

Journal of Development and Communication Studies

Vol. 4, No. 1, January-June, 2015. ISSN (Online & Print): 2305-7432.

<http://www.devcomsjournalmv.org>.

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Journalists as watchdogs of good governance: Challenges and some ways forward⁵

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Cite this article as: Chitsulo, E. 2015. Journalists as watchdogs of good governance: Challenges and some ways forward, *Journal of Development and Communication Studies*, 4(1): 62-65. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jdcs.v4i1.5>

Introduction

About 30 years ago, on November 25, 1985 to be specific, I walked into the newsroom with a hybrid attire- a blue blazer jacket, a grey pair of trousers, an over-washed stripped white shirt, and a religiously-polished but severely mended pair of brown shoes. And these were the best I could afford after working for a good five years in the public service as a teacher. But, whether one looked like a Christmas tree or not, ladies and gentlemen, this was the place to be if one were to talk about journalism practice in Malawi. I had arrived.

Of course, the eyes I encountered were not as friendly or as familiar as those I had left in a secondary school staffroom. Hostilities and scorns could be discerned from the few faces that managed to raise their heads as we were introduced, as a seed the Ngwazi (President Hastings Kamuzu Banda) wanted to use in his quest to 'graduatise' the newsroom.

From compartment to compartment – as the various newsroom sections were segmented in those days- we were introduced to such cold, untrusting faces; most of them seemingly over-worked staffers, busy minding their day's business. I was walked from the long-serving Acting Editor's Desk in the corner, to the Sports Desk, Features Desk, Telex Room, and finally the Chief Reporter's Desk, which fed current news to the *Daily Times*, Malawi's only daily at the time- run by Blantyre Newspapers Limited, a subsidiary of Blantyre Printing

⁵ Abridged speech made at the 16th Graduation Ceremony of the Malawi Institute of Journalism, Blantyre, Malawi 28 November, 2013. The author died March 15, 2015, after a three-day illness, while serving as Managing Editor of Nation Publications Limited.

and Publishing Company (BP&P) Limited. The other companies that formed the media empire of the Ngwazi were: Blantyre Print and Packaging Company Limited, Olivetti (formerly Gaskells Limited), Times Bookshops Limited, Dzuka Publishing Company Limited, Paper and Printing Supplies Limited (PPS), Blantyre Periodicals Limited and Graphic Lintas Worldwide.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, if you did not work for the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), the Malawi News Agency (MANA), or the Times, you were not in serious journalism employment in Malawi. The other prestigious places of work were the Reserve Bank of Malawi in Lilongwe. The NICO Group of companies, the then Commercial Bank of Malawi or Limbe Leaf Tobacco Company- where the Chairman or kingpin was one and only person, the only Honourable JZU Tembo, the only person who was referred to by that title when MPs went with mere designations of Mr, Mrs, Miss or Dr – if at all there were any in parliament.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, as we ended at the Chief Reporter's Desk, we had gone through at least three interviews, the last being with the Chairman, who only welcomed us to BP&P, the Ngwazi's company, where, he said, the policy was to ensure the good name and image of the Life President, the Malawi Congress Party and the Ngwazi's diplomatic friends. Note that by the time we were taken to the chairman's boardroom, special branch operatives had been to our villages to find out who we were, what we had done in life and if we were not linked to dissidents abroad. Ladies and gentlemen, this was, for some us, the beginning of our story in journalism.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, parents and relatives, I have gone to great lengths to outline those first steps in journalism just to emphasise that as long as the Ngwazi ruled, the issue was about "secretarial journalism", "Kamuzuism", and the one-party rule. Words such as "watchdogs, good governance, transparency or accountability" were not in our academic or professional vocabulary. The catchwords were unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline, on which the Malawi Congress Party and the Malawi nation were founded.

