

Starving the Messenger: A Study of Journalists' Conditions of Service in Malawi

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Abstract

This study used in-depth interviews to investigate the conditions of service and welfare of journalists in Malawi. It found that while the Media Council of Malawi code of professional ethics and standards and in-house policies expected the best out the journalists, the majority of the journalists, mostly junior reporters, were grossly underpaid; far below the monthly living wage. It also found that dejection, fatalism, and individualism pervade journalists so much so that some of them seemed resigned to their status quo. Media owners seemed unwilling to engage in any debate about their journalist employees' welfare. The study concludes that under such circumstances, many Malawian journalists were likely to be tempted to take bribes and engage in other forms of corruption as coping mechanisms.

Key words: *Afriethics, umunthu, ubuntu, journalism, welfare, living wage*

Introduction

The terms journalism, media, and press are often used interchangeably to refer to the process of news gathering, the men and women who report the news or the institutions responsible for informing the public of what is happening in society. Communication researchers have investigated various aspects of journalism. However, little or no investigation has been done on the working conditions of the Malawian journalist, which was the focus of this study.

Objectives of the study

This study was conducted on behalf of the Journalists Union of Malawi (JUMA) in 2010 to establish journalists' salaries and benefits in Malawi; to determine if these salaries and benefits were reasonable vis-à-vis the cost of living; and to find out whether the journalists had signed contracts governing their conditions of employment.

Research questions

Precisely the study sought to answer the following three research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: What are the demographic characteristics of journalists in Malawi?

RQ 2: What are the salary scales for journalists in Malawi and how do they compare with salaries and working conditions of typical employees such as civil servants?

RQ 3: Do Malawian journalists have written conditions of work, including contracts and editorial policies, and if so, how strictly are they adhered to?

Literature review

Journalism as a profession has been a subject of several studies internationally, but very little has been studied about the conditions of services governing Malawian journalists. Some studies even question whether journalism is a trade, a mission or just a pastime. Ruhl (2000) and Schudson (2003) “lament the ‘folkloric’ inconsistency of [journalism as a field of study] as well as the impossibility to generate a more or less consensual body of knowledge out of the existing literature” (cited by Deuze, 2005:443). While acknowledging lack of a body of knowledge in the traditional physical science sense, Dennis and Merrill (1995) argue that journalism is no less a profession than others, such as law and medicine. They posit that like medical and legal personnel, journalists are trained and possess skill that help them to identify newsworthy events. They further argue that journalists, like other professionals, are governed codes of ethics and standards of practice.

Elaborating the journalism-as-a-profession argument, Deuze (2005) claims that there exist, globally, universal values that are associated with journalism praxis. He identifies five unique characteristics of journalists as professionals. Firstly, Deuze (2005) argues, journalists across the world and cultures espouse a social responsibility work ethic and subscribe to serving the public, invariably calling themselves as watchdogs of society, messengers, and information missionaries. Secondly, Deuze (2005) agrees with Ukpbi (2001), Hanitzsch (2011), and *Worlds of Journalism* (2011) that journalists subscribe to the ideal of objectivity, impartiality, neutrality, factuality fairness, credibility, and balance. Thirdly, journalists uphold their autonomy, independence or freedom from political and economic interference as an ideology, which they strive to achieve. Fourthly, journalism as a profession revolves around the concept of immediacy of information delivery, that is, journalists seek to deliver information as quickly as possible, unlike politicians, doctors, and lawyers who wait until they are satisfied about the consequences of releasing the information before they do so. Finally, Deuze (2005) argues that globally, journalists have codes of written and enforceable codes of ethics to guide their individual and collective behaviour.

Minnie (2001:35) argues that if professions are “defined by their claim to render a service for the public good”, then journalism is one because it is responsible for the delivery of information, which is one of the fundamental human rights and public goods.

The moral standards set in the codes of ethics globally are very high and sometimes self-inflicting. With a few exceptions, notably the Islamic Mass Media Charter (Jakarta Declaration, 1980) which emphasises that Muslim journalists ought to promote Islamic values and Shariah, all media guidelines, from the Sigma Delta Chi of 1932, through the Swedish Code of Ethics for the Press, Radio and Television, to the Media Council of Malawi Code of Ethics and Standards (Media Council of Malawi, 1995), stress the same normative or deontological prescriptions which include not only telling the truth, being accurate, thorough, honest, respecting individual privacy, cultures and avoiding doing harm to the vulnerable, such as children (see also BBC, n.d; MISA, 2011; Hanitzsch, 2011), but also to “conduct themselves with propriety at all times when performing their duties” and not be being associated with situations and acts, such as receiving “favours, which are likely to compromise their professional integrity (Media Council of Malawi, 1995). During election campaigns, Malawian journalists are required to “refrain from taking any individual inducement from political a political party candidate or politician; such as transport and sustenance of overnight accommodation” (Malawi Electoral Commission, 2009:7).

