

The Impact of Political Interference on Public Media Functions: The Case of Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC)

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ABSTRACT: *Media practice faces untold challenges in both democratic and nondemocratic countries. Among those many challenges, the issue of interference of politics on the editorial functions of the media is chief. The purpose of this thesis was to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public media; with focus on the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Malawi is a democratic country where like many other democratic countries, its constitution allows for free media practice. Nevertheless, the situation in which the country's public broadcaster operates is pathetic. The public broadcaster does not function independently, and instead of catering for the citizenry, it is used as a tool for propaganda by each political party that assumes power. The funding that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation receives from government, the laws guiding the functions of the broadcaster, and the process by which top officials of the broadcaster are appointed, are some of the things that create fertile ground for interference. There are a lot of problems that come with political interference on the functions of public media. Since the public broadcaster now only broadcasts the government's positives, the citizenry is robbed of the truth that lies behind the untold stories; the negatives. In addition to that, the audience has lost trust in the public broadcaster, such that most people now do not listen to or watch the public broadcaster. Worse still, the interference of politics deprives media practitioners of their freedom. They cannot freely express themselves for the fear of losing their jobs. This thesis advocates for the emancipation and revolution of the captured media. The Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation must be left to be an independent entity as is supposed to be the case in order to better serve the public.*

KEYWORDS: political interference, public media, functions Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC)

INTRODUCTION

With the rising political tensions and hunger for power, politicians desire to be known to the masses, more so incumbent governments and politicians. This results in the scramble over the media waves, and the incumbent assumes advantage to control public media. The media is a fundamental force in the affairs of every nation and some have branded it the fourth arm of government (Albuquerque 2005).

The media therefore, is supposed to be independent and free from any external pressure in order to well perform its obligations of informing, educating and entertaining the audiences. In as far as the independence of a media outlet is concerned, ownership cannot be overlooked. Whether a media outlet is independent or not will indubitably depend on who owns it.

It is beyond doubt that public media outlets have been directly controlled by ruling parties and have therefore favoured incumbent parties or candidates by being used as tools to castigate political opponents among others. These media outlets have faced immense government and political pressure that has compromised journalistic independence and integrity. For instance, Mbeke, Ugangu, & Orlale (2010), state that the Kenyan Broadcasting Cooperation has failed to offer impartial coverage because of interference from government officials and politicians.

In Malawi, we have watched the public broadcaster conform to the government of the day's interests. Recently, the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC), has been used as a tool to advance political agenda and castigate political opponents.

This thesis reports the findings of a thorough study to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public media. Emphasis is placed on journalistic independence, transparency and accountability, and equal access to government resources. Also central to this study is exploration of the constitutional provisions towards a free press.

Problem Statement

Public media houses are supposed to be independent and serve the interests of the citizens. They are meant to offer information, education and entertainment to the masses without fear or favour, affection or ill will. In terms of programs and news coverage, these media houses ought to offer equal chances to all the citizenry to express themselves through their outlets. This is to say, regardless of one's political, racial and religious affiliation, opportunity to utilise the public media to disseminate information must be granted.

However, public media houses have for so long failed to offer impartial coverage because of interference from government officials and politicians. Benson, Powers, & Neff (2017), though finding some positive impacts of public media on democracy note that, it must be acknowledged that some publicly funded broadcasters are less than civically optimal, producing content that uncritically reflects the views of those in positions of power or that fails to attract audiences, representative of the citizenry as a whole. There is a conflict of interest

dilemma that hits public service media as an institution established to serve civil society and regulated, financed and controlled by governments in their role as representatives of their elective publics. In terms of news coverage and programming, public media houses have favoured the party in government.

Media freedom stands in untold danger if public media houses continue to function under the pressure of incumbent governments and politicians. The media practitioners shall bid farewell to autonomy and the citizenry shall be deprived of content that serves the interests of the general public.

Aim

The aim of this study was to assess the impact of political interference on editorial functions of public media.

Objectives

- To identify the causes of political interference in the operations of public media
- To identify the effects of political interference on public media functions
- To identify possible ways of dealing with political interference on public media

Significance of the Study

This study shall contribute to the already existing body of knowledge as regards the extent to which politicians influence the functions of public media, the effects of political interference on public media functions and the suggested solutions to the problem.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of the study demanded that data be collected from people that are directly connected by reason of employment either currently or otherwise to the public broadcaster, whose willingness to participate in the study was not guaranteed. Also, because the researcher is up and coming, access to the respondents proved to be problematic.

Overview of the Methodology

This study adopted a case study approach designed to assess the impact of political interference in the functions of public media. Respondents were chosen using the purposive method of sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents and a semi-structured questionnaire was used as an interview guide to generate qualitative data that was later analysed using the qualitative content analysis method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study will use normative theories which were first proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called “Four Theories of the Press”. A normative theory describes an ideal way for a media system to be controlled and operated by government, authority, leader and the public. These theories are basically different from other communication theories because they do not provide scientific explanation or prediction. At the same time these four theories of the press came from so many sources rather than a single source. Normative theories are more focused on the relationship between the press and the government than the press and the audience. They are more concerned with the ownership of the media and who controls the press or media in the country.

