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Hegemony, Ideology and Political Journalism in Democratic Malawi's Broadcasting Media

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Abstract

For the first three decades following independence from Britain in 1964, the governance of Malawi was a political dictatorship under President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP). The country adopted a multiparty constitution in 1993 through a national referendum. Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF) emerged winners of the 1994 general elections and formed a government. The UDF also won the 1999 and 2004 elections. In a multiparty democracy, the right to freedom of expression should ideally empower journalists to provide in-depth and balanced reporting on issues that affect the disadvantaged populace, the majority of which lives in abject poverty. The media's attempts at providing accurate and balanced information have, however, intensified tensions with the ruling politburo. Building on the case of four journalists who were dismissed from the country's public broadcaster, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio, this paper draws from Gramscian concepts of ideology and hegemony to critique the practice of political journalism in Malawi's broadcasting media. It seeks to explore how oppressive political regimes stifle media freedom and how all this leads to the emergence of popular culture as a form of alternative media.

Key terms: Hegemony, political journalism, alternative media, political broadcasting.

Résumé

Au cours des trois premières décennies après que le pays se soit affranchi de la tutelle britannique, en 1964, le Malawi était soumis à une dictature politique, sous le règne du Président Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda et de son Parti malawite

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du congrès (MCP). Le Malawi a adopté une constitution multipartite en 1993, grâce à un référendum national. Bakili Muluzi et son Front démocratique uni (UDF) ont remporté les élections générales de 1994 et ont par la suite formé un gouvernement. L'UDF a également remporté les élections de 1999 et de 2004. Dans une démocratie multipartite, le droit à la liberté d'expression devrait, de façon idéale, permettre aux journalistes de produire des informations bien fiables et impartiales sur des sujets affectant les populations défavorisées, dont la majorité vit dans une pauvreté abjecte. Les efforts des médias, visant à fournir des informations exactes et objectives n'ont fait qu'intensifier les tensions avec le Politburo au pouvoir. Cette communication est basée sur le cas réel de quatre journalistes qui ont été renvoyés de la radiodiffusion publique nationale, la Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio, et s'inspire des concepts gramsciens de l'idéologie et de l'hégémonie, pour critiquer la pratique du journalisme politique au sein des médias radiotélévisés du Malawi. Cet article cherche à étudier la manière dont les régimes politiques oppressifs étouffent la liberté de la presse, ainsi que les conséquences d'une telle situation, notamment l'émergence d'une culture populaire, comme forme médiatique alternative.

Mots clés : hégémonie, journalisme politique, médias alternatifs, radiodiffusion politique.

Introduction

Four journalists, Patrick Mphaka, Rusk Mkwapatira, Geoffrey Msampha and the late Tom Chisuse of the public radio broadcaster, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), were fired soon after Malawi's 1999 general elections. By January 2003, the Office of the Ombudsman was holding a public inquiry into the 'unfair, summary and politically motivated' dismissals of the four journalists, fired for 'allegedly sympathizing with the opposition' in the run-up to the 1999 general elections. Testifying at the inquiry, former Chair for the Malawi Electoral Commission's Media and Public Relations Committee, Flora Chirwa described the dismissals as a 'normal trend,' since 'these things always happen' (Chimbuto 2003: 3; Chirwa 2003: Interview). In 2004, the inquiry established that the 'termination of the services' of the four journalists 'was unfair and abuse of power' (The Ombudsman 2004:33).

This discussion builds on facts of the dismissal of these journalists and critically examines Chirwa's claim that the events represent a 'normal trend'. The study defines and critiques the practice of political journalism in Malawi's broadcasting media. Critical research on Malawi's political journalism within both the print and broadcasting media is patchy and without theory-based reference to cultural studies discourse on ideology

and hegemony (Manyozo 2003). Drawing on the Gramscian concept of ideology as expounded by Stuart Hall *et al.* (1977), the examination exposes the nature of what Louis Althusser (1971) terms ideological and repressive state apparatuses in inculcating 'common sense' into the practice of political journalism (Tomaselli *et al.* 1987:7). The discussion contends that when hegemony begins to lose legitimacy and consensus, it uses force or Althusserian repressive state apparatuses, in order to maintain leadership, and such repressive apparatuses involve suppressing media freedom, as is the case in Malawi, which forces the subaltern classes to employ popular culture as an alternative media.

