

Watchdog role: How Malawi media utilise question time during press briefings

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Abstract

During the 21st Century press briefings have evolved into one of the most convenient ways of conveying important information to the masses. Politicians, activists, and leaders of various institutions now rely on press briefings to reach their audiences. In Malawi and other countries, livestreaming and live broadcasts of press briefings have pushed newsmakers far ahead of mainstream media as citizens now access information directly from the sources with little or no processing by a third party. However, theorists argue that the concept of the press briefing is informed by theories of image building which keep communication far from the terraces of journalism. Thus, question time during press briefings presents one of the few remaining occasions for the press to exercise its watchdog role. Even so, the way the press utilises this opportunity varies. This paper explores how Malawian media utilise question time during press briefings to fulfil its watchdog role. Using the concept of ‘journalistic interview’, which treats interviews between journalists and politicians as an encounter of two institutions, each making a claim on its legitimacy, this study employed qualitative content analysis of 10 recorded political press briefings held between April 2019 and April 2020, a period dominated by many political press briefings. Malawi conducted tripartite elections in May 2019 and the Constitutional Court annulled the presidential election in February 2020 on grounds of serious irregularities. The analysis is complemented by interviews with 15 Malawian journalists and two major issues emerged. Question time gives Malawian journalists an opportunity to exercise their watchdog role although the occasion is sometimes abused by both parties involved in the interlocution. Secondly, political interests and power

disparity between press briefing organisers and journalists compromise the independence of the press and its watchdog role.

Keywords: Malawi, press briefing, watchdog role, journalistic interview

Introduction

Although the interaction between journalists and politicians in political debate is well researched worldwide, scholars have given little attention to what Ekstrom (2001) calls ‘journalistic interview’. This is a concept that explains the interaction between journalists and politicians in political debate, particularly how journalists use interviews to gather information. In the past, these conversations happened behind a dormant audience waiting for journalists and news organisations to relay to them already packaged news and information. This hierarchy of news processing gives the mainstream media prominence in creating and shaping public debate on political issues, more so that the opportunity to question politicians directly allows journalists to perform their watchdog role. This paper understands the watchdog role as vital for any democratic society in which the press acting as the fourth estate ‘oversees and questions’ those entrusted with power and authority (Neverla, Lohner, and Banjac 2015).

However, the transformation of media systems, as enhanced by the internet, especially web 2.0 which has allowed for creation of social networking sites (SNS), has affected the traditional order threatening to undermine the press' watchdog role in the process. From being the first on the news, research shows mainstream media is now in most cases playing catch-up to SNS. Politicians and other political institutions are directly engaging with their audiences through SNS and bypassing mainstream media. For instance, President of the United States of America, Donald Trump has opted to use Twitter to communicate directly to the public. At the time of writing, Trump's Twitter account had 79.1 million followers.

The flourishing of livestreaming on Facebook and Twitter has seen news sources directly interacting with their audiences in real time. However, online spaces are compromised when used to broadcast state propaganda by powerful politicians. Since the age of dictators, state media in Africa has churned out government propaganda in the name of addressing the nation on important issues. In Malawi, the state-owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) was reformed in 1998 to operate as a public broadcaster to address state monopoly (*Malawi Communications Act 2016*), but the way it conducts its business today shows it has failed to reform.

In 2015, it initiated a programme called *Talk to the President* which features President Peter Mutharika. Citizens can ask questions in advance on various issues and the president responds in a recorded programme. Adamson Muula opined through his weekly newspaper column: “the initiative need to be commended as an attempt by the presidency to get closer to the people” (2016). Contrary to Muula, I argue that the programme was MBC’s political gimmick to be seen as opening up to the public and making the president accountable and accessible to the people. It was a ploy to churn out government propaganda and protect the president from tough questions from media personnel. Columnist Thom Chiumia equally expressed his reservations towards the programme arguing that it was prone to abuse by the President who uses the MBC as his mouthpiece (2015). He further argued that the programme cannot be ‘credible’ on MBC.

