



# Framing Crime in Tanzania: Agenda-Setting and Coverage Patterns in Mwananchi and Habari Leo

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how crime is framed in Tanzanian newspapers, focusing on Mwananchi and Habari Leo. Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory and News Framing Theory, it investigates the dominant types of crime reported and the editorial patterns that shape public perceptions of criminality. A qualitative research design was employed, combining content analysis of crime news articles published between January and June 2024 with semi-structured interviews of twelve journalists and editors. Findings indicate that coverage is overwhelmingly dominated by violent and sensational crimes, including murder, robbery, sexual offences, and gender-based violence, while complex and systemic crimes such as corruption, cybercrime, financial fraud, environmental offences, and organised economic crime are underrepresented. Editorial decisions prioritise stories that are dramatic, accessible, and likely to attract readership, resulting in a skewed public understanding of crime that emphasizes immediate threats over long-term societal harms. The study concludes that Tanzanian crime reporting reflects news values, commercial imperatives, and institutional constraints rather than proportional representation of actual crime trends. It recommends enhancing investigative journalism capacity and broadening reporting practices to include less visible but socially significant crimes, thereby supporting more informed public discourse and accountability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Crime reporting constitutes a central function of journalism, serving not only to inform citizens about threats to public safety but also to facilitate legal accountability, social control, and collective understanding of justice systems. Across the globe, crime news occupies a significant proportion of newspaper content and plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of insecurity, risk, and moral order (Jewkes, 2011; Surette, 2019). Through processes of selection, emphasis, and repetition, media institutions influence which crimes are perceived as socially significant and deserving of attention, thereby shaping public discourse and policy priorities (McQuail, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Scholars argue that crime news does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it, privileging certain narratives and categories of crime over others based on news values such as drama, immediacy, and human interest (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; McGregor, 2021).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that newspapers tend to prioritise visible and sensational crimes such as murder, robbery, sexual assault, and gender-based violence, while complex and systemic crimes including corruption, financial fraud, organised crime, and cybercrime receive comparatively limited coverage (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2018; Wall, 2007). This pattern is evident across both Global North and Global South contexts, where commercial pressures, audience appeal, and newsroom routines strongly influence editorial decisions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Wasserman, 2020). In African media systems, crime reporting is further shaped by political constraints, regulatory environments, and resource limitations, often resulting in a reliance on routine, street-level crime stories that are easier to access and verify (Macharia & Mwaura, 2019; Nyabuga, 2020). Consequently, media representations of crime may exaggerate the prevalence of violent offences while obscuring crimes with long-term structural consequences for governance, economic stability, and social justice (Liska & Chamlin, 2020).

In Tanzania, print newspapers such as *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* play a critical role in informing the public about crime and security issues. However, crime reporting practices operate within a restrictive legal and institutional framework, including the Media Services Act (2016), the Cybercrimes Act (2015), and broader national security regulations, which can limit coverage of politically sensitive or elite crimes (Media Council of Tanzania, 2022). As a result, newspapers often prioritise dramatic and routine crimes that attract readership while avoiding investigative reporting on corruption, economic crimes, and institutional wrongdoing. Despite the growing importance of media accountability and public interest journalism, limited scholarly attention has been given to the specific categories of crime that dominate Tanzanian print media coverage. This study addresses that gap by

systematically analysing the types and categories of crime reported by *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo*, with the aim of assessing how editorial priorities shape public understanding of criminality and national security concerns.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Crime reporting occupies a central position in journalistic practice because it mediates public understanding of safety, deviance, justice, and social order. Scholars widely acknowledge that news media are not neutral mirrors of crime reality; rather, they actively shape crime knowledge through processes of selection, prioritisation, and representation (McQuail, 2010; Surette, 2019). Most members of the public encounter crime indirectly through media narratives rather than personal experience, which grants newspapers significant power in defining what constitutes crime, who is portrayed as a criminal, and which offences are perceived as most threatening (Jewkes, 2011). Through repeated exposure to certain crime types, media institutions influence public fear, moral judgement, and expectations of law enforcement and the justice system, thereby embedding crime reporting within broader structures of social control and governance (Williams, 2012).