Malawi's media between 1964 and 1993

During its three decades of dictatorship (from independence in 1964 to 1993), Malawi had MBC *Radio* as its only broadcasting outlet, and one newspaper, *The Daily Times* with *The Malawi News* as its weekend edition. There was no television station. The other newspaper in existence, *Odini* and the monthly magazine, *Moni* were published by the Catholic Church's Montfort Press and dwelt on development and religious activities. The Department of Information published *Boma Lathu* (Our Government) in indigenous *chiChewa*, through which the state kept rural people in touch with political developments, focusing on the achievements of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP). In dictatorial Malawi, there was therefore no alternative media. Since MCP officials censored print and radio news, Malawi subscribed to the Soviet and authoritarian press paradigms. The only alternative media trickled in through the short waves from *chiChewa* services on Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation and South Africa's Channel Africa Radios.

The advent of multiparty politics in 1993 resulted in media reforms and diversification. MBC still dominates the radio market with its two stations, Radio One and Radio Two FM, which rely on one newsroom and both of which, footprint Malawi's major population centres. News coverage clearly favours the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) government (Jodal 2004; Mochaba *et al.* 2003 and Msampha, 2004). Free-to-air television broadcasting was introduced by the government in 1997 with MBC-like editorial control, probably because Television Malawi (TVM) is in reality, 'privately owned' by 'some individuals' (Senior MBC Broadcaster 2003: Interview). There are also several commercial and community radio broadcasters. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) began to provide FM services in 2001. In 1998, the Malawi

Parliament enacted the Communications Act, under which the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) was formed and empowered to provide broadcasting licenses. Malawi also became a signatory to the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Freedom of Expression, which, itself, is grounded in press paradigms of social responsibility and democratic participation.

Ideological and repressive state apparatus versus radio broadcasting

Acknowledging Vladimir Lenin (1962) as the originator of the concept of hegemony, the influential Italian communist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, conceives a hegemonic class as one, which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own means of ideological struggle (Mouffe 1979, Gramsci 1971, Hall *et al.* 1977). Whereas Lenin (1962) had conceptualized hegemony as the dictatorship of the proletariat, Gramsci's hegemony is to be found in the indissoluble union of political, intellectual and moral leadership (Mouffe 1979). Considering the ideological differences in the allied classes, visionary leadership helps the hegemonic class to negotiate the acceptance of its own ideologies. Thus, ideology becomes a 'cement which holds together' a social structure (Hall *et al.* 1977: 53; Gramsci 1971). In fact, Hall *et al.* (1977: 49) observe that Gramsci himself 'rarely uses the term ideology' in the *Prison Notebooks*, but instead uses terms such as philosophies, conceptions, systems of thought, or forms of consciousness to refer to what he terms as 'lived relation' or 'common sense.' Introducing concepts of political, intellectual and moral leadership by the 'best and most conscious comrades,' Gramsci no longer applies hegemony to the strategy of the proletariat, as Lenin had proposed, but uses it to describe the practices of the ruling classes, through which subordinate classes 'borrow corporate consciousness' in order to illuminate their understanding of the world (Gramsci 1974: 3; Hall *et al.* 1977: 53).

Attempting to expound on Gramsci's ideology, Keyan Tomaselli *et al.* (1987: 7, 23) borrow from Louis Althusser's notion of material existence, defining ideology as 'an ongoing social process,' through which corporate 'common senses' are 'produced, conveyed and received' in everyday 'social situations.' Tomaselli *et al.* (1987) further note that ideology holds societies together mainly through 'social reproduction of capitalist relations and values' through both ideological and repressive state apparatuses. Institutions such as the church, the law, the police, the military and others help the hegemonic bloc establish consensus among the allied

and subordinated groups. Gramsci's concept of ideology therefore provides a springboard for scholars and researchers to 'move beyond idealist' notions of political power, helping them understand how media structures and texts are 'controlled and appropriated' (Tomaselli *et al* 1987: 8-11).

Origin of political journalism in multiparty Malawi: The church as the intellectual class

In 1992, Malawian Catholic Bishops wrote and published a Pastoral Letter criticizing President Kamuzu Banda's hegemony for human rights abuses, which prompted the government to attempt to arrest and assassinate them. Mijoga (1996: 55) looks at the Letter as a 'public declaration of the hidden transcript.' His critique of the dichotomous Church/government relationship is, however, essentialist as it looks at the two categories as different classes. By Church, the discussion refers to the three dominant religions in Malawi; Roman Catholic, CCAP and Islam. Mijoga (1996) also looks at this alliance and cooperation as having only been due to 'the totalitarian character of the government which made it impossible for the church to enter into any meaningful dialogue.' The Church, however, had alternative choices, as demonstrated by Jehovah's Witnesses in rejecting any alliance with the MCP government. It, therefore, became the ruling class's organic intellectuals as it had a 'definite class affiliation,' thus, the Church became MCP's 'permanent persuaders' (Gramsci 1971: 10).