Authoritarian theory

This theory states that all forms of communication are under the control of the government elite or authorities and influential bureaucrats (Wasserman, 2006). To the authoritarians, the press is a means to enhance the government’s power in the country. The authorities have all rights to permit any media and control it by providing licences and make certain censorship.

Libertarian theory

This theory sees people as capable of finding and judging good ideas from bad. The press should not restrict anything, even negative content may give knowledge (Fourie, 2007). The libertarian thoughts are exactly against the authoritarian theory.

Social responsibility theory

This theory allows free press without any censorship but at the same time the content of the press should be discussed in public panels and media should accept any obligation from public interference or professional self-regulations or both (Irvan, 2016). This theory lies between the authoritarian and the libertarian theories because it gives total media freedom on one hand and external controls on the other hand.

Soviet theory

This theory states that the government controls all media to serve working classes and their interest. The state has absolute power to control any media for the benefits of the people (Huang, 2003). The whole purpose of the mass media is to educate the greater masses of the working class, and the public is encouraged to give feedback.

Context to the Study

Public media vulnerability

Other quarters argue that the issue of media capture by the state burdens both private and public media. Though agreeing to the notion, Bajomi-Lazar (2015), stresses that of all media, public service broadcasters seem particularly susceptible to political pressures. In reference to a study focusing on public television in 20 European countries and conducted by the Open Society Institute (OSI) – Budapest in 2005, he suggests that public service media are highly vulnerable, because buffer institutions fail to protect their professional autonomy and political independence from political pressures.

In admitting the existence of the problem, Benson, Powers, & Neff (2017), though finding some positive impacts of public media on democracy note that, it must be acknowledged that some publicly funded broadcasters are less than civically optimal, producing content that uncritically reflects the views of those in positions of power or that fails to attract audiences, representative of the citizenry as a whole.

Causes of media capture

According to Benson, Powers, & Neff (2017), inadequate funding can contribute to problems of political interference on public media operations, but even more important are the roles played by legal and organizational structures specifying where that money comes from, how it is used, and who decides. These structural frameworks shape public media's contributions to democracy by strengthening or weakening professional autonomy and civic accountability—two goals that are closely related but not identical. Autonomy has been linked to the flourishing of aesthetic and intellectual creativity and risk taking (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

Likewise, democratic normative theory highlights the need for media to be civically accountable—that is, to respond to public needs for comprehensive, critical, and diverse content (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2010). Sociological theory suggests that such civically useful content is more likely to be produced when journalists and other cultural producers have greater autonomy from partisan political and economic pressures; even so, civic accountability often needs to be encouraged through specific policy measures (Bourdieu, 2005). According to Benson, Powers, & Neff (2017), these twin goals are captured well in the words of a recent Goldsmiths University of London inquiry on the future of public service television: The BBC . . . needs governance and regulatory structures that will allow it to exercise a meaningful degree of independence while at the same time ensuring that it can be held to account when it fails to serve its audiences adequately (Putman, 2016).

Editorial independence versus accountability

Interference on the editorial freedom of media, whether by governments or any other self-interested constituency, is contrary to the basic principles of a free, open and pluralistic society.

However, securing independence from potential interference by cooperate owners of media businesses and at the same time being accountable to them is a common and difficult balance in any media business. It is far more difficult for public service media to expose government to critical investigations and harsh commentary. There is a conflict of interest dilemma that hits public service media as an institution established to serve civil society and regulated, financed and controlled by governments in their role as representatives of their elective publics.

According to Nissen (2016), it is worth noting that the importance of editorial independence is not limited to public media. This is a well-established principle for any 'free press'. The editorial policy of a media outlet living up to journalistic ideals is not decided by outside forces and external pressures, whether they be politicians or economic interests. Historically, in the West at least, it has been generally agreed that the owners of a newspaper should limit their influence to the appointment and dismissal of the editor-in-chief and not interfere with the content of the daily paper. The reason behind this principle boils down to an issue of trustworthiness by and for the public and thus securing the media's special role in acting as an 'unfettered watchdog' for public interests and the healthy functioning of a democratic society. That is precisely the reason why media typically enjoy constitutional protections, unlike other industries. The state has an inherent obligation to defend the interests of society and citizens against perceived wrongdoings carried out by the very same state and its political actors. This distinction between state and society is one recurring theme in governance disputes over editorial independence and also the reason why the accountability principle is not easily handled (Nissen, 2016).

Unfortunately, most members of public media service get fired if they try to oppose the political elite that seek to control the operations of public media. Although sacking top management is an extreme and highly visible outcome, it is really only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface one finds a broad range of ongoing power struggles over varied aspects, including programme policies and stipulation about the coverage of news and current affairs, conflicts that can be just as, if not more, detrimental to editorial independence. It is surprising that little has been documented and thoroughly analysed to explain the sources, dynamics and patterns of such conflicts and specially to describe how governmental interference takes place also in mature democracies with public service media institutions that are supposed to operate at arm's length from such interference (Nissen, 2016).