Contrary to its mandate as stipulated under the Public Service Obligations 109 (2) in the Malawi Communications Act 2016, MBC is used as a mouthpiece of the governing party while politicians in opposition are denied access and have to rely on private media. Existing studies show that generally politicians, particularly those in opposition struggle to reach their audiences with fully packaged messages due to the high costs of advertising and also restrictions in traditional media where political information is subjected to gate-keeping concepts before being published as news (Lester and Hutchins 2009). The challenge has been how to package information to meet their political interests and newsrooms standards. Thus, the Internet, particularly its social networking sites, presents itself as an opportunity for politicians to bypass state controlled traditional media.

One of the core values of news is ‘recency’. Everyone wants to get the news as it breaks. Thus, most people would prefer to tune in to a live broadcast of a press briefing rather than wait for newsrooms to package the same information into news bites. Not only that, issues of irresponsible journalism and partisan reporting in mainstream media have over the years eroded people’s trust in mainstream media, and thus, having an opportunity to access information directly through live broadcasts of press briefings, came as a relief to many news followers.

On the other hand, fake news and propaganda by politicians, have reinforced the need for mainstream media to guard citizens from politicians’ mendacities. To remain relevant in the social media age, mainstream media is utilising its infrastructure and reputation to promote live broadcasts of political press briefings. While it is not easy to limit what the organisers say during

these live briefings, question time allows the press to exercise its watchdog role. Thus, as Ekstrom (2001) observes, the nexus of political debate and the interaction between politicians and journalists is at the compass of protecting their legitimacy in the society. Ekstrom's argument is that the press and politicians have a reputation to protect and this is determined by the way both do their job. While politicians claim to be servants of the nation, the press claim to be eyes of the society. This means, when the two institutions meet in political debate, it is about protecting their legitimacy.

In a democracy, a free press is expected to serve the interests of the society. It acts as a watchdog, monitoring the conduct of political leaders and government officials, among others. The press holds politicians accountable through publication of news articles, opinions and one-on-one interviews on issues of public interest. The aim is to ensure that the citizens are well-informed on issues of national importance. In most cases, the press initiates these conversations with the politicians, but there are also times when politicians initiate political debates. Press briefings organised by politicians are one activity that brings the two institutions to serve their communities.

However, Wollaeger (2008) notes that powerful authorities use different strategies to manipulate public information to their advantage. A press briefing is a fodder for propaganda. Thus, information shared during press briefings should not be consumed raw. This makes the question time during political press briefings a necessity and an opportunity for the press to exercise its watchdog role to question the politicians. Question time is an element of 'journalistic interview' because it brings to the fore the power relations between politicians and the press in the discourse of mediatisation of politics. It explains the way journalists frame their questions towards politicians during interviews and in turn how politicians frame their answers and how this conversation shapes political debate. Previous studies on interview society and journalist interview have given more attention to interviews organised by media personnel ignoring press briefings organised by politicians. During press briefings, journalists have less control of the proceedings and their chance to ask questions is at the mercy of the organisers. It is, therefore, imperative to appreciate how this affects media's watchdog role. This paper explores the way in which Malawian media conduct its role as a watchdog during question time at press briefings.

Professional journalism in Malawi

Although Malawi media has a long history dating from as far as 1800, its growth has been slow. According to Chitsulo and Mang'anda (2011), Malawi media was founded through print publications by missionaries. Later, colonialist government and private media (print and broadcast) ownership followed. When Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda became a founding President in 1964 after 71 years of colonialism, he swiftly abolished private media and promoted the state media with subsidies for its operations. He structured the state media to churn out government propaganda.

The first broadcast media in Malawi was the Federal Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) run by the colonial government (Mvutho 2018). It operated from 1958 to 1961 in support of the colonial administration. Post 1963, although other countries were using Short Wave Modulation, Kamuzu Banda settled for Amplitude Modulation which only accommodated MBC Radio. The only alternative media was a Christian student radio at African Bible College in Lilongwe. It covered a small radius and was relying on a relay feed from Transworld Radio which was broadcasting from Manzini, Swaziland (Phumisa 2018). I speculate that this enabled the government to ensure its citizens listened to only MBC Radio which was in the business of churning out government propaganda.