Introducing and defining the concept of intellectuals as a 'category' of those with 'the task of organizing, disseminating and conserving skills and ideas associated with mental rather than manual labour,' Gramsci identifies two kinds of intellectuals: organic and traditional (Hall *et al.* 1977: 50; Gramsci 1971:10-15). Organic intellectuals represent particular ideological elements whilst traditional intellectuals are non-allied though they may not be objective. By cooperating with dictatorial MCP's oppressive leadership, the Malawian Church became, not only part of the ruling class, but *metamorphosed* herself into the ruling class, thus becoming 'organically bound' as the 'dominant group's deputies, exercising subaltern functions of social hegemony and governance' (Gramsci 1971: 12). Gramsci thus denies the independence of the Church as traditional intellectuals, who are supposed to 'lack affiliation' and he notes that in history, the Church has been a 'category of intellectuals organically bound to the aristocracy' (Gramsci 1971: 12; Hall *et al.*: 50). With increasing international pressures against the 'hegemony-in-crisis'

of the MCP, the Church elements attempted to reclaim its aspired *status quo* of traditional intellectuals by 'detaching themselves' from MCP, which 'marked and ratified' the crisis of the MCP state (Gramsci 1971: 270). The Church however immediately became organic intellectuals for the UDF, for which it campaigned vigorously in the 1994 and to an extent, the 1999 general elections.

The 1992 Pastoral Letter therefore, ratified the 'crisis' of the MCP hegemony, a crisis which occurs when a dominant class has lost consensus among the groups it is leading (Mouffe 1979; Gramsci 1971). This crisis led to the 1993 referendum and consequently, the 1994 general elections, which were won by Bakili Muluzi and his UDF. Having won the 1994 elections, the UDF 'identified, conquered and assimilated' traditional intellectuals into becoming its organic intellectuals, so as to 'give itself homogeneity and an awareness of its own function in the economic, social and political fields' (Gramsci 1971: 5, 10). This process involved appropriating Aleke Banda's, first vice-president of UDF, *The Daily Nation* and *The Weekend Nation* newspapers as official government newspapers considering Aleke's position as First Vice-President of UDF. Radical journalists such as Willie Zingani and Ken Lipenga were offered some government posts. When the opposition *Daily Times* and *Malawi News* continued reporting embarrassing stories, the government ordered all its ministries and statutory corporations to stop advertising in the two newspapers, which was a financial blow, considering that the government is Malawi's biggest advertiser.

Political journalism and 'normal trends'

Focusing on language, discourse and discussion, McNair (1995) conceives political journalism as verbal, written and symbolic 'commentary about' politicians, political actors and allocation of public economic, social and cultural resources. McNair's conceptualization has a centralized media which links the political organizations and the citizens. Political journalism is thus viewed as a process through which media 'transmits, reconstructs, transforms and mediates' messages of and about political organizations through 'commentaries, editorials and interview questions' (McNair 1995: 45). Similarly, Black (1982) defines political journalism as an empirical practice by journalists through which the media 'restructures' political reality. In political journalism therefore, journalists are preoccupied with reproducing political events as they happen and as they see them with the aim of helping citizens acquire a kind of 'second-hand experience,' thus a reconstructed reality (Black 1982: 6). This means

that journalists are no longer only 'senders of political messages,' but rather like film producers or photographers, they are constructors of reality in their own right; for, they are responsible for formulating specific meanings into information by preferring, judging, choosing and arranging it. To achieve this, journalists require space and freedom to interpret events so as to enable them properly communicate messages from political actors to 'desired audiences' (McNair 1995: 11).

In Malawi, UDF has monitored and policed the process and structures through which Malawian journalists construct political reality and has done this through the employment of many forms of 'normal trends,' especially in the wake of worsening poverty and a slumping economy (UNDP 2003). Yet, even though Section 20 of the Malawian Republican Constitution (1994), Section 51 of the Communications Act (1998a) and Section 63 of the Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Act (1994) provide for balanced and equitable reporting during election periods, broadcasting journalists have faced numerous problems in attempting to meet these constitutional requirements. This discussion critiques the major forms of 'normal trends' in political broadcast journalism. The realities of state oppression on political journalism in broadcasting media in democratic Malawi were also manifested in the refusal by most broadcast journalists to participate in interviews, 'through refusing to return calls, faxes or emails' and if some of them accepted, they preferred not to have their names disclosed (Mochaba *et al.* 2003: 2, 8, 10).

1. Unconstitutional employment policies

The firing of four MBC journalists after the 1999 general elections led the Office of the Ombudsman to investigate government interference in political reporting by the broadcast media. During the hearings, MBC argued it had a policy through which it could fire any employee without giving reasons, which the hearing established, was unconstitutional (The Ombudsman 2004). The development leading to the firing, as established by the enquiry, began soon after the 1994 general elections, when the UDF government 'dished out unreceipted' MK50, 000 (then equivalent to US\$4400) to each of the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) Party Members of Parliament (MPs) in an attempt to court the latter party into a coalition government. Though Gramsci notes of hegemony as 'based on voluntary and spontaneous consent,' AFORD in a Malawi representative democracy still failed to consult its constituents about the proposed coalition (Hall *et al.* 1977: 51).