Law; an instrument for media capture

The unlimited independence of public service media from political authorities is not the issue. The mere fact that there is a legal framework for public service media institutions with general operating rules and given that all or a considerable part of the funding is allocated by governments leads rather naturally to a certain and unavoidable dependency that is not fundamentally unhealthy or problematic. The key issue, however, is to understand why

editorial processes are vulnerable to governmental influence to a degree that merits setting up particular boundaries.

It is unfortunate that politics uses its instruments to exert influence over the public media. According to Rexha (2015), the main instrument that politics uses is the law – as the grounds which regulate the rapport between the public media and the political power. Examples of the most independent public broadcasters can be found in those countries where politics has adopted and executed such legislation that limits the possibility of politics to exert influence over the main components related to the independence of the public media. In the case of the Radio Television of Kosovo – RTK, politics has failed to follow this practice. The political power in Kosovo has used the law as an instrument to exert influence on the two main parameters related to the editorial independence of the broadcaster: the manner of financing and the election of the medium’s Board. The consequences of such influence are reflected on the editorial policies and program content, which render this broadcaster that has the legal status “public” into a medium that serves as a “loudspeaker” for the voice of the political power.

Public media and politics in Africa

In the African context, one key area where the role of the media is most crucial is in the expected contribution of the media to the process of establishing open, democratic and stable societies (Ansah, 1992). But this resides in the media’s ability to expose and criticize bureaucratic incompetence, corruption, abuse of power, and the violation of human rights.

Ansah adopts the position that the mass media constitutes the institutional framework for exercising a regular scrutiny on the activities of the government to see how performance matches promise or how programmes are being implemented. In a democratic society, actions of the government, which is only a trustee of the collective will and power of the people, are expected to be regulated by the force of public opinion and the press is the most appropriate medium for gauging and reflecting public opinion.

But despite this fundamental role of the media in Africa, a number of obstacles still stand in their way, seriously and negatively impacting on their roles. One of these obstacles are political problems. Predominant patterns of state ownership, management and control of the media in many African countries provide little leeway for the free access to information for the media and the expression of critical or opposing viewpoints. Besides, although most African constitutions contain clauses on freedom of speech or expression, few have explicit guarantees of media or press freedom and free flow of information.

According to the Kenya media vulnerability study done by Mbeke, Ugangu, & Orlale (2010), Kenyan media face immense government, commercial and political pressure that constrains journalistic independence and integrity. Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation (KBC) is a state owned and controlled broadcaster whose independence has been compromised for a long time.

KBC has failed to offer impartial coverage because of interference from government officials and politicians. For a long time, KBC was a monopoly in broadcasting and this enhanced political competition for its microphones. The liberalisation of the airwaves and the political environment in 1991 did not seem to change it. This is because KBC is controlled and funded by the state. There is lack of political will to reduce political interference at KBC. Election observers roundly criticised KBC for its bias against Prime Minister Odinga and partiality for President Kibaki.

Suggested solutions; African context

In his paper Ochilo (1993), suggests possible solutions to political interference on public media operations. He says there's need for African countries to have a provision of explicit clauses in their constitutions which guarantee press freedom and the establishment of mass media free from political and governmental controls.

Besides, there's need for decentralisation of media ownership in Africa in order to allow individuals, groups, trade unions and non-governmental organisations to own the media as one of the ways of easing levels of political controls.

Furthermore, the political interference on the activities of the media may be addressed through the establishment of national media trusts and commissions whose purpose would be to protect the media against governmental pressure and ensure that media professionals go about their jobs without fear of reprisals from the government in power.

Politics and public media in Malawi

The Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, provides citizens with the right to freedom of expression and to report and publish freely. Section 36 reads; The press shall have the right to report and publish, within Malawi and abroad, and to be accorded the fullest possible facilities for access to information. In addition, section 34 of the same says that every person shall have the right to freedom of opinion, including the right to hold opinions without interference, to hold, receive and impart opinions (Mhagama & Kanyang'wa, 2011).

In support of these rights, certain regulation policies have been created to assist in the exercise of these rights. One of these policies is the Communications Act (1998) which directs in the regulation of both public and private media so as to serve the public interest. The Communications Act provides for the formation of the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) as an independent body to allow a level playing field in the practice of broadcasting among other duties. Despite these provisions and policies, the public broadcaster seems to be in immense captivity of every government that assumes power. The news coverage and programming are inclined toward those that are in power.

In a study conducted by Manda (2006), 83% of respondents to the questionnaire on opinions about the national broadcaster recommended that for the MBC and TVM to become public in

name and deed, there's need for the two stations to be given editorial freedom. They recommended that this could be achieved by making the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) free from political influence. Board members, the respondents suggested, should be appointed through a public hearing like is the case with South African public institutions. Further, they recommended that the management of both TVM and MBC should be appointed on merit rather than for an individual's political allegiance. Once MACRA, MBC and TVM boards and top management staff are appointed on merit, they will be able to work professionally and treat all Malawians equally.