Agenda-setting scholarship provides a foundational explanation for these dynamics by demonstrating that media influence public priorities through the visibility and prominence they give to particular issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In crime journalism, agenda-setting manifests through headline placement, repetition of crime themes, and sustained focus on particular categories of offences. Crimes that are frequently reported especially when framed as urgent or threatening come to be perceived as widespread social problems, even when official crime statistics suggest otherwise (Liska & Chamlin, 2020). This selective emphasis has profound implications, as it shapes not only public perceptions but also political agendas, policing strategies, and resource allocation within the criminal justice system (Knight, 2018; Surette, 2019). Crimes that receive minimal coverage, such as financial fraud or environmental crime, may be perceived as marginal despite their extensive social and economic consequences.

The agenda-setting function of crime reporting is reinforced by newsroom routines and professional norms that prioritise speed, accessibility, and audience engagement. Journalists often rely on official sources such as police reports, court records, and eyewitness accounts, which naturally favour visible and immediately detectable crimes (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). As a result, crimes that occur in public spaces and involve physical harm such as robbery, assault, and homicide are more likely to enter the news agenda than crimes that are hidden, technical, or institutional in nature (Wall, 2007). This reliance on routine sources also limits the

diversity of crime narratives, reinforcing dominant frames and marginalising alternative perspectives that might challenge official accounts or expose systemic wrongdoing (McChesney, 2019).

Closely intertwined with agenda-setting is the process of framing, through which journalists construct meaning by emphasising certain aspects of crime stories while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). Framing shapes how crimes are categorised, how victims and offenders are portrayed, and how responsibility is attributed. Research indicates that crime news is frequently framed episodically, focusing on isolated incidents and individual behaviour rather than broader social, political, or economic contexts (McGregor, 2021). This approach simplifies crime narratives, encouraging audiences to interpret crime as a product of moral failure or individual deviance rather than as an outcome of structural inequalities, governance failures, or institutional corruption (Jewkes, 2011).

Framing also determines which crimes are perceived as emotionally compelling and newsworthy. Crimes involving violence, sexuality, or vulnerable victims particularly women and children are often framed through moral panic, fear, and outrage, increasing their visibility in the news (Kimani, 2021; Kimani, 2021). While such coverage can raise awareness and stimulate public concern, it may also sensationalise crime and obscure nuanced understanding. In contrast, crimes such as corruption, cybercrime, or corporate fraud are often framed as abstract, technical, or distant from everyday life, making them less attractive for routine reporting despite their far-reaching societal consequences (Wall, 2007; McGregor, 2021).

Empirical studies from Western contexts consistently demonstrate that media coverage of crime is disproportionate to actual crime patterns. Research in the United States and Canada shows that homicide and violent offences receive extensive media attention despite accounting for a small fraction of overall crime rates, while property crimes and white-collar offences are underreported (Chermak, Pizarro, & Gruenewald, 2009; O'Hear, 2020). This imbalance reflects the dominance of news values such as drama, conflict, immediacy, and human interest, which favour extreme events over routine or complex criminal activity (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Consequently, media audiences may develop distorted perceptions of crime prevalence, leading to heightened fear and punitive attitudes toward crime control (Surette, 2019).

African media research reveals comparable patterns, though shaped by distinct political and economic conditions. Studies across East, West, and Southern Africa indicate that sensational and violent crimes dominate newspaper coverage due to commercial pressures, competition for readership, and limited investigative resources (Oluwaseun, 2017; Macharia & Mwaura, 2019). Investigative journalism on corruption, organised crime, and elite wrongdoing is often constrained by political interference, legal threats, and weak institutional protections for journalists

(Wasserman & Benequista, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). As a result, newspapers tend to focus on routine crimes that can be reported quickly and safely, reinforcing episodic and event-driven crime narratives (Nyabuga, 2020).