UDF's and AFORD's consensus was therefore based on personal

economic benefits, and not on negotiation as Gramsci propounds. To defend itself, the government argued that the money was for development projects within respective constituencies, but the question was, why did the opposition MCP MPs not get the money as well? The government indicated that MCP had refused the money (The Ombudsman 2004: 9). The current affairs team at MBC, led by Mphaka and Msampha sought the views of the leader of opposition, Gwanda Chakuamba, who noted that the money had been secretly given to UDF and AFORD MPs and that MCP was never approached, hence, observing that the 'MCP was segregated against' (The Ombudsman 2004: 9). Immediately after the airing of the story, the then Head of Current Affairs at the MBC, Albert Ndalama 'had his services terminated immediately,' whilst Msampha and Mphaka were 'transferred' to the Programmes Department as part of MBC's 'restructuring process,' which was only hastily arranged to deal with these journalists (The Ombudsman 2004: 9-10).

After the 1999 general elections, Msampha and Mphaka together with two others were 'summarily dismissed' for 'terrorizing their fellow employees, insubordination and bias towards the opposition' and were not given a chance to be heard (The Ombudsman 2004: 32-33). Both the allegations and dismissals were criticized by the public inquiry as contrary to principles of 'natural justice' and consequently ordered MBC to 'compensate, reinstate or consider them having reached mandatory retirement age' (The Ombudsman 2004: 33). Based on such cases, many journalists are forced to become unprofessional to avoid being sacked because even if they have to take their employers to court, the process is long, which also leaves the 'journalist economically stranded' (Msampha 2004: Interview).

Similar strategies have also been employed at the community religious broadcaster, *Radio Islam*. In 2003, America's professed global war on terror was taken to Malawi, where five alleged Islamic fundamentalists were working on Islamic development projects. President Muluzi, a Muslim himself, allowed the suspects to be whisked away from the country to be questioned without proper legal procedures. A few months later, the suspects were released from American custody, having being exonerated of any wrongdoing. The president invited the wives of the five suspects to discuss issues pertaining to their husbands. A community radio, *Radio Islam* broadcast a news item, reporting that the president 'had felt ashamed of what he had done and had apologized sincerely' (*Radio Islam* Broadcaster One 2004: Interview).

Immediately after the story was aired during a lunch hour news bulletin,

the *Radio Islam* Director, a Muslim Arab himself, 'stormed into the newsroom and he was very furious', telling his journalists that the 'authorities were not happy' with the way the journalists had reported on President Muluzi's discussion with the suspects' wives (*Radio Islam Broadcaster One* 2004: Interview). He expressed 'concern' that there was 'too much pressure' from 'these authorities,' pressure that resulted in suspensions for a senior reporter and head of news, and suspensions, which the Director told them, 'were not on record' (*Radio Islam Broadcaster Two* 2004: Interview). The then head of news, Amadu Mapira, was subjected to the humiliation and embarrassment of being made to stand up by the Director as his suspension was announced verbally during an editorial indaba (*Radio Islam Broadcaster Two* 2004: Interview). Such experiences 'frighten newcomer journalists,' making them 'obey everything they are requested' and probably 'making them function like robots' (Senior MBC Broadcaster 2003: Interview). By functioning like robots, journalists would, thus, have 'borrowed' the 'corporate consciousness' and thereby ensuring that ideology as a 'practice' would have 'succeeded in producing a natural attitude' (Tomaselli *et al* 1987: 24; Hall *et al.* 1977: 53; Gramsci 1971: 328)

2. Watchmen journalists: The MBC Media Task Force

During the 1999 general elections, Mphaka and Msampha became part of the official MBC Elections Task force. Section 57 of the Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Act mandates the Electoral Commission to ensure fair radio and television coverage of all registered political parties during election period, but does not specifically define the expression, election period or its length. In Gramsci's 'war of position,' organic intellectuals bound to different classes, engage in the process of 'articulation and disarticulation' in an attempt to win over non-allied classes and thus 'validate' particular ideologies (Mouffe 1979: 182-183; Hall *et al.* 1977: 53). MBC is a public broadcaster serviced with public funds. In Gramscian terms, it is traditional intellectual. The UDF however established an unofficial UDF Media Task Force within MBC to help the party execute its propaganda, although the party itself had come to power on the 'promise of media freedom' (The Ombudsman 2004; *Article 19* 2000). Membership of this particular force comprised senior broadcasters including Eunice Chipangula, Stanley Kachipeya, Moffat Kondowe, Maxwell Kasinja, Tailosi Bakili, George Ngaunje and Grecian Lemani, membership to and existence of which, was denied by both Chipangula and Kachipeya (The Ombudsman 2004; *Article 19*; Chipangula and

Kachipeya 2004: Personal Correspondence). Article 19 (2000) also observes that UDF provided finances, cars, cell phones and other strategic resources to help facilitate this Task Force's activities, which centred around a campaign of disinformation whilst keeping watch over journalists who tried to be professional (Article 19 2000; The Ombudsman 2004).