However, let me say that during that period of the strong hand of the Ngwazi, there was a lot of human capacity development. For those at work, training and refresher courses were a critical component of the employee's package, which is why a lot of us were exposed to the best ways of doing things. We travelled across the continents in search of knowledge because the Ngwazi wanted informed indigenisation; which explains why a lot of us were trained. For those who worked in the Ngwazi's other empires such as BP & P or worked directly under him in ministries such as Agriculture or Works, professional training was always assured. This also explains why at the advent of multipartyism in the early 1990s, we were skilled enough to jump ship and go our own ways and still remain relevant to our audiences. This, ladies and gentlemen, also explains the origins of the first critical and robust media outlets that graced the landscape in the early 1990s. It also explains the many vibrant technocrats and politicians who opposed the Ngwazi head-on, and went on with the new political dispensation as an informed lot.

Our watchdog achievements

Enough about the past and the Ngwazi. At this point, allow me to outline a few landmarks that we, the journalists and watchdogs of governance, have achieved in contemporary media history in Malawi.

- The Mwanza Four murders
- The Bingu wa Mutharika story at COMESA
- The Joyce Banda clemency of an unqualified prisoner
- The K1.7 billion case
- Gender-based violence
- The illegal tobacco sales across the borders
- The 187 million education scam
- The Yusuf Mwawa abuse of office case that landed him in jail
- The ongoing Malawi-Tanzania border wrangle
- The Vwaza Marsh contract issue now in the courts and
- The Capital Hill Cashgate

So, what does it take to be a good watchdog?

- Getting a sound education and training; reading, and the continuous endeavour to understand issues and gain knowledge. We need to get an education in the broad, French sense of the word.
- Understanding of why one is in the newsroom: this understanding should go beyond having a job, but getting to further depths of philosophies such as “Adventism” and “missionarism”.
- Understanding of the people’s history, plans and aspirations and what they scheme to achieve for themselves, their children and their country. To me, as a practitioner, it means reading any documentation on such landmark events as the development papers put together after the Symposium on Nyasaland, a gathering of global luminaries that took place in Blantyre in 1962; going through the Ngwazi’s statement of Malawi’s Development Policies (DEVPOLs); being acquainted with Malawi Vision 2020, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), the Economic Recovery Plan, and so on.
- Distinguishing an enemy from a friend, a partner from an exploiter, excellence from mediocrity.
- Getting acquainted with how decision-makers or our leaders conceive and implement development policies.
- Befriending policy-makers, political, civic or corporate leaders without necessarily being too close to be bribed and corrupted by that friendship.

Challenges and ways forward

Like most professionals today, the media is beset with challenges which, I think, need addressing from the time one gets into a classroom for the first time, not only when one passes through journalism school. The following challenges need immediate attention:

- Weak educational standards; where language and content are not getting the same attention they used to. This manifests itself in the type of questions we frame, the stories we write and the non-contextualised nature of our output.
- A fluid curriculum; one which keeps changing all the time, and most times not in tandem with what students will need in their professional lives.
- Persistence of a euro-centric curriculum; one that ignores realities on the ground, to the point that what we consider news values (the 5 Ws and H, Conflict, sex, scandals, novelty, etc) become constant points of contention between journalists and news consumers today.
- Weak industrial or business base; one that sometimes gives rise to a poor work environment for journalists and leads, in some cases, to malpractice such as corruption, bribery, and propaganda operations.

Ladies and gentlemen, we can mitigate some of the challenges by overhauling our entire education and training system so that it produces diplomats, graduates and workers that meet the immediate needs of our industry, communities and country. Secondly, we need to professionalise the media to make sure it is taken as an equal and competitive partner with other sectors of endeavour. Thirdly, we need a fresh conversation and consensus on our values so that these are infused into our young people, who should in turn help realise the aspirations of our people, but not add to the confusion we have presently. Finally, there is need for a strong link between industry and academia to ensure that what is taught in class is recognisable in the newsroom.

The media is power. It can move our aspirations as a nation and give meaning to our lives.

Thank you very much.