Within the Tanzanian context, existing literature suggests that print media coverage of crime is heavily skewed toward visible and emotionally compelling offences such as robbery, murder, domestic violence, sexual offences, and traffic-related crimes with criminal elements (Nkya, 2020; Media Council of Tanzania, 2022). These crimes align closely with dominant news values and audience expectations, making them attractive for daily reporting. However, crimes with long-term structural impacts such as corruption, embezzlement, cybercrime, environmental offences, and organised economic crime receive limited and inconsistent attention despite their growing significance (Wall, 2007; McChesney, 2019). Legal frameworks such as the Media Services Act and the Cybercrimes Act further influence editorial decisions, often discouraging sustained scrutiny of politically sensitive or elite crimes (Media Council of Tanzania, 2022).

The dominance of sensational and street-level crime reporting has broader implications for democratic accountability and public knowledge. Overrepresentation of violent crime can distort public understanding of national crime realities, amplifying fear while obscuring systemic threats to governance, development, and social justice (Liska & Chamlin, 2020). Underreporting of complex crimes may weaken public demand for institutional reform and accountability, allowing structural criminality to persist with limited scrutiny (Wasserman, 2020). Despite the centrality of these issues, limited empirical research has systematically examined how Tanzanian newspapers categorise crime and prioritise different offences. By analysing the types and categories of crime reported by *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo*, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of crime representation in Tanzanian print media and its implications for public discourse and policy.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the types and categories of crime reported in Tanzanian print newspapers. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of editorial practices, meaning-making processes, and contextual factors that shape crime reporting, rather than focusing solely on numerical frequency. The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam, the main editorial hub for both *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* newspapers. These newspapers were purposively selected due to their national reach, influence on public discourse, and contrasting ownership structures *Mwananchi* as a privately owned outlet and *Habari Leo* as a state-owned newspaper providing a basis for comparative analysis. Data sources included crime news articles and semi-

structured interviews with media professionals directly involved in crime reporting and editorial decision-making.

A total of thirty crime-related news articles, fifteen from each newspaper, published between January and June 2024 were purposively sampled to capture routine crime reporting patterns. The articles were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify dominant crime categories, patterns of emphasis, and reporting trends. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve respondents, including seven journalists and five editors, selected based on their professional roles and experience in crime reporting. Interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed to provide contextual explanations for observed reporting patterns. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation. The integration of content analysis and interviews enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that crime reporting in *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* is overwhelmingly dominated by violent and visible street-level crimes, particularly murder, armed robbery, sexual offences, domestic violence, and assault. These crimes were consistently prioritised in terms of frequency, headline prominence, and narrative emphasis. In many cases, such stories occupied front pages or led crime sections, signalling their perceived importance to readers. This pattern reflects the agenda-setting function of the media, whereby repeated exposure elevates certain crime categories into public consciousness as the most urgent social threats (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Similar findings have been reported globally, where violent crime is disproportionately covered relative to its actual prevalence (Chermak, Pizarro, & Gruenewald, 2009; O'Hear, 2020), reinforcing public fear and shaping crime-related policy discourse. In the Tanzanian context, this emphasis suggests that newspapers actively construct a crime agenda centred on immediate physical danger rather than long-term structural harm.

Interview data strongly corroborated these content patterns and revealed the newsroom logic behind them. Journalists and editors repeatedly stressed that violent crimes are prioritised because they are easy to access, quick to verify, and resonate emotionally with audiences. As one editor from *Mwananchi* stated:

*“Crime stories like theft, robbery, and assaults dominate coverage because they are easy to report, rely on accessible sources, and instantly capture readers’ emotions. Unlike complex crimes such as corruption,*

*these cases require little investigation and directly affect people’s sense of safety. Ultimately, sensational crime stories sell more, as fear and suspense attract greater attention than boardroom scandals” (Respondent 01, Mwananchi, 12/07/2025).*

This quotation highlights how commercial imperatives and newsroom routines intersect to shape editorial agendas. The findings align with Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) hierarchy of influences model, which emphasises organisational and economic pressures as key determinants of media content, as well as African media studies that identify market-driven sensationalism as a defining feature of crime reporting (Macharia & Mwaura, 2019; Oluwaseun, 2017).