To keep watch over 'controversial journalists' such as Mphaka and Msampha during the 1999 general elections, the MBC 'increased the number of journalists' in the official Elections Task Force to which the two belonged. The reason for the increase was an 'anticipation that there was going to be too much work' though in reality, the Coordinator of the Task Force, Matthias Manyeka admitted, that the 'number increase' was because he was 'just carrying out orders' as 'authorities felt that the official Force was full of opposition sympathizers' (The Ombudsman 2004: 10). In Allthusserian terms, the UDF Media Task Force can be described to have been an ideological apparatus by the UDF government with which to validate its consciousness of what was and is newsworthy. Likewise, Chipiriro Matiya (2003: Interview) compares the UDF Media Task Force to his own experience as a *Television Malawi* producer, when 'some journalists' were 'pressurizing authorities' to have him fired for 'being an opposition plant' and 'anti-government.'

3. Considerations and 'Poison in a honey bottle'

Msampha observes the ineffective and outdated editorial policy at MBC, noting, 'nothing has really been reformed from the dictatorship days,' a view shared by the Article 19 (2000) Media Monitoring Project of the 1999 Malawi elections. He observes that though democracy entails freedom of expression and even when bosses at MBC encourage journalists to be free and professional, 'journalists have learnt to be careful,' self-censoring, because the 'authorities' are actually 'giving us poison in a bottle that has been labeled 'honey', and if you try to eat, you are in trouble, big trouble' (Msampha 2004: Interview). As if concurring with Msampha, Mphaka gives an example of a news item regarding a Mrs Chaponda, a staunch supporter of the opposition MCP who defected to the ruling UDF, which had been 'hastily included' in the lunch hour *chiChewa* news bulletin. Because the bulletin was already late by two minutes, the Chiponda defection story could not be read as it had been placed last. The Duty Editor, Stanley Kachipeya was very furious with Mphaka, noting he was going to 'report him to the authorities' for not being 'patriotic to UDF' and for 'sympathizing with the opposition MCP' (The Ombudsman 2004: 9-10).

Tomaselli *et al.* (1987:24) borrow and introduce the concept of 'considerations' as a practice through which journalists shape, choose, prefer and judge what is newsworthy especially in the absence or disregard of editorial policies. Similar 'considerations' at *Television Malawi* were also observed by former producer, Matiya (2003: Interview), who recalls that during editorial conferences, 'it was obvious that a story from the opposition would be nipped in the bud' and in some cases, he was 'queried by 'people' for passing a story that had heavy leaning towards the opposition'. Mphaka's failure to read Chiponda's defection story due to time considerations, Kachipeya's subsequent disappointment with Mphaka's time considerations and *Television Malawi's* news considerations are just ideological terrains on which the ruling UDF is attempting to entrench its corporate consciousness. Matiya also notes that despite the daily morning briefings during editorial conferences, the public television had 'no editorial guidelines spelling out criteria for news' but still reporters and producers were able to make sure there was 'a news blackout of the opposition.' Thus, television journalists were employing Tomaselli *et al.*'s considerations in overlooking the opposition, as such, validating UDF's consciousness (Gramsci 191).

The management of *Radio Islam* has also attempted to validate corporate consciousness in the journalists' considerations, through its own forms of 'poison in a honey bottle'. During the Al Qaeda debate mentioned hitherto, the journalist who was accompanying the wives of the suspects as they went to meet the President, had been 'advised' by the Director to 'ask his questions properly,' despite the emphasis on 'professionalism and balanced coverage' by the Director himself. (*Radio Islam* Broadcaster One 2004: Interview). After the Islamic and political 'authorities' expressed displeasure with the report indicating that President Muluzi was ashamed and apologetic, the Director put up posters in the newsroom, decreeing, 'airing of controversial matters is not allowed in this newsroom,' and the journalists were later verbally ordered 'never to talk about the UDF government, the Muslim Association of Malawi and President Muluzi' (*Radio Islam* Broadcaster One 2004: Interview). Gramscian common sense therefore was employed using intimidation, and with time, journalistic considerations have ensured that *Radio Islam* journalists 'become very careful when handling information on the ruling party and the President' (*Radio Islam* Broadcaster One 2004).