The dawn of multiparty democracy in 1993 changed the media landscape in Malawi. Free press and private media arrived and initially thrived. New newspapers and magazines were established (Chitsulo and Mang'anda 2011). The airwaves were also liberalised and Frequency Modulation (FM) installed. Malawi's first democratically elected president Bakili Muluzi launched MBC Radio 2 FM on 17 July 1997. Fifteen months later, the first commercial radio station, FM 101 Power was launched, and the list has been growing. According to the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (Macra) website, by 2020 the broadcast media regulator had issued 83 licences—56 for radio and 27 television stations. New newspapers and magazines have emerged and disappeared (Gunde 2015; Chitsulo and Mang'anda 2011; Manda 2015). As of 2020, the country had only two daily newspapers published by the country's two main news groups: *Times Media* and *Nation Publications Limited*. These two groups also publish two weekend papers and two Sunday papers between them.

However, this transition to pluralist media was not complemented with media training. Manda (2015) notes that in the first 29 years the University of Malawi (UNIMA) did not offer any journalism training and there was no journalism degree programme in Malawi until 1999. Those who worked as journalists were trained on the job. Democracy and the adoption of new laws, freedoms, and new ways of doing business saw the introduction of journalism programmes at UNIMA and much later other private colleges. Even so, by 2010 as shown in a survey by the Journalists Union of Malawi, over 50 percent of journalists only had the Malawi School Certificate of Education, an O Level Certificate equivalent while 30 percent had diplomas and certificates obtained from Malawi Institute of Journalism (MIJ) and other institutions (see Manda and Kufaine 2013, Manda 2015).

Nevertheless, the last decade has seen both public and private universities and colleges graduating journalists in the hundreds. This coupled with refresher courses and postgraduate media scholarships awarded by among others, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Africa, Chevening, Swedish Institute, Osisa, Commonwealth and Canon Collins Trust, has resulted in the rising media professionalism in Malawi. However, most journalists quit the newsroom after obtaining postgraduate qualifications.

Despite these observable developments, there are very few research papers on journalism practice in Malawi and it is difficult to quantify with certainty the status of professionalism in Malawian media. The Media Council of Malawi (MCM) which is responsible for promoting professionalism has been on and off over the last decade. Its resuscitation with the support of Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Malawi in 2019 is yet to produce any observable changes but its resuscitation is an indication of its much-needed role in Malawian journalism. In his Master's thesis, Sharra, notes that a "functional and well-structured press council" has the potential to promote professionalism and responsible journalism that serves the interests of the society (2018, 69). The only 'comprehensive' research on media practice titled *Journalism Practice in Malawi: History, Progress and Progress* was published in 2011, with funding from UNESCO. Thus, there is a huge gap in literature and this paper goes a long way in helping to bridge this gap.

Conceptual framework: question time as a journalistic interview

This paper draws on Ekstrom’s concept of journalistic interview to investigate how Malawian journalists utilise question time during press briefings in performing their watchdog role. There are three themes that anchor this concept. These are the interview as a discourse that structures politicians’ participation in the public sphere, an expression of the confrontation of institutions each having a claim to legitimacy and the edited interview—de- and re-recontextualization. This paper applies the second theme which treats journalistic interview as an “expression of the confrontation of institutions, each having a claim on legitimacy” (Ekstrom 2001, 566). This concept is largely used in analysis of broadcast media interviews where journalists structure their questions to get what they want from sources while the interviewees justify the issues at hand. Montgomery (2008) calls this kind of interview an ‘accountability interview’. The common denominator is that both the press and politicians are accountable to their audiences. Thus, as representatives of different institutions, when they meet, it is a confrontation of institutions.

It is, however, important to highlight that the way journalists prepare for an interview which they have independently organised differs from when it is organised by a source. In press briefings, the source (politician) sets the agenda of the discussion. This frames the kind of questions asked and the line of questioning. This paper argues that holding to account a source who organised a press briefing cannot be equated to the opposite set-up. Thus, the way journalists handle question time during press briefings should be studied separately with a focus on how they frame their questions to address the issues at hand and how this enables them to grow into their role as watchdogs. Unfortunately, there is little literature that explains the power disparity when journalists and politicians meet in set-ups where one is the organiser and the other a guest and how this affects the media’s watchdog role. This is an important contribution this paper is making.

