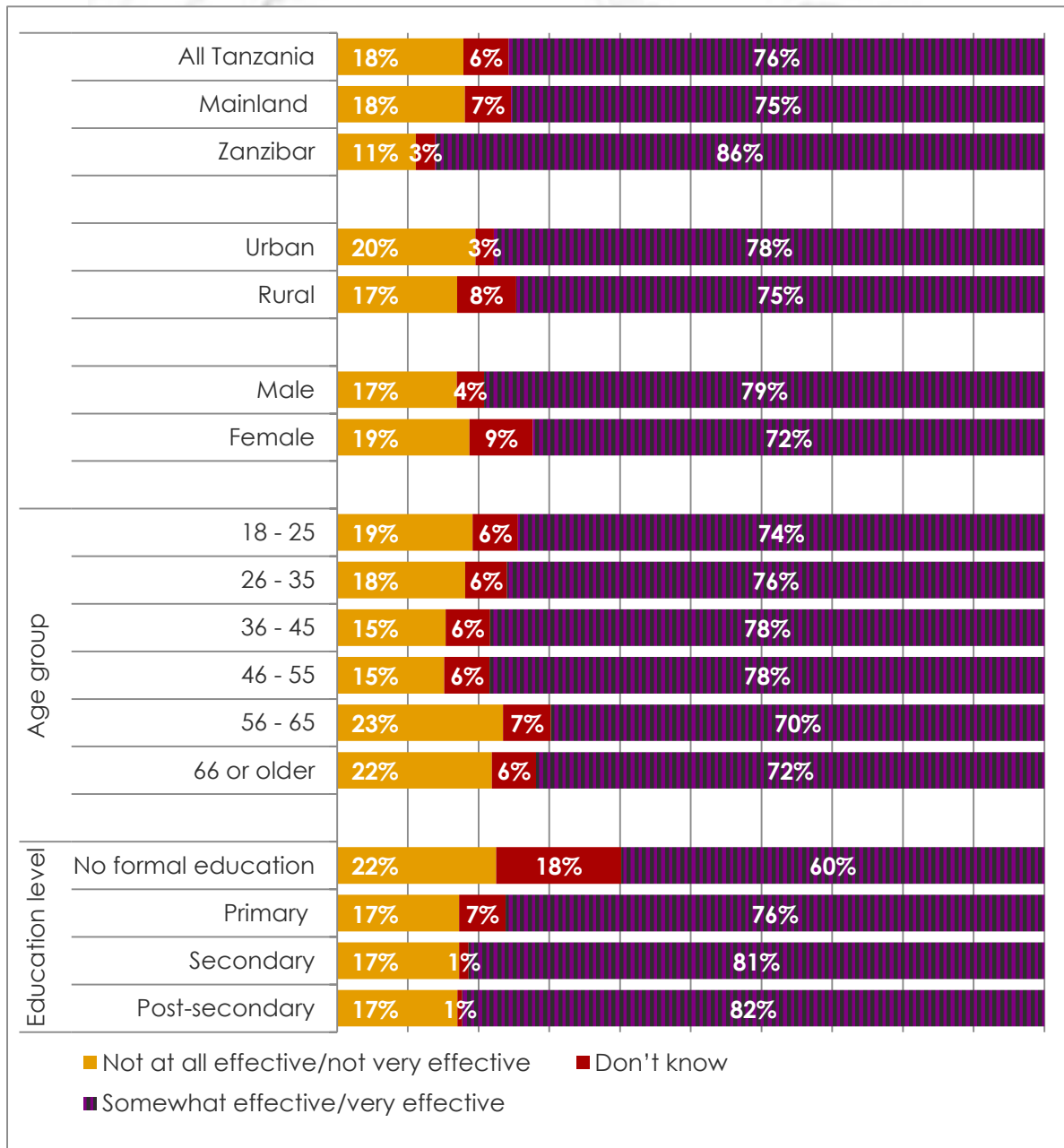
Figure 11: Perceived media effectiveness in exposing corruption | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how effective is the news media in revealing government mistakes and corruption?*