Revisit and amend the Communications Act

In the same study, 72 % of the respondents suggested that the Malawi Communications Act (1998) should be revisited because it gives too much power to politicians to directly or indirectly interfere with the operations of MACRA, TVM and the MBC. They argued that since the president appoints chairperson of management boards of the three institutions, they cannot work professionally and independently of the executive, the minister of information and the Cabinet. According to this research's report, the respondents' fear was confirmed when President Mutharika addressed a public rally in Blantyre. He said, "I hear [the Director of Public Prosecutions Ishmael Wadi] says he is independent. How do you become independent from someone who appoints you?" (Nation 11/09/06). Earlier the Minister of Information, Patricia Kaliati, argued that the government could not pay the MBC for airtime used during its live coverage of parliament because she

"thought they (MBC) are a state-owned institution. So, they can't pay the MBC k40m for covering parliament live. It was MBC's social responsibility as a public broadcaster."

This research report continues to argue that one would be misled if he thought that it's only politicians that equate public and state or government. Manda (2006), quotes Kanthunkhako Jere who in the Nation of 26 July 2006, urged for more funding for the MBC and TVM so that they continue making known the government development agenda and policies. Jere further said the president and his party had a right to use public media because there is only "one State President." Jere's point was reminiscent of assertions made in the Daily Times of 10 February 2000 by Clement Stambuli, then Minister of Information;

"Politicians who are not in government should not expect that there will be a time when they shall be covered live. That will not be possible and that will not happen. That is the privilege of the incumbent party... [not just for this party in government] but any other regime that may come in [future]."

The respondents in this research also said that the amendment to the Communications Act should include written and published guidelines guaranteeing the public broadcasters editorial independence and good conditions of service that will prevent them from corruption and political polarization.

Some sections of the Communications Act really give the executive controls over the independence of the regulatory agency. For instance, Sections 7 and 8 give the president powers to appoint the members and chairperson of MACRA without reference to anyone else, not even parliament. The minister is to appoint the director general. MACRA is also supposed to comply with directions that the minister may give them in relation to allocation of radio communication frequencies. The minister may even make exemptions from the requirement to hold a licence. It is clear therefore that the creators of the Act concentrated these powers in the president and the minister while the regulatory authority and the regulatory institutions are limited in their powers, especially if it concerns political control.

Suggested overarching solutions

There's no single good model or good solution to the key problems of public communication. Whether particular institutional arrangements and forms of journalistic practice are detrimental or beneficial for the consolidation of a new democracy depends on the overall context and the interaction with other elements in the system. However, commercialisation of the media market is often seen as the best way of securing the media's political independence. However, this is not the case. Especially the experience from Latin America and post-communist countries shows that ownership is frequently highly politicized in that influential actors-politicians purchase media outlets in order to bring them under their control for the purpose of instrumentalising them for their own political ambitions (Voltmer, 2008).

According to Benson, Powers, & Neff (2017), in a study that used comparative policy research to describe how several leading democratic nation-states foster relatively autonomous and accountable public media, no one right policy solution exists, but in their research they highlight four crucial domains that can help make a difference: funding, charters, oversight agencies, and audience councils and surveys. Within these domains, they identify the following best practices that promote professional autonomy and civic accountability: (1) funding that is relatively generous, funnelled through a dedicated fee rather than general tax revenues, and established for multiyear periods, which lessens governmental capacity to directly link funding to approval or disapproval of programming; (2) legal and administrative charters that restrict government's ability to influence programming in a partisan direction while also mandating the provision of high-quality programming that caters to diverse audiences; (3) oversight agencies that serve as arm's length buffers between public media and the government in power, and whose own independence is bolstered through staggered terms and the dispersal of authority to make appointments; and (4) audience councils and surveys that strengthen links to diverse publics.

Gaps

Gap on literature

Although substantial research has been conducted on public media, there exist few comprehensive attempts to synthesize this literature and create a systematic typology of policies relevant to democratic normative concerns of autonomy and accountability. Such a typology is valuable not only for scholars but for policy makers, journalists, activists, and concerned citizens. For national media systems in which public broadcasters face strong challenges, there is need to reframe current debates over media policies. The core question is not whether public media have central roles to play in the digital era, but which government policies best ensure that they meet democratic normative ideals for professional autonomy and civic accountability.

Conceptual Framework

If media practice is to be beneficial to any nation, autonomy must be at the centre. The press must never be afraid of being influenced by external forces. This study's presupposition is that the media should be left to operate freely in order to better serve the public. In effect, the functions of the public media must at no point be interfered with by incumbent governments and politicians. Public media should independently discharge their duties, giving equal chances of coverage to everyone regardless of their political affiliations for instance. The arm's length principle should be applied in the dealings between incumbent governments and public media. That's to say public media should autonomously operate without government's interference.