Methods

This study draws its empirical data from analysis of 10 recorded press briefings on electoral issues held between April 2019 and April 2020. Although the selection of the recordings was random, several key factors were put in place to produce a representative sample. Firstly, selected were press briefings organised to give updates on the 2019 Malawi elections, post- election protests, election court case and the 2020 fresh polls which were ordered by the courts. Secondly, press briefings by institutions such as the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), Malawi Anti-
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Corruption Bureau (ACB), Human Rights Defenders Coalitions (HRDC), other electoral stakeholders and top five political parties namely, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Malawi Congress Party (MCP), UTM, United Democratic Front (UDF) and People's Party (PP), were prioritised.

The study period was selected because events during and after the 2019 elections attracted a huge media following as these events had a lot of public interest. Preference was given to press briefings on preparedness for the elections, election results updates, election irregularities, rigging allegations, protests and violence, election court case, bribery allegations and calls by HRDC for MEC Chairperson to step down on grounds of incompetence in managing the 2019 elections.

Another factor which largely determined which interviews to use was accessibility of the recordings. The clips used in this paper were downloaded from YouTube and were recorded by the country major news organisations such *Times Media*, *Zodiak Broadcasting Station*, *Nation Publications Limited* and *Malawi Institute of Journalism*. Thus, the study used only those clips that are available and accessible online. For this reason, this paper does not rule out chances of biases, but it argues that the sample is representative and large enough for fair results which can be used as a starting point for further research.

The analysis of these clips is complemented with interviews with journalists who included reporters, editors, retired journalists and media trainers who were active during this period. A short questionnaire was sent to 20 participants through emails and WhatsApp and 15 participants responded. This was to gather views from different players to build strong evidence to support the proof in the recorded clips. The correlation as shown in the findings section below reinforces credibility of the sampled data, but as argued above, this paper is the starting point for further research in this area.

Discussion of the findings

Over the course of Malawi's history, interviews have evolved into a specialised and fashionable method of modern journalism. A news story without a direct or indirect quote from a news source sits on a slippery edge of professional journalism. Malawi journalism is more of what Jay Rosen

(2011) calls “he said, she said”, journalism, the stories are less analytical. Similarly, a press briefing that does not allow journalists to ask questions scores low on accountability and legitimacy. The way an interview is conducted, framing of the questions and issues captured have become a yardstick for professionalism, especially that journalism acts as the eyes and ears of the society. Thus, in cases where it suffers in the hands of politicians, its watchdog role withers, and as a result, the public which it is supposed to serve suffers.

The 2019 presidential debates in Malawi elucidate the public’s expected standard of the Malawi press. Across the world, presidential debates provide an opportunity for politicians to spell out their political plans. The platform also allows journalists to perform their watchdog role through moderation and asking questions. In 2019, organisers of the presidential debates in Malawi settled for a human rights lawyer to moderate the debates. Although she managed the conversations, she was faulted for suffocating the media’s watchdog role by failing to ask difficult questions on pertinent issues. Political analyst at UNIMA, Ernest Thindwa opined:

The debate was okay but there are areas that need improvement particularly on the pace the moderator set for the debate. The moderator was taking [more] time to ask questions than the time given to the aspiring candidates to respond. I personally feel she was not probing enough on how these candidates were going to fulfil the pledges they were making (Makondetsa 2019).

Such sentiments were also shared on social media with people questioning the purpose of the debates if they cannot pull out relevant questions and answers on issues of national importance. What we see from this and many other cases is the public’s thirst for truth and its trust in media personnel to perform this role. Certainly, citizens feel more protected when the press can provoke authorities to explain their promises. In Malawi, one of the forums that allow journalists to engage with politicians is press briefings. The below sections probe and analyse how Malawian media utilise question time during political press briefings.

Watchdog Role: question time during press briefings

Like in many countries, political debates attract a huge following in Malawi. The 2019 elections and the eventual post-electoral violence saw the country registering many press briefings on electoral issues by different stakeholders in elections. This means journalists have had an opportunity to engage with political actors. However, this should not be understood from such a linear and definite standpoint. Over the last two decades, Malawi has recorded a number of press freedom violations by both government institutions and political parties.