In spite of the Director's decree, some *Radio Islam* journalists continued airing controversial material through the 'Contemporary Issues' phone in and discussion programme, which was very critical of the Muslim

Association of Malawi for not having defended the interests of the 'Muslim brothers' when they were being whisked away by American intelligence officers. This prompted 'authorities' to suggest ways of 're-editing broadcast material' before being aired. Like in the case of the UDF Media Task Force at MBC, Radio Islam employed organic intellectuals sympathetic to UDF and the Muslim Association to monitor its own journalists. The Director ordered that after post-production of broadcast material ready for next-day's airing, 'experts would be coming in the evening to re-edit the material and arrange it accordingly,' which disappointed all broadcasters as 'people who were not part of our system' would be 'structuring and re-editing news' (Radio Islam Broadcaster Two 2004: Interview). However, 'we found ways to deal with that' (Radio Islam Broadcaster Two 2004: Interview). By requesting further 'expert' considerations to work on the finished broadcast material, Radio Islam's Director can be said to have been applying certain corporate professional decisions in expressing dissatisfaction with the considerations of his journalists.

4. Structuring of news

Translations are some of the ways through which ideological common sense covertly entrenches the capitalist social values. During the 1999 general elections, the then UDF representative, Sam Mpasu, who was also the Minister of Information, would give different versions of an answer in English and *chiChewa*. With regard to the arguments that 'smaller parties' were not being accorded equal and enough air time on the public radio as stipulated in Malawi's constitution, Article 19 (2000) notes that Mpasu observed in an English interview that 'UDF has gone all the way backward to give non-existent' parties a voice on the radio, 'which does not happen in Britain, Germany, America or anywhere else in the world.' In the *chiChewa* interview however, Mpasu changes his story, defiantly contending that 'some small parties whose existence was not known to many people' should not be heard or 'allowed to campaign on the radio' because they 'do not have supporters' and are 'failing to campaign in the villages.'

The differential broadcast translations by the minister were a public relations showcase, to overwhelm the common illiterate villager about UDF's generosity to these seemingly unimportant parties, whilst assuring the international community that the government was committed to fair and balanced coverage of all political parties. Such abuse of public broadcasting media for UDF is statistically recorded by the Norwegian

Centre for Human Rights (NORDEM), which observed in May 2004, that MBC allocated 97.7 per cent whilst TVM allocated 79.5 per cent of election coverage to the ruling UDF coalition (Jodal 2004: 10-11). Similarly, structuring of TVM election programming also involved journalists' professional considerations, which were openly biased against the opposition, as auto-ethnographically observed by independent election observers:

On Saturday 22 May, about 36 hours after the voting in Malawi's third multiparty election had ended, Television Malawi televised 'Election Update 2004', [which] started with a live broadcast of the opposition coalition's press conference, [whose] spokesperson complained that the Electoral Commission [was delaying] announc[ing] the result. [...] After five minutes, the transmission was cut off. Instead, the viewers got music videos! Ten minutes later, the programme resumed. The journalist opened by stating his surprise that the opposition questioned the counting procedures [and] said 'in order to balance the view by the so-called coalition, we have now invited the publicity spokesperson of the UDF to present the government's views of the alleged delays [by the] Malawi Electoral Commission. [...] The publicity spokesperson spoke for about ten minutes [without] interruptions, stressing that the government had full confidence in the MEC and that he was surprised that the opposition displayed so little patience [and suggested] that the coalition was scared of losing. [...] The journalist did not question the UDF spokesperson's statement or why it had taken longer to announce results. [...] Then the journalist asked the UDF representative: 'Do you have anything to add, Sir?' (Rakner, Bakken, Svasand and Tostensen 2004: 3).

By employing professional considerations which seemingly favour the ruling UDF, some broadcast journalists have, in Gramscian sense, *metamorphosised* themselves into becoming deputies for the ruling party, thus organic intellectuals.

5. Concerned authorities

In response to a Capital FM radio's phone-in programme in 2003, during which many Malawians criticized the brutality of the Malawi Police Force, dismissing its reform programme as a 'sham', the Inspector General of Police 'expressed concern' with the 'insults' in the programme. Some 'concerned officers' requested the Station Manager, Aladin Osman to visit the Southern Region Police Headquarters for a 'friendly chat' over the contents of the programme, to which Osman refused, requesting them, 'in turn to contribute to the programme if they felt they had anything to say' (Osman 2003: Interview). Osman therefore refused to borrow and employ UDF's corporate consciousness in developing Capital FM's professional considerations of what is newsworthy (Hall, Lumley and

MacLennan 1977).