Beyond frequency, the study found that crime stories were predominantly framed episodically rather than thematically. Reports focused on isolated incidents, individual offenders, and immediate consequences, with minimal contextualisation of underlying causes such as unemployment, urban inequality, institutional failure, or governance challenges. Police statements and court briefs were the dominant sources, often presented without critical interrogation. This framing practice reflects News Framing Theory, which explains how journalists privilege event-based narratives that personalise crime and obscure structural dimensions (Entman, 1993). As one journalist noted:

*“Most crime stories are written straight from police reports. There is rarely time to go deeper and explain why these crimes keep happening or who benefits from them.”*

Such episodic framing reinforces what Jewkes (2011) describes as the “simplification of crime,” encouraging audiences to interpret criminality as individual moral failure rather than as a product of systemic conditions. This finding is consistent with McGregor’s (2021) argument that sensational crime framing limits critical public engagement and sustains shallow understandings of social problems.

In contrast, complex and systemic crimes including corruption, financial fraud, cybercrime, environmental offences, and organised economic crime were strikingly underrepresented. When such crimes appeared, they were typically confined to short reports about arrests, court proceedings, or official statements, lacking investigative depth or sustained follow-up. Several respondents explicitly linked this absence to fear of legal and political repercussions. One *Habari Leo* journalist observed:

*“Stories involving corruption or financial crime are risky. They take time, require documents, and you can easily end up in trouble if powerful people are involved.”*

*Another editor added:  
"Investigating economic crimes needs  
resources we simply do not have, and the  
consequences can be serious."*

These findings strongly support previous research indicating that African journalists face structural barriers including restrictive laws, weak protections, and political pressure that discourage investigative reporting on elite crime (Nyabuga, 2020; Wasserman & Benequista, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). From an agenda-setting perspective, the systematic marginalisation of such crimes reduces their visibility and perceived importance, despite their profound implications for governance and national development.

The findings indicate that crime reporting in *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* is shaped less by the actual distribution of crime in society and more by news values, institutional constraints, and framing practices. The dominance of violent and sensational crimes constructs a media reality in which street-level offences appear more prevalent and threatening than systemic crimes. This pattern supports broader theoretical claims that media agendas and frames play a decisive role in constructing social reality rather than merely reflecting it (McQuail, 2010; Surette, 2019). By privileging dramatic, visible crimes over complex institutional offences, Tanzanian newspapers contribute to a skewed public understanding of criminality, potentially reinforcing fear while weakening public scrutiny of corruption, economic crime, and structural injustice.

## **POLICY AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for Agenda-Setting Theory by demonstrating how Tanzanian newspapers prioritise certain categories of crime while marginalising others, thereby shaping public perceptions of criminality and social risk. The dominance of violent and street-level crimes in *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* illustrates how sustained media attention elevates these offences into perceived national threats, regardless of their proportional occurrence or long-term impact. This confirms theoretical claims that media agendas are not neutral reflections of reality but are constructed through editorial judgments influenced by news values, organisational routines, and commercial pressures (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McQuail, 2010).

The study extends agenda-setting scholarship into the Tanzanian context by showing how regulatory constraints and political sensitivities further narrow the crime agenda, particularly in relation to elite and institutional crimes. The findings also deepen the explanatory power of News Framing Theory by illustrating how crime is predominantly framed episodically rather than thematically. The emphasis on isolated incidents, individual offenders, and immediate consequences reinforces frames that personalise crime

and obscure its structural causes. This supports Entman's (1993) argument that framing determines how audiences attribute responsibility and interpret social problems.

By privileging dramatic narratives over contextual analysis, newspapers encourage interpretations of crime as individual deviance rather than as outcomes of governance failures, economic inequality, or institutional corruption. The study therefore contributes to framing theory by demonstrating how episodic crime framing in African media contexts sustains simplified and depoliticised understandings of criminality. More broadly, the findings contribute to critical political economy approaches to media by highlighting how commercial imperatives and institutional constraints shape crime representation.

The prioritisation of sensational crimes reflects market-driven journalism in which audience attraction and circulation concerns override public interest reporting (McChesney, 2019). The marginalisation of complex crimes further illustrates how power relations, legal risks, and political influence limit journalistic autonomy. This underscores the need to integrate agenda-setting and framing theories with structural analyses of media power to fully understand crime reporting practices in developing democracies such as Tanzania.