For instance, in 2009, President Bingu Wa Mutharika's government ordered all government institutions to stop advertising with *Nation Publications Limited* (Phiri 2010). In 2013, a female photojournalist was beaten while on duty by a Malawi Parliament security officer at the National Assembly. Several other media personnel such as Golden Matonga, Maxwell Ng'ambi, Steve Zimba, Kandani Ngwira, Francis Chamasowa and Alfred Guta have been arrested, detained, or assaulted by authorities for doing their job. There has also been a tendency by politicians of inviting political party supporters to their press briefings. This exposes journalists to abuses as they are heckled if they ask unwelcome questions that are likely to expose wrongdoing or put the incumbency in a supposed bad light.

Nonetheless, politicians, political parties and other political institutions continue to engage journalists in their activities through press briefings. Even in cases where journalists, particularly talk show hosts want politicians on their shows, most politicians make themselves available. This indicates a somewhat good relationship between media and political institutions in Malawi.

The high number of press briefings over the sampled period enabled the media, as a watchdog, to interact with politicians and ask questions on various issues affecting the society. The sampled video clips also show an improvement in the number of journalists who cover and ask questions during political press briefings. For instance, during one of the Malawi's ACB's press briefings held on 14th January 2020 on electoral bribery allegations, the institution's director Reyneck Matemba confessed: "*We have never gathered like this at least in my recent memory*", meaning the presser had attracted one of the largest media gatherings ('ACB Press Briefing' 2020). Of course, the issue at hand may have influenced the numbers but patronage during the 2019

electoral press briefings as observed in the selected clips was high compared with previous political press briefings.

Another important development is that for the first time in Malawi's political history, most political press briefings were livestreamed on Facebook by *Times Media*, *Zodiak* and *Nation Publications Limited*, among others. This, I would argue, allowed many citizens to follow press briefings live or watch recordings later. This is unlike in the past when most people would only get processed (edited or storified) interviews. However, it has to be mentioned that the number of people with access to the internet is below 14 percent (Kainja 2019). Thus, live streaming only complemented the traditional media, and indeed the media organisations that offered livestreams are well-established media institutions in print and broadcasting media, part of the country's legacy media.

Interviews with journalists revealed that they appreciate the question time during political press briefings, arguing that it allows them to ask questions and reinforce the media's watchdog role. There are a number of cases in which the press was able to corner politicians, and this is commendable. Nevertheless, the interviewees say this opportunity is mostly underutilised or abused not only by pressmen but also organisers. Instead of asking serious questions, some journalists make 'compliments' or ask 'out of context' or 'partisan questions' which does not serve the interests of the public. Surprisingly, from the sampled recordings, such conduct is high among journalists from both private and state media. During the investigations, four cases came out prominent. One of them involves a journalist who was caught in a moment of ignominy with MEC chairperson during a 2019 press briefing on election results update. The journalist opened his series of questions with a compliment.

“Good afternoon Madam, you are looking good this afternoon. I like your earrings personally. This is serious, you are looking good this afternoon. I started on lower note, but on a serious note, starting from MBC, what is the responsibility of a state broadcaster when it comes to being independent...” (‘MEC Press Briefing’ 2019).

What we see from this case is that, not only is the compliment misplaced, but also the subsequent questions on MBC and electoral observers. This complete departure from a critical issue to

personalised interests is seen in subsequent questions and responses from the source. The chairperson replied.

You have asked me personal questions, give me the indulgency to ask you personal questions. How old are you? [the journalist replies]. How far have you gone with school? [the journalist replies]. I am asking these questions because you are a young journalist, you have been to school, you read, you work as a journalist, you should know and read on what is happening... ('MEC Press Briefing' 2019).

In their six minutes of interaction, the chairperson got more control and went on to lecture not only the journalist but many others in the room. The journalist had asked why the Commonwealth head of mission, Thabo Mbeki, had left Malawi before the announcement of the election results. In response, the chairperson said: *“Do you know what Commonwealth is? [the journalist replies]. As observers, when they have observed elections, they make a statement. Did he give the statement? The journalist replied, “not yet”, and the chairperson concluded, “Not yet? And you are a journalist?”* ('MEC Press Briefing' 2019). The journalist was not aware that the Commonwealth had issued its statement before Mbeki left Malawi.

Although this case is rare, it confirms the media culture in Malawi. All the sampled interviewees confirmed that most Malawian journalists underutilise the opportunity that comes with press briefings, adding it has affected the quality of their watchdog role. They highlighted that most Malawian journalists attend press briefings 'unprepared' or 'partially prepared' and ask 'irrelevant' questions.