The question of anonymous 'authorities' looms large in discussions with journalists. Radio Islam suspensions of Mapira and Lameck Masina were executed because of 'pressure' from 'authorities', which even involved an 'angry email' ordering the Director to 'immediately do something' about 'particular broadcasts' (Radio Islam Broadcaster Two 2004: Interview). The same 'concerned authorities' were not 'happy with the Malawi Institute Journalism (MIJ) Radio for its coverage of issues that 'seemed to sympathise with the opposition' (Senior MBC Broadcaster 2003: Interview). Because of 'these authorities' MBC refused to air paid adverts by the opposition announcing a calendar of their rallies during the 2004 campaigns, despite the broadcaster's crippling debts which resulted to confiscation of some of its property by tax authorities (Manyozo 2003). The political nature of 'concerned authorities' was evident during the Ombudsman's inquiry, during which it was established that the then MBC's Acting Director General, the late Wilson Pamkuku, had once been a personal assistant to Mpasu. Pamkuku would later on request Mpasu to fire the four journalists, which on record, the Minister refused to have authorized (The Ombudsman 2004).

6. Policing political journalism

Sections 41 and 43 of the Communications Act (Malawi 1998a) empower the president or the police to 'seize a radio station' in the 'best interest of the public.' For community broadcasters, Section 51 of the Communications Act restricts them from airing political broadcasts during elections, and restricts them from airing programmes in 'support of democracy,' despite mounting evidence that democracy and politics are big development items because they determine the process that could improve a people's status quo (Malawi 1998b). Against the provisions in the Communications Act, MBC consistently denied the opposition candidates access during the 1999 and 2004 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns. President Muluzi banned all public debates and demonstrations against his party's intentions to manipulate the constitution and allowed him to stand for an unconstitutional third term, despite lack of support for the bill in Parliament.

Policing political journalism has also involved the use of force, brutality and physical harassment of broadcast journalists, the imprisonment of MIJ Radio journalist, Maganizo Mazeze and the dismissals of MBC journalists being examples. Soon after the third multiparty general elections, in 2004, *MIJ Radio* was 'unconstitutionally' closed down by

the police 'in public the interest' for featuring a live interview with an opposition spokesperson, who rejected the results of the elections and threatened demonstrations. Thus, despite democracy, the practice of political journalism continues to encounter Chirwa's 'normal trends.' In fact, the term 'normal trend' could have been former *The Daily Times* journalist, Joseph Chimbuto's interpretation regarding what Chirwa actually said during the Ombudsman's inquiry. Chirwa contends that the question posed to her was 'Were you surprised that Mphaka was dismissed after getting a recommendation letter?' to which she maintains she had replied 'No, I was not surprised, after all this happened to me'. In elaboration, she however notes 'when one gets employed, they should expect to retire, to resign or to be dismissed, because when you are employed you can be dismissed, so I was not surprised, because these things happen' (Chirwa 2003). Chimbuto's concept of 'normal trend' is therefore not very far from Chirwa's notion of 'these things happen,' for in both cases, employers overlook the ethical and the constitutional provisions on fair labour practices by firing employees without giving them reasons.

Malawi's popular music as alternative media

Gramsci (1971) observes that if an aspiring class or power bloc fails to provide a conducive environment for a democratic production of knowledge, allied ideological elements withdraw their support and later on begin to oppose the aspiring hegemony. He terms this failure to maintain an alliance a crisis in hegemony – 'a crisis of authority' (Gramsci 1971: 210; 275). At this stage, a ruling class, is 'no longer leading but only dominant' as people have become 'detached from their traditional ideologies' (Gramsci 1971: 276). In a democracy, the existence of both the Hegelian thesis and anti-thesis facilitates the process or war over position, thus, synthesis. In the absence of alternative media, or even in the presence of weak anti-thesis, there emerges the unofficial anti-thesis, which is a popular method of producing and circulating subaltern consciousness, which is usually in direct opposition to the dominant consciousness and lies outside state control (Gramsci 1971; Storey 2003).

Gramsci notes that when a state is oppressive, and loses its legitimacy to lead by consensus, thus 'prolonging' the crisis in hegemony, the 'representatives of the new order in gestation' or the subordinate classes, led by a new aspiring hegemony, inspired by 'rationalistic hatred' for the crumbling hegemony, 'propagate utopias and fanciful schemes' (Gramsci 1971: 242). Gramsci's fanciful schemes refer to popular culture, itself

constituting what John Storey terms an 'arena of hegemony,' a 'key site for the production and reproduction of hegemony' (2003: 48-49). Storey's hegemony is not Lenin's unilinear hegemony, but rather a Gramscian hegemony, itself a process of negotiating consensus, thus hegemony is conceived as a 'compromise equilibrium' between contradictory forces (Storey 2003: 49). John Fiske (1989: 1-2) argues that popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that contradictorily serve the interests of the dominant. Taking a culturalist stance, Fiske (1989) observes that popular culture is made from within and below, noting that there is an element of popular culture that lies outside social control.