From a policy perspective, the findings have important implications for media regulation, journalism practice, and public governance. The overrepresentation of violent street-level crimes and underrepresentation of systemic crimes suggest a need for policy interventions that encourage more balanced and investigative crime reporting. Media regulators and professional bodies, such as the Media Council of Tanzania, should strengthen guidelines that promote ethical, contextual, and public-interest-oriented crime reporting. Such guidelines should encourage journalists to move beyond episodic narratives and incorporate thematic analysis that explains the structural dimensions of crime.

The findings also point to the need for institutional support for investigative journalism. Policy frameworks should prioritise capacity building through specialised training in investigative reporting, financial journalism, and data-driven crime analysis. Without adequate skills and resources, journalists will continue to rely on routine crime stories that are easier to report but offer limited social value. Government and non-state actors should therefore support independent investigative units and provide legal protections that shield journalists from intimidation and retaliatory lawsuits when reporting on corruption and economic crimes.

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of reforming legal and regulatory environments that constrain crime reporting. Laws such as the Media Services Act and the Cybercrimes Act, while intended to promote accountability, may inadvertently discourage investigative reporting on politically sensitive crimes. Policymakers should review these legal frameworks to

ensure they do not unduly restrict press freedom or undermine the media's watchdog role. A more enabling legal environment would empower journalists to report on elite and institutional crimes without fear, thereby strengthening transparency, accountability, and democratic governance.

Finally, the findings have implications for public policy and crime prevention strategies. Media agendas influence public opinion and, by extension, political priorities. When newspapers disproportionately emphasise violent crimes, policymakers may focus resources on reactive policing rather than addressing structural and economic crimes that undermine national development. A more balanced media representation of crime could contribute to informed public debate, more equitable policy responses, and a holistic approach to crime prevention that addresses both visible and systemic threats.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that crime reporting in *Mwananchi* and *Habari Leo* is overwhelmingly dominated by violent and visible street-level offences, including murder, armed robbery, sexual offences, domestic violence, and assault, while complex and systemic crimes such as corruption, financial fraud, cybercrime, and organised economic offences remain marginalised. This pattern aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory, showing how sustained media attention elevates certain crimes into perceived national threats regardless of their actual prevalence (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McQuail, 2010). The predominance of episodic framing, focusing on isolated incidents, individual offenders, and immediate consequences, obscures structural causes such as governance failures, economic inequality, and institutional weaknesses, reinforcing simplified and depoliticised understandings of crime (Entman, 1993; Jewkes, 2011; McGregor, 2021). These patterns are shaped by commercial imperatives, newsroom routines, and regulatory constraints, illustrating the interplay between market-driven journalism and structural barriers that limit investigative reporting on politically sensitive or resource-intensive crimes (Macharia & Mwaura, 2019; Oluwaseun, 2017; McChesney, 2019; Nyabuga, 2020; UNESCO, 2022; Wasserman & Benequista, 2020).

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for media practice and policy. First, Tanzanian media should prioritise more balanced and investigative crime reporting, moving beyond episodic narratives to incorporate thematic analysis that contextualises crime within structural, economic, and governance frameworks. Media regulators and professional bodies, such as the Media Council of Tanzania, should strengthen ethical and public-interest-oriented guidelines to encourage reporting that addresses both street-level and systemic crimes. Second, institutional support for investigative journalism is critical. This includes capacity building through

specialised training in investigative techniques, financial journalism, and data-driven crime analysis, as well as the provision of adequate resources and legal protections to shield journalists from intimidation or retaliatory lawsuits when covering complex or politically sensitive cases.

Finally, legal and regulatory reforms are necessary to reduce barriers to comprehensive crime reporting. Existing frameworks, such as the Media Services Act and the Cybercrimes Act, should be reviewed to ensure they do not inadvertently restrict press freedom or undermine the media's watchdog role. A more enabling environment would empower journalists to report on elite and institutional crimes, enhancing transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. By presenting a balanced representation of both visible and systemic crimes, Tanzanian newspapers can support informed public debate, equitable policy responses, and holistic crime prevention strategies that address both immediate threats and long-term structural risks, ultimately contributing to national development and social justice.

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