Elsewhere, such stringent moral guidelines are, as a rule, accompanied by reasonable salaries and benefits. However, in Malawi, most media institutions or journalists operate on shoestring budgets and gift demanding and taking, though not empirically proven, is not uncommon amongst Malawian journalists. They call it *chimpondamthengo*, a term reminiscent of token fees paid to local herbalists who ask for no pay from their patients. As long as it is not demanded, *chimpondamthengo*, is not considered as bribery or payment. It is a “thank-you” for a job well done. By calling gift-receiving *chimpondamthengo*, Malawian journalists act within what is acceptable in African culture. Apropos, Sylla (n.d: 1) has argued that gift-giving in traditional African society was and still is in some countries, not “synonymous with corruption, or nor is it at its genesis”.

Sylla’s position resonates with Kasoma (1996)’s argument that current moral guidelines or codes of ethics governing global journalism are essentially Euro-centric Judeo-Christian values and that, therefore, such moral guidelines ought to be domesticated, as the Islamic Media Charter (Jakarta Declaration, 1980) has, to account for prevailing local cultures, traditions, and beliefs. Drawing on the tenets of *umuntu* or *ubuntu* humanist philosophy, Kasoma (1996) proposes that African journalistic moral guidelines should be based on African communalist values or *Afriethics*, where one’s moral behaviour is guided by family and community concerns and needs. Implicit in *Afriethics*, is the fact that the African, and *ipso facto*, Malawian journalist, could receive gifts or *chimpondamthengo* from news sources without necessarily compromising his or her integrity as Sylla (n.d) has argued.

As noted above, the studies into journalism concentrate on its functions, roles, practices and ethics. Rare are studies that examine the welfare of journalists despite the fact these face constant danger when covering political events, war, riots, and other dangerous beats. The *Hindustan* (n.d) a career guide website, aptly describes the difficulty of journalism work as follows:

Journalism is an exciting and challenging career, and is sometimes seen as a little glamorous. While it can be glamorous or prestigious, in reality it is hard work, learning on the run, handling the pressure of deadlines and not knowing what your working day will be like from one day to the next. Many journalists work long and irregular hours, with evening and late night work common. An assignment cannot be dropped just because a shift has finished; a journalist must see it through to the end. Often they are called back to work to cover an unexpected development, and they are frequently required to work [...] at night, on weekends, on public holidays. The unusual work hours can make social life difficult. Besides the open-ended work hours, there are also pressures to meet tight deadlines and to ensure the facts presented are accurate.

Despite such tough work, journalists are among the least trusted professionals, and whose jobs are precarious. According to an IPSOS Mori study, the British public rates journalists as the second most untrustworthy professionals (IPSOS Mori, 2011). Whittal (2008) observes that in Europe more and more journalists are being employed on fixed terms; thus rendering journalism a precarious job because journalists can be laid off or refused contract renewal at anytime. As the findings of this study demonstrate, conditions of service of journalists in Malawi are probably more precarious or worse than those of their counterparts in Europe.

Protection of journalist labour in Malawi

Several legal instruments govern and protect the welfare and conditions of service of workers in Malawi. In addition to the Employment Act of 2000, there exist sector specific instruments, which regulate the work and conditions of service of the army, police, civil servants, members of parliament, and presidents. There are also guidelines pertaining to the employment of domestic servants (Pendame, 2006). Almost all employment sectors in Malawi have trade unions which are affiliated to the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (Manda, 2000; Dzimbiri, 2007). However, despite the fact that journalism has been practiced in Malawi from colonial times (Sembereka,

1980; Chirwa and Manda, 2009; Chitsulo and Mang'anda, 2011; Englund, 2011) there is no specific law or set of guidelines governing the employment and conditions of service of journalists. Only in 2007 did journalists establish the Journalists Union of Malawi (JUMA, which joined the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) dominated Communication Workers Union Malawi (COWUMA) to fight for the welfare of journalists in Malawi. Despite