In Malawi, UDF's organized attempts at stifling political reporting have resulted in the emergence of political popular music, which heavily criticizes the government over issues such as inflation, human rights abuses, corruption and mismanagement of taxpayers' resources. Much of this music draws from indigenous folk tales or Bible stories, in which case, the subordinate classes create their own meanings. Thus, popular musicians including Mlaka Maliro or Billy Kaunda constitute opinion leaders or intellectuals organically bound to the subordinate ordinary Malawians. Relying on oral texts and the depth of Malawi's indigenous languages with parables, idioms, riddles and proverbs, popular music therefore provides an alternative public sphere for political journalism, whose media texts lie outside state control, for their meaning is derived from pleasure. In the popular song, *Chinyengo* (hypocrisy) for instance, Mlaka Maliro draws on the Bible story of Isaac and Jacob, noting that hypocrisy is like Jacob's sheepskin, which will be found out. This song narrates the story of a promiscuous uncle who has divorced his wife due to adultery. Without mentioning places and names, Maliro is able to offer a social commentary on former President Muluzi's widely publicized separation from his first wife, Anne. Though the official announcement deliberately omitted the reasons for the separation, an omission repeated by all media in Malawi, *Chinyengo* is able to tell us about the adultery of the woman, the uncle's wife. Similarly, Kaunda's song *Agalatiya mwataya chipangano* (Galatian, you have broken the promise) criticizes the UDF government for its failure to reduce poverty as per its 1994 promises. Evison Matafale's *Watsetsereka* (You have fallen) narrates a traditional tale of a greedy ant to symbolically warn of the impending fall of the greedy UDF government.

Separating 'serious' from 'popular music,' Theodor Adorno (1994: 206-209) argues that popular music is composed in such a way that the

process of 'translation is already planned and achieved within the composition itself,' a kind of 'multiple-choice questionnaire,' in which a listener can 'cross out' what he does not like and 'check' what he likes.' Even though some of the popular musicians have been verbally attacked by UDF politicians, their music has continued to enjoy air time on MBC, thus ensuring the continued existence of alternative media texts within the heavily monitored public media. Hall (1994: 463) introduces the concept of 'cultural struggle' to describe a process through which members of a particular cultural community distort, resist, negotiate or recuperate meaning. In the absence of an anti-thesis, many Malawians are able to 'rearrange' and 'rearticulate' dominant messages coming out of MBC by means of consuming popular music.

Afterthoughts

Despite the constitutional recognition of democracy as a form of governance, contemporary Malawi faces increasing political and socio-economic challenges, which require strong political will, accessible public spheres as well as a committed political journalists to facilitate the process of accountability. The majority of Malawians are rural, poor and illiterate, which places a massive responsibility on the broadcasting media to educate, inform and challenge people to actively perform their citizenship obligations. Unfortunately for Malawi, lack of political legitimacy through massive election irregularities especially in the 1999 and 2004 elections and the lack of community consultation by political parties have resulted in the lack of consensus for the dominant allied classes, thus UDF is 'no longer leading but only dominant' since the village-based alliance partners have become 'detached from' its 'traditional ideologies' (Gramsci 1971: 276). The reason for continued media suppression under democratic dispensation could be explained by the fact that Malawi never actually transformed from a dictatorship, thus only achieved a form of what Gramsci (1971: 58) terms 'transformismo' or a passive revolution, in which the old MCP found itself ruling as UDF. Media suppression can also be explained in the fact that major political parties conceptualize media freedom as increased structures and advanced technology not as a set of journalistic practices (Manyozo 2003: 15). Importantly, continuing media suppression in Malawi is a manifestation of a protracted crumbling of the UDF hegemony.

The foregoing has therefore established that Gramscian concepts of hegemony and ideology make amenable the examination of issues of political power and how ruling parties maintain it, through both ideological

and repressive state apparatuses, resulting to many forms of 'normal trends' and 'poison in honey bottles.' From this position, the study has argued that popular music texts provide an alternative public sphere where musicians become traditional intellectuals providing an unofficial anti-thesis, the official forms having been suppressed by the dominant class. Drawing on specific examples from Malawi, the discussion has established how UDF as a crumbling hegemony employs many forms of 'normal trends' to ensure opposing views are excluded from the contents of the public broadcasters, MBC and TVM. Musicians such as Mlaka Maliro however, have employed folk media in providing an alternative political media, itself a site where meanings of alternative popular media texts are negotiated by the subaltern classes (Storey 2003).

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