This doesn't mean that the governments should not control the media in other ways necessary. As long as the action to be taken shall be for the greater good, then, a reasonable amount of government control over public media shall be relevant. Therefore, this study inclines towards the social responsibility theory. This theory allows free press without any censorship but at the same time the content of the press should be discussed in public panels and media should accept any obligation from public interference or professional self-regulations or both (Irvan, 2016). This theory lies between the authoritarian and the libertarian theories because it gives total media freedom on one hand and external controls on the other hand.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature available on the causes, effects and potential solutions of political interference on the functions of public media. Interaction with what others have already written on the problem in discussion, has proven relevant to this study. The theories that are recurrent in the studies of this nature, have contributed to the structuring of a conceptual framework for this study.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

In the quest to meet the objectives of this study, a qualitative study was conducted. To be more specific, due to the nature of the study topic, within the qualitative design, the case study

approach was adopted. This approach is used to generate in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, & et al., 2011).

The main characteristic of qualitative study is that it is mostly appropriate for small samples, while its outcomes are not measurable and quantifiable. Its basic advantage, which also constitutes its basic difference with quantitative study, is that it offers a complete description and analysis of a study subject without limiting the scope of the study and the nature of participant's responses (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

However, according to Langos (2014), others have argued that the effectiveness of qualitative study is heavily based on the skills and abilities of researchers, while the outcomes may not be perceived as reliable, because they mostly come from researchers' personal judgements and interpretations. According to Bell (2005) the results of qualitative study may not be perceived as reflecting the opinions of a wider population because the approach is more appropriate for small samples.

Site selection

The public broadcaster, Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC), was chosen as a site for this study. Considering that this study sought to zero in the impact of political interference on public media functions, it was only logical that the study targets a public broadcaster. Since the study was conducted in Malawi, and because of the case study approach adopted by the study, the sole public broadcaster of the land, MBC, was the ideal site.

Sample selection

The method of purposive sampling also called judgement sampling was used in coming up with the sample of this study. In this non-probability method, the participants are deliberately chosen based on the qualities they possess. This method allows the researcher to decide what needs to be known, then set out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by reason of knowledge and expertise (Ilker, Sulaiman, & Rukaya, 2016).

In the current study, the chosen participants had a special relationship with the problem under study. They had enough experience of working with public media in one way or the other. Within this context, the participants of this study were media personnel currently or otherwise connected by all means with the public broadcaster, Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation.

Data collection methods

To collect data in this study, in-depth interviews were conducted. According to Boyce & Neale (2006), in-depth interviews are a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspective on a particular idea, program, or situation.

The main advantage of this method is that it involves personal and direct contact between interviewers and interviewees, as well as eliminate non-response rates, but interviewers need to have developed the necessary skills to successfully carry an interview (Fisher, 2005). More importantly, this method offers flexibility in terms of the flow of the interview, thereby allowing for generation of conclusions that were not initially meant to be derived regarding a study subject. Nonetheless, Gill & Johnson (2002), argue that there is a risk that the interview may deviate from the pre-specified study aims and objectives.

A semi-structured questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data in this study. This questionnaire acted as an interview guide. Some questions were prepared beforehand to well guide the interview towards the study objectives, but additional questions emerged during the interviews.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data collected from personal interviews. This is a method that allows collected data to be categorized into themes and sub-themes so as to be compared (Moore & McCabe, 2005). Content analysis helps in reducing and simplifying gathered data, while at the same time producing results that may be measured quantitatively. In addition, this method enables researchers to structure the gathered qualitative data in a way that meets the study objectives.

However, human error is highly involved in content analysis, since there is the risk of misinterpreting the data gathered, thereby generating false and unreliable conclusions (Krippendorff & Bock, 2008).

Limitations

As is the case with every other study, the current study had the following limitations:

- In some cases, participants refused to speak against their organisation
- The sample size was small. A bigger one would most likely make the study more reliable
- Qualitative study didn't allow for measurement of the examined problems
- The assessment of the impact of political interference on public media functions may be influenced by factors not mentioned in this study

FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of this study and analysis of the same. The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public service media.

The objectives of the study were:

- To identify the causes of political interference in the operations of public media
- To identify the effects of political interference on public media functions
- To identify possible ways of dealing with political interference on public media

In-depth interviews were conducted with ten professionals well-versed with the workings of the media. Though relatively small, the sample covered much ground as it included professionals from media regulating bodies, officials from the ministry of information, and concerned media practitioners both on the editorial and the journalistic levels. An affirmation by word of mouth assuring anonymity was made to the participants.

The data from the in-depth interviews was arranged into themes that well dealt with each of the three objectives of the study. A semi structured questionnaire was used as an interview guide to generate qualitative data in this study and follow up questions emerged during the interviews. The following questions were in the semi structured questionnaire:

1. How does an independent public media outlet look like?
2. How important is an independent public media outlet?
3. What's the basis for an independent public media outlet?
4. Can journalistic independence be achieved in public service media? How?
5. How does the government and its politicians interfere with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation?
6. Should incumbent governments and their politicians interfere with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation? Why?
7. What do you think are the causes of the interference?
8. What are the effects of political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation?
9. What do you think can be done to deal with political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation?

