

Media grows despite challenges

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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In a report released by the Civic and Political Space Platform (CPSP), a group of civil society organisations in Malawi, it was established that the media in Malawi has had positive growth over the last two years, despite numerous challenges which almost derailed its progress.

The 34-page-report, titled *Status of Governance Report in Malawi*, has dedicated a chapter on media and governance in Malawi.

Chairperson of CPSP, Moses Mkandawire told Bizcommunity, despite the report being based on 2010 research, the findings still carry a significance ring as the status quo has not quite improved.

"If you are looking at 2010 in terms of the issues that emerged and then you reflect on 2011, I think they are almost the same issues that we are into. This is just a manifestation but I think the problems started way back in 2009 in terms of mismanaging our public resources but also providing poor leadership in the overall political development," said Mkandawire.

The report notes, that despite being harassed, the media underwent remarkable growth and expansion in 2010.

"This involved investment in new radio and television stations and the launching of new ventures in both print and electronic media. The nation appeared to be forging ahead here," it says. The report observed that government's partisan control of the public media, notably the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), gained notoriety.

"As a public broadcaster, funded by all tax payers, MBC annoyed many sections of the nation by its refusal to open up its airwaves and electronic transmissions to opposition political parties, and its penchant for only monitoring government propaganda and political campaigns," the report says.

Amongst members of the reading public and in media houses, the report shows that there was consternation and rancour over government's threat to ban or close some private media houses - those that were viewed as publishing newspaper articles deemed to be critical of government policy.

"This invariably meant media houses that employ high standards of investigative journalism through which corruption, greed and lawlessness among the leadership are exposed," says the report.

The report prepared by CPSP, the composition of over 15 religious and civil society bodies including catholic dioceses in Malawi, said it focused on the media to establish the extent to which it was endowed with an environment that would have

enabled it to develop and flourish as a 'Fourth State' of Malawi's democracy.

Crucial role of the media

Mkandawire says in order for them to tackle media issues they took into account the crucial role the media usually plays in sustaining a country's democracy by, among other things, concretising a country's commitment to freedom of the press and expression and promoting the free flow of information and exchange of ideas and opinions.

"This helps to breed an informed and enlightened citizenry; and ensuring that there is accountability and transparency on the part of the leadership relative to its use of available positions and resources," he said.

The report says the period under review was remarkable for being one during which the media industry was able to grow and expand; improve its work relationship with regulating authorities; seek to be recognised by the government of the day as an important conveyance belt for democratic principles and values; and improve training facilities and opportunities for new practitioners and stakeholders.

"But, the media's advocacy and watchdog roles were compromised by government's absolute control, manipulation and gagging of the public media; its frequent intimidation and harassment of the independent private media as well as occasional bids for its strangulation; and the underdeveloped nature of Malawi's reading culture which results in poor circulation and consumption of newspapers and other printed materials," the report explains.

Encouraging developments

Among several encouraging developments within the period which had a bearing on the media as a vehicle and watchdog of democratic values and principles was the sheer growth of the media industry, both print and electronic, and its capacity to reach out to many sections of Malawi society, was phenomenal.

The same applied to media institutions like Media Council of Malawi (MCM) and the Malawi chapter of Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA-Malawi) which were able to consolidate their role as guardians and advocates of media interests.

"What is more, the industry benefited from the availability of training opportunities for its personnel at certificate, diploma and degree levels."

Radio and television

During the period under review, the media witnessed the sustained growth of the radio sector and expansion of the television network.

"More than twenty radio stations operated, and many of them expanded and improved their programmes,"

As for the TV network, there was development over and above that connected with state owned MBC's television, for two other stations were added to the network. New stations include Luntha TV, sponsored by the Catholic Church and Calvary Family Church TV, self sponsored. Their programmes were religious in nature and enjoyed limited geographical coverage.

Print and electronic media

The report states Malawians enjoyed the services of the expanding print and electronic media. The report observes that print media, for instance comprised of two dailies, one bi-weekly and five weeklies, all of which were privately owned.

Electronic media, in the form of online news and debate platforms beamed online, included Nation News, Zodiak News Bulletin, British Broadcasting Station (BBC) News, Nyasa Times, Facebook, etc.

Media training

Media training institutions within the period under review continued to flourish. This included journalism courses offered by Skyways Business College in Blantyre and Lilongwe, the Malawi Institute of Journalism (MIJ) in Blantyre, and Departments of Journalism and Information Technology at University of Malawi - The Polytechnic in Blantyre and Mzuzu University. And at University of Malawi - Chancellor College, the Department of Fine and Performing Arts introduced a course of 'Media for Development'.