The 2019 elections proved skills and knowledge gaps in our journalists, particularly when they were posing questions to MEC officers and politicians. At some point, MEC chairperson proved to be in control to the extent of schooling journalists on some issues. Journalists do not need to be schooled by a source but rather show their abundant knowledge on an issue and highlight gaps through thought-provoking questions (John Chirwa, Personal Interview, 22 April 2020).

Veteran journalist, Gregory Gondwe, says the conduct of journalists during recent press briefings has led to questions about training and media professionalism in Malawi.

Some journalists do not prepare themselves before meeting the conveners of the political press briefings. As a result, they are reactive to the proceedings as they decide to ask questions because their colleagues are doing the same. The end result is that they are outsmarted by the conveners of the press briefing which then exposes their ill-preparedness which punches holes for the whole media fraternity as all journalists are considered mediocre leading to many questions regarding training, professionalism and knowledge (Gregory Gondwe, personal interview, 21 April 2020).

Journalist Grace Phiri says because some journalists attend press briefings partially prepared, the questions do not produce desirable answers. Another journalist, Steve Chilundu says: *“Due to lack of preparedness, some journalists pose irrelevant questions that do not probe real issues from politicians”*.

Although the interviewees agree that journalism standards are falling, their responses were limited to the quality of questions journalists ask during press briefings. Of course, taking into consideration the long history of Malawi media, there is a lot to celebrate in terms of the quality of journalism. New degree programmes and recruitment of degree holders in newsrooms have improved the overall quality of journalism in Malawi. The quality of entries submitted for the MISA-Malawi annual media awards competition testifies to this improvement when compared with past entries.

This means there are specific problems in Malawian media. From the interviews, three core issues emerged. The first issue was that media houses send junior reporters to major political press briefings. Secondly, journalists attend press briefings without doing any research, and finally, supervisors do not mentor their journalists.

Temwani Mgunda, a journalist turned-media trainer at UNIMA says because of these factors, Malawian journalists have failed to impress during press briefings as they ask what he calls “very

shallow and obvious questions” adding “they don’t ask intelligent questions that would make politicians have a tough time articulating policies or ideologies and this has affected the quality of media’s watchdog role in Malawi”.

The recordings expose the serious lack of research by Malawian media. For instance, during the 14 January 2020 ACB press briefing, Matemba asked one reporter repeatedly to mention just one politician in the opposition who was arrested by ACB before investigations. The Director was reacting to the journalist’s allegations that ACB was taking time to arrest suspects in the electoral bribery allegations because the suspects were in government. The journalist confessed not having an example but went on to allege that it is what the people out there were saying. The director found space and punched holes in the media profession.

If I were a member of the media, I would put it back to them because I am a mouthpiece of the people of Malawi ...When these allegations are there, you should be able to ask them, which people are you referring to...? (‘ACB Press Briefing’ 2020).

Some government officials are also dismayed by how Malawian journalists underutilise the opportunity to exercise their watchdog role during press briefings. Mzati Nkolokosa, a features writer, now Director of Information with Malawi Government advises media houses to stop sending junior reporters to press briefings addressed by the president, senior government officials or leaders of the opposition. He argues that politicians of this calibre need to be asked difficult and well-researched questions devoid of emotions and personalised interests. He gives an example.

Earlier this year, the Minister of Information and Minister of Education called for a press conference to announce re-introduction of Junior Certificate Examinations and abolition of Equitable Access Selection to secondary schools and universities [Also known as Quota]. We prepared the two ministers for very difficult questions because the two issues were sensitive. But we were disappointed. Just three simple questions. Largely, the reporters were junior officers. In addition, the reporters

were not prepared by their supervisors. (Mzati Nkolokosa, personal interview, 21 April 2020).

What we see from these examples is not a sign of a weak or poor journalism in Malawi, but a culture of taking things for granted and this is reflected along the whole media structure from a junior reporter to media managers and to institutions that enforce media professionalism. The implication is that politicians get away with their sins and sometimes outshine the media in public.