The findings are discussed in line with the aforementioned objectives of this study. However, it is relevant to mention that the first five questions in the questionnaire were given to build a basic understanding of the topic at hand. They sought to define journalistic independence and political interference. Journalistic independence therefore, is an umbrella term used in this thesis to refer to the ability of individual journalists and media outlets (including public service media) to function without external influence of any kind. While political interference, is an umbrella term used in this thesis to refer to negative influence in the decisions of the media brought by government and its politicians. 100 percent of the participants agreed that public

media must be independent and free from political interference in order to better serve their obligations. One participant in sharing thoughts on this said:

Public media must be independent from government influence, because it is only then that the media will well perform their duty as a watchdog. As much as they report the government's positives, they must also subject the government to public scrutiny and criticism. (Participant 8)

Causes of political interference

This section of the chapter discusses the findings in relation to the first objective of the study, which was to identify the causes of political interference on the functions of public media. Various themes arose in relation to this objective.

Law – This is an umbrella term used in this thesis to refer to legislations affecting media practice in Malawi, the legislations specific for public media, and the obedience and disobedience of the same. It was discovered that apart from the constitutional provisions that provide for free media practice, the Communications Act delves specifically into the operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC). It states that the MBC must be a stand-alone media outlet, independent from government control, that the appointment of the Board and the Director General should be approved by parliament. It was also discovered in this study that in the operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation, most of these legislations are neglected. For instance, the appointment of the Director General is not approved by parliament as the Communications Act states. One of the participants shared the following views:

The laws that govern the operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation are not adhered to. The Communications Act clearly states that MBC should be an independent media house. The appointment of the Director General must be approved by parliament. And I also think, government officials such as the president and the minister of information are given too much power by the law over the public broadcaster. This causes government and its politicians to easily interfere with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. (Participant 2)

100 percent of the participants mentioned at least one of the aspects of the law that affects the operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation as the cause for political interference on the functions of the MBC.

Funding – This is an umbrella term in this thesis referring to any financial support given to the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation from government's coffers. It was found that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation solely depends on the government for finances. While 10 percent of the participants said this is not a cause for political interference on the functions of MBC, 90 percent of the participants strongly emphasized that funding from government is one of the major causes of this interference. They argued that as the government funds the public broadcaster, the government and its politicians feel entitled to control the broadcaster, and the broadcaster feels obliged to listen to each decision from the government. Participant 1 said:

It is not as easy as it sounds to disregard the voice of the one that is giving you money. What I think is that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation is stuck in the armpits of the government and its politicians because those are the custodians of the funds MBC receives.

Accountability – This is an umbrella term used in this thesis to refer to the employees' obligation to answer to their employers. It encompasses the employer's sense of entitlement over the employee and the employee's desire to keep the contract running. It was discovered in this study that most if not all the appointments at the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation including that of the Board, the Director General and even those below him, are politically motivated. Usually, the president appoints a Board of MBC which has people affiliated to the party in power, and the Board appoints a Director General who is also affiliated to the party. The Director General of MBC, then appoints people below him who are also affiliated to the party. This builds a rapport for the president and government politicians to control the Board of MBC, for the Board to control the Director General, and the Director General, his subjects. The Board in this case tries to be accountable to the appointing authority, and so does the Director General and his subjects to their bosses respectively. In sharing views on the same, one of the participants said:

Every sitting party looks at the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation as a tool for propaganda. And in preparation for use of MBC in propaganda, they try to appoint someone who is on their side. Now, that person who is appointed as Director General, appoints people below him, who can also do what he thinks is right. Because he is appointed by a sitting president of a certain party, that means that person should affiliate himself to the party. And to keep his contract running, he needs to never bite a finger that feeds him. Everything that comes from the government is deemed to be the bible. That's what causes MBC to be biased. (Participant 4)

Effects of political interference

This section of the chapter discusses the findings in relation to the second objective of the study which was to identify the effects of political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The following themes were common among the participants.

Loss of audience – It was mentioned by participants during the study that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation has lost its audience. Due to the coming of numerous media outlets that are not biased in their reporting, most people have ditched MBC for the other outlets. One of the participants in supporting this said:

MBC's programming is biased towards ruling political parties. These are their masters they seek to please. So, in the long run, people start losing trust in the broadcaster since propaganda, spin and twisting are at the centre of MBC. (Participant 3)

Another participant said:

My family and I no longer listen to or watch Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Their reporting is biased. We would rather listen to a private radio station than waste our time. (Participant 7)

Suppression of the truth – The media are supposedly the most trusted source of information. When there is news, one is usually asking whether it has been aired through the waves. If it has not been aired, most people doubt the credibility of the news. Suffice to say, public media are supposed to fulfil the duty of giving the public the truth of all matters. It was discovered during the study that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation broadcasts only that which is positive about the government. One of the participants said:

MBC is not informing the truth. That's the problem, because they only want to inform people what is good not what is bad. They want to inform people on the positives of the government as they are selling it and not the negatives. The Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation is always busy selling a party to keep their contracts running. (Participant 4)

Lack of freedom – 90 percent of the participants stated that the journalists and editors at the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation do not have the freedom required for media practice. One of the participants said:

The people working at MBC are not free. They cannot express themselves. They cannot report in a manner they are supposed to because if they report the negative, they will be deemed to be associated with the opposition. So, they do not practice free journalism as it is supposed to be. (Participant 10)

Suggested solutions

This section of the chapter discusses the findings in relation to the third and last objective of the study which was to identify possible solutions to political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The participants suggested the following solutions towards dealing with the problem.

Law reform – While agreeing that the laws that govern the operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation, must be adhered to; 100 percent of the participants suggested that some of the laws need to be changed. One of the participants said:

The Communications Act gives too much power to government officials like the president and the minister of information, over the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. It must be revisited to reduce those powers. Also, there should be a law to ensure that the Director General of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation reports to parliament and not to the president. (Participant 6)

Financial independence – In reference to the notion that political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation comes because of the funding MBC receives from government, 90 percent of the participants suggested that MBC comes up with different other ways of mobilising resources. One of the participants said:

Private media houses are able to survive on advertising and other sources of money. They do not get funding from government. The Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation should do the same in order to stay independent from political pressure. (Participant 9)

Appointment reform– 100 percent of the participants suggested that the process of appointing the Board and the Director General of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation should be checked. The appointments should not be made by a sitting president, rather they should be done by parliament which is a representative of the citizenry. One of the participants said:

The appointments have to be competitive. They should be based on merit not the affiliation of an individual to a particular party. (Participant 5)

Conclusion

This chapter has thoroughly discussed and analysed the findings of the study. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public media, and specifically the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The discussion above reflects the responses of the anonymous participants who for the purpose of this study have been assigned numbers 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, and 10.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section the conclusions derived from the findings of this study on the impact of political interference on the functions of public media are described. The conclusions were based on the aim, objectives and results of the study. Reflections on these findings and the resultant recommendations have also been explained. The recommendations were based on the conclusions and aim of the study.

Overview of the study

The study was an exploratory, and contextual qualitative study. To be more specific, within the qualitative design, the case study approach was adopted. Semi-structured, open qualitative interviews were conducted with ten media experts, in one way or the other concerned with the dealings of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation, who were purposively selected as participants. The interviews were conducted in English, tape-recorded, then analysed. Themes that emerged from the data were correlated with literature

The findings and recommendations explained below are centred on the experiences of the ten participants, the research objectives and the themes emerging from the analysis of the data. The aim of the study was to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public media. In pursuit of this aim, the study achieved the following objectives:

- To identify the causes of political interference in the operations of public media
- To identify the effects of political interference on public media functions

- To identify possible ways of dealing with political interference on public media

5.3 Summary of the data

In relation to the objectives of the study, three themes emerged from the data for each objective. Thus, nine themes all together emerged in this study, and the findings were discussed according to these themes:

Causes of political interference

THEME 1 Law

THEME 2 Funding

THEME 3 Accountability

Effects of political interference

THEME 1 Loss of audience

THEME 2 Suppression of the truth

THEME 3 Lack of freedom

Suggested solutions

THEME 1 Law reform

THEME 2 Financial independence

THEME 3 Appointment reform

Reflections on findings

Causes of political interference on public media

THEME 1: Law creates a rapport for government and its politicians to interfere with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Participants demonstrated dissatisfaction with how the laws governing the functions of MBC are handled. For example, the participants said the parliament does not approve the appointment of the Director General of MBC as stipulated in the Communications Act. The also gives the law gives too much power to the president and the minister of information over the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Rexha (2015), states that the main instrument that politics uses is the law – as the grounds which regulate the rapport between the public media and the political power.

THEME 2: Funding from government puts the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation on a tough spot. The participants lamented that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation is bound to accept each decision that comes from the people in charge of their funding. According to Benson,

Powers, & Neff (2017), issues of funding can contribute to problems of political interference on public media operations.

THEME 3: Accountability to the appointing authority causes those working at the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation to compromise on their professionalism. Some of the participants had previously been influenced in certain decisions while they worked at MBC. In order to keep their tickets running, they were not able to object to the influence. Most members of public media service get fired if they try to oppose the political elite that seek to control the operations of public media (Nissen, 2016).

Effects of political interference on public media

THEME 1: Loss of audience is one of the problems that arises from the interference of politics on the functions of public media. The participants kept mentioning that most of the audience of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation has lost trust on the public broadcaster and has since migrated to unbiased private media outlets.

THEME 2: Suppression of the truth. The participants emphasized that with the interference of politics on the functions of the Malawi Broadcastion Cooperation, the audience is not being told the truth. The participants backed this assertion with the fact that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation only broadcasts the positives of the government, not the negatives.

THEME 3: Lack of freedom was another effect of political interference on the functions of public media that recurred through the study. The participants and fellow workers were not able to freely express themselves the time they worked at the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. They said, they did not practice free journalism as it is supposed to be the case.

Suggested solutions to political interference on public media

THEME 1: Law reform was one of the recurring suggestions towards curbing political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The participants suggested that the Communications Act be revisited in order to reduce the power that the president and the minister of information have over MBC.