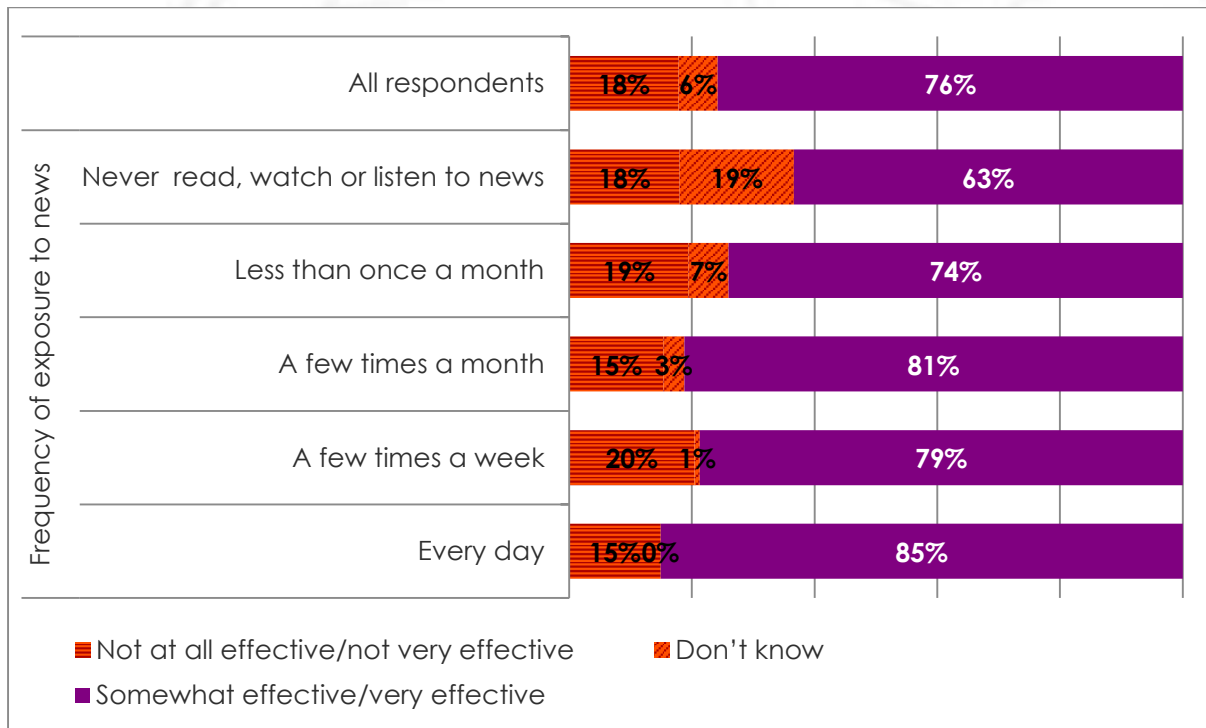
Media effectiveness is rated more highly by residents of Zanzibar compared to the mainland and by men compared to women. Effectiveness ratings increase with respondents' level of education (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Perceived media effectiveness in exposing corruption | by location, gender, age, and education level | 2014



Additionally, exposure to news media is strongly correlated with popular ratings of media effectiveness (Figure 13). While 65% of those who never read, watch, or listen to news rate the media as somewhat/very effective, the corresponding proportion among those who access news every day is 85%.

Figure 13: Perceived media effectiveness in exposing corruption | by frequency of exposure to news | 2014



Conclusion

While Tanzanians express satisfaction with their level of individual freedom of expression, assessments of the Tanzanian media environment conclude that the country's laws constrain press freedom. Bans and suspensions of news media have encouraged a tendency toward self-censorship, limiting the ability of the media to function effectively.

Amidst concerns about the state's growing intolerance of critical media, this analysis shows that a majority of Tanzanians support media investigation of government mistakes and corruption and media freedom to publish without government control, believe that the media is effective in that role, and are satisfied with the reliability of news reports.

However, public support for the media's watchdog role is significantly weaker than it was two years ago, while support for government control of the media has increased. The public's assessment of media effectiveness is less positive, and concern about the peril of too much negative reporting is growing.

Facing persistently low levels of accountability on the part of the government and growing government strictness in regulating the press, the Tanzanian media faces a crucial challenge in meeting public expectations while at the same time defending its credibility and independence before law enforcers.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

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