However, a point needs to be made based on one of the observations from the study participants that the behaviour of the few now defines the face of the whole media fraternity in Malawi. Indeed, some journalists are able to maintain standards and help Malawi media to grow into its role as a watchdog during press briefings. They ask not only intelligent, but also difficult questions that provoke authorities to say the truth. For instance, on 21 October 2016, journalists cornered President Peter Mutharika during a press briefing held at Kamuzu Palace on why he avoided handshakes at the airport on his return from United Nations General Assembly. The president admitted arriving in the country with a dysfunctional right hand due to what he called “rheumatism” (Sangala 2020). Initially, the government had dismissed rumours about the president’s health. Thus, the press successfully grew into its role as a watchdog. Another recent example is when the Inspector General of Police alongside Malawi Defence Force organised a joint press briefing to update the media on why the police had written to HRDC to postpone further demonstrations. The press asked difficult questions that the hosts could not defend their decision sufficiently. This was commendable on the part of the media.

Partisanship and media control

One of the major issues that is overlooked by theorists of ‘interview society’ and ‘journalistic interview’ is the power disparity between press briefing organisers and journalists as well as political forces in the newsrooms. Unlike with interviews in which the press invites a source for an interview, organisers have more control during press briefings. They decide on what should be discussed, who should attend, where and for how long. While this sounds normative, this paper found that this power disparity between media and politicians is abused in Malawi, particularly

by moderators of political press briefings. The common abuse as noted from the sampled recordings is the selectivity on who should be given a chance to ask questions.

Of course, this tendency has been around in Malawi and is common among government officials. They prioritise journalists from the state media because they know they are there to churn out government propaganda. This defeats the whole purpose of ‘journalistic interview’ as conceptualised by Ekstrom because some journalists go back without answers to their questions. This affects media’s watchdog role and favours politicians who get a platform to advance their interests unquestioned.

There was a time when journalists were invited to a press briefing where the president wanted to brief them on his visit to United Nations General Assembly. Right from the start, the director of ceremonies kept picking and choosing who to ask, mostly those that were settled for, were pro-government journalists. A few journalists from the private media who forcibly grabbed the microphone were booed by the party functionaries who had thronged the venue more than the journalists (Gregory Gondwe, Personal interview 22 April 2020).

Another participant notices that this tendency of prioritising particular journalists who subscribe to organisers’ political interests during press briefings has also grown roots in the opposition political parties. He says the 2019 elections revealed that some journalists in private media are serving particular political parties.

Some political parties have planted supporters in newsrooms to support their agenda and this is evident in published articles and also questions these journalists ask during political press briefings. They fail to ask relevant questions because they belong to media houses that support certain political parties and as such their watchdog role gets compromised by the media houses’ editorial policies (Temwani Mgunda, personal interview, 21 April 2020).

Media ownership in Malawi may be one of the major problems contributing to this and frustrating the media’s watchdog role. For instance, all the top five political parties except for the newly

formed UTM, own a media house or have stakes in a particular media business. Apart from state media, the ruling DPP has stakes in *Galaxy Broadcasting Company* (Radio and Television) which was established by the DPP founder, Bingu Wa Mutharika. Malawi's main opposition political party, MCP, has stakes in *Times Media*, a media house founded by the party's founder, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. UDF has stakes in *Joy Media Group*, which was started by Bakili Muluzi, the founder of the party and also biological father of the party's current president, Atupele Muluzi. PP's leader, Joyce Banda, is the owner of *Ufulu Media* (Radio and Television).

In his PhD thesis, Anthony Gunde, traces the relationship between media ownership and politics from 1993 when Malawi turned democratic. His analysis reveals that the 1993 political transition had a lot of partisan journalism, journalists siding with particular politicians.

Firstly, Malawian journalists themselves were active participants in the political process as they had the "syndrome" that they had defeated Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial regime which put into question their objectivity. Secondly, Malawian journalists themselves were divided over political party affiliations which emanated from the ownership structures of the publications who were largely politicians (Gunde 2015, 27).

This phenomenon is also prevalent in the recordings and continues to compromise media independence and watchdog role today. From the critical political economy of the media perspective, journalists with political interests or working for media institutions with political party affiliations, are inevitably compromised. Rationally, these journalists have no option but to ask questions that tow towards their sources of bread.