THEME 2: Financial independence also was suggested a possible solution towards dealing with political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The participants agreed that MBC should not rely on funding from government for this encourages interference. They suggested that just like private media outlets, MBC should be able to come up with other means of resource mobilisation.

THEME 3: Appointment reform was also suggested by the participants as one of the ways that can help deal with political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The participants suggested that the Director General of MBC should be appointed by the president. They said the president is a human being who has his own biases, and this makes his appointments politically motivated.

Summary

The study confirmed that politics greatly interferes with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Editorial decisions are influenced by the government of the day and its politicians. It was evident in the study that at every level of work at the public broadcaster, one is trying to be in good books with the government of the day hence the bias in reporting and programming. The government is able to interfere with the functions of the public broadcaster through the law, funding and the appointments MBC officials like the Director General and members of the Board of MBC.

It was noted also in the study that the interference of politics on the functions of the public broadcaster compromises on the integrity of the noble journalistic profession. A number of problems have come with this interference. The public broadcaster has lost its audience. Since listeners and viewers have not been satisfied with the way the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation has conducted itself, they have migrated to unbiased media outlets. On top of that, the audience has been denied the truth by the public broadcaster which uses their taxes. MBC's job has been propaganda, selling the party in power at that time, hence only broadcasting the positives of government and not the negatives. The people working at the public broadcaster have been robbed of their journalistic freedom by this interference. They cannot express themselves freely for the fear of being deemed as associated with the opposition if a differing view is expressed.

It is imperative note that if the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation are left exposed to this political interference, calamity awaits media practice in Malawi. Indeed, there is need that something be done with utmost urgency to deal with the problem. It was noted in the study that law reform, financial independence on the side of MBC, and the reframing of the appointments process would set us up for a good fight against the cancer of media capture.

The researcher examined the research objectives stated at the beginning of the study (repeated in sections 4.1 and 5.2). After reviewing the data presented in chapter 4, and the conclusions and recommendations of chapter 5, it was seen that the objectives of the study had been achieved.

Recommendations

The researcher makes the following recommendations towards dealing with the problems that have risen in this study.

Appointments

The interference of politics on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation can be reduced by checking the process through which the Director General is appointed. People at the helm of the public broadcaster need not to be partisan.

The following recommendations are made:

- Appointments of MBC officials should not be done by the president
- Parliament must approve of all appointments
- There should be an independent body that appoints MBC officials

Funding

The issue of funding has to be seriously looked into to deal with political interference on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. Indeed, the government takes advantage of the fact that MBC is funded by the state to control its operations. However, the fact that government funds MBC should not be reason for political interference, because the funds are actually tax payers' money.

The following recommendations are made:

- Funding should be funnelled through a dedicated fee rather than general tax revenues
- Funding should be established for multiyear periods
- MBC should create other avenues for resource mobilisation

Professionalism

In the academy, a journalist is taught to be professional. One is expected to remain true to the doctrines of true journalism. To report fairly without fear or favour, and never to compromise on facts. Most of the interference also comes when the politicians see the possibility of manipulating a journalist. But, under no circumstances is a journalist allowed to incline towards that which is not for the benefit of the public.

The following recommendations are made:

- Punish unprofessional journalists
- Employ well trained journalists

Buffer institutions

There is need that journalists and media institutions (including the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation) be protected by buffer institutions. These are institutions that will stand in between the government and MBC to make sure that the rights of the institutions and individuals are protected.

The following recommendations are made:

- Create more buffer institutions
- Make MBC and its workers affiliated to the buffer institutions

Law reform

Indeed, whenever the government wishes to sabotage media practice, the law is the most powerful tool it uses to achieve that. The case is the same when government interferes with the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation, there must be loopholes in the law which the politicians have noticed to their advantage.

The following recommendations are made:

- Revisit the Communications Act
- Reduce the powers given to the president over the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation
- Make strict laws against interference on MBC

5.6 Limitations

Certain limitations were identified during the study:

- Some participants resigned from the study
- Some participants refused to speak against their organisation
- The sample size was small. A bigger one would most likely make the study more reliable

5.7 Recommendations for further study

In relation to the identified limitations and the findings of the study, the following are recommended as future research subjects:

- Media and the law
- Importance of the audience on the media
- Journalistic independence versus accountability
- How media ownership affects practice

5.8 Conclusion

This study on the impact of political interference on the functions of public media, found that there is tremendous interference from government of the day and its politicians on the functions of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation. The editorial functions of the public broadcaster are greatly influenced by the politicians in power and its waves are utilized for propaganda by each government that comes.

Hopefully, this study contributed to an understanding of the impact of political interference on the functions of public service media and its findings and recommendations can serve as a basis for future research projects.

It is also hoped that the experiences of the participants could be used to formulate policies and procedures that could contribute to dealing with the interference of politics on the functions of public media.

Following the recent change of government, word on the street is that the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation has been liberated. But time is the best judge, and without fixing the problems identified in this study, one can rest assured that the public broadcaster remains in the armpits of any government that comes. Based on previous research findings, and the claims by the current government that MBC has been liberated, the present study was conducted to assess the impact of political interference on the functions of public media.

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