"The training institutions concerned continued to run journalism training programmes at certificate, diploma and degree levels, but also mounted development-oriented short courses from time to time."

The report also observes that the media fraternity enjoyed the support of committed and active media institutions like MCM and MISA-Malawi. They were quite active in their advocacy role and in raising support, locally and internationally, for capacity building programmes.

Reduced conflict

The report also observed that there was reduced conflict between the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) and various radio stations. The research established that there was a much improved working relationship between MACRA and the different radio stations that regulatory authority has to deal with, than had been the case the previous year.

One other major progress registered was on the development of Legal Institutions where a Policy Task Team was put together, to work on a draft of the Information Act, and to start work on reviewing the Communication Act of 1998.

Challenges

The report says the media encountered a number of problems and challenges over the period, which were a source of concern from a governance point of view.

"Notable amongst these was government's excessive partisan control and manipulation of the public media, especially MBC, which had the effect of reducing that vital branch of the media to a cheap, propaganda tool for the government"

It says excessive government and partisan control of MBC, as public broadcasters, was the biggest issue of concern and worry for most Malawians outside the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) core.

It says this was the case because it infringed their right to access information and opinions from all sections of society. Due to pressures from government, and from the Ministry of Information and Civic Education in particular, MBC was extremely partisan, thus being pro-government and the ruling DPP, in the way it discharged its functions as a public broadcaster.

This was reflected in its penchant for propaganda programmes like 'Road to 2014' which is in favour of Prof Peter Mutharika's presidential bid.

The report also bemoaned management's unwarranted manipulation of the way current news broadcasts were projected, contrary to Communication Act, which calls for management's neutrality and impartiality in such matters.

Compounding the situation, the report adds, was government's harassment of and bid to suppress outspoken sectors of the independent private media, because of their frequent and fearless exposures of flaws in government policy and conduct.

"This tended to squeeze the independent media in question into corners from where a lot of energy was then expended on

parrying government onslaughts"

Poor circulation

The media also encountered the problem of poor circulation and consumption of newspapers and other printed materials, due to the underdeveloped nature of Malawi's reading culture.

"This had the effect of dampening sales and reducing revenues and most media houses could thus only operate and survive on shoestring budgets"

A heavy blow was struck at the media by parliamentary passing of the amendment to Section 46 of the Penal Code which empowers the minister of information and civil education to ban publications s/he considers to be not in the public interest, meaning those government does not like because of their critical tone.

The other challenge was on frustration perpetrated by MACRA which displayed unexplained delays in processing applications of those that had applied for radio station licences.

"This was largely because MACRA tended to be selective in processing the applications it received," it says citing where the regulator body was quick to issue a licence to Mulhakho Radio (a tribal grouping for President Mutharika), and yet sat on applications from the Livingstonia Synod and the Christian Council of Malawi.

The report justifies this finding by pointing out that since 2009 when Christian Council applied for a licence to establish Maziko Radio Broadcasting Service, despite a number of follow up inquiries, the whole of period under review lapsed without positive feedback from MACRA.

The country's media powerhouse, Nation Publications Limited (NPL) was almost crippled financially by government's cancellation of advertising contracts with it and since carrying government advertisements has always been a major source of revenue for mainline newspapers this was unfortunate.

The government issued a circular directing all its agencies not to post any advertisements with *Nation* newspapers because the papers in question persistently featured columns that were critical of government policy.

Other challenge were presidential verbal threats against the media, that were unleashed from time to time, which it says had the effect of undermining press freedom and freedom of expression generally.

"The threats in question were apparently based on president Mutharika's assessment of the Media as a 'Fourth Sate' which tended to side with the opposition," it says. The report also mentions of the presence of DPP vigilantes during 'press rallies' which it observed posed a serious threat to the security of journalists covering such events.

"Ardent party supporters were often admitted to such press conferences as observers and informal bodyguards for key party officials. Through gestures and murmurs, however, they were able to censor journalists who posed questions that were embarrassing to the government," it says.

The report does not spare the media which it says created the challenges for its self. "These included the fact that some media institutions remained inactive. This applied to organisations like Journalists Union of Malawi (JUMA) and press clubs which were not as active as expected, due to scarcity of resources and lack of sponsorship," it says.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE: @KALIPOCHI

Gregory Gondwe is a Malawian journalist who started writing in 1993. He is also a media consultant assisting several international journalists pursuing assignments in Malawi. He holds a Diploma and an Intermediate Certificate in Journalism among other media-related certificates. He can be contacted on gregorygondwe@gmail.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@Kalipochi](#).

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