Unfortunately, there is no trace of any research that has analysed political questions posed to politicians during press briefings to ascertain this partisanship in Malawi. However, there are a number of papers that have touched on the issue in passing before. For instance, in his paper titled *Factors affecting the quality of Malawian journalism*, Manda observes that Malawi's deep-rooted ethnic polarisation is also "reflected in the way the media slant their stories" (2015, 160). Similarly, in a paper titled *Vampires in the news: a critical analysis of news framing in Malawian newspapers*, Sharra argues that "media does not exist in a vacuum", meaning like any other

member of a society, journalists develop frames on particular issues and these affect their independence (2019, 73).

This paper stretched this probe by looking at how Malawian media cover elections to show how widespread this is. So far, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) is the only institution that publishes credible media monitoring reports on elections in Malawi. The IWPR mainly monitors election coverage by looking at, among others, positive and negative coverage in the media. The 2019 IWPR report shows the state media and *Galaxy Broadcasting Company* gave DPP highest positive tone on radio while *Times* and *Ufulu* radios gave MCP highest positive tone. The reason why *Ufulu* supported MCP may be because PP went into an alliance with MCP ahead of the polls. UDF received a positive tone on *Joy* and *Angaliba* radios. *Angaliba*'s concept, from the name itself, represents the interests of Yao people from the Eastern Region of Malawi where the UDF president comes from.

This political partisanship is even clearer under the negative tone section of the 2019 IWPR report. Here, even the political party rivalry between top political parties is apparent. For instance, the report says *Times*, *Joy* and *Ufulu* radios gave DPP 79.2%, 69% and 83.6% negative tone while the State media, *MBC 1* and *2* and *Galaxy* radios gave MCP 50%, 36% and 50% negative tone, respectively. This level of partisanship in the media confirms both previous findings of this paper that particular journalists ask biased questions during political press briefings. One of the reasons is their political interests. However, this affects Malawi media's watchdog role.

Interestingly, even reporters from some independent media houses without direct political connections demonstrate some level of partisanship when asking questions during press briefings. One of the research participants notes that journalists' dependence on politicians for money, including transport refunds after press briefings affect the media's watchdog role. In Malawi, it is a tradition that journalists expect allowances every time they are invited to cover an event, including political press briefings. Thus, those who pay well are likely to enjoy positive publicity and command respect in the media.

There is too much respect to the conveners of the press briefings due to the fact that afterwards, they will be given transport refunds, which leads to unnecessary

self-censorship and needless carefulness even when it is clear that the host is lying. This happens not only in the ruling politicians' press briefings, but even in the ones by the opposition. There is a need for empowerment to certain levels for journalists to be able to perform to their expected standards (Gregory Gondwe, personal interview 22 April 2020).

This demonstrates that the space for objective and independent journalism in political debate continues to narrow in Malawi. Using different strategies, politicians are able to influence and shape political debate. This affects the overall quality of the media's watchdog role. This can be curtailed if the media, including individual journalists tighten their belts, denounce their political interests as well as receiving freebies, and take question time during political press briefings seriously as an opportunity to serve the community they claim to represent.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Malawi recorded a high number of political press briefings between April 2019 and April 2020 and there is an increase in the number of journalists who attend these briefings. Furthermore, these briefings created a platform for the press to exercise its watchdog role. There were times when the press stood out remarkably as watchdogs. However, the high number of instances in which some journalists abused this opportunity raises a red flag. For instance, it has been established that some journalists attend political press briefings unprepared. This affects the quality of questions they ask. Professionally, no journalist is supposed to attend a media event without doing research. Secondly, supervisors are supposed to be cautious when identifying reporters for major political events and no matter how senior a journalist is, mentoring is important because it does not only help in asking relevant questions, but also prepares the journalist for possible follow up questions.

Another major issue of concern is the independence of the media. The paper found that media houses, particularly those with political roots are serving political interests. On the other hand, journalists are swayed by job opportunities and sometimes freebies. Inevitably, these compromise their independence. In a democracy, no matter what, the press is expected to be independent and serve the interests of the public. In countries where media regulatory councils are toothless, it is

imperative to utilise existing self-regulatory mechanisms to promote professionalism and independence at individual and newsroom levels. This is what Malawian media can do to save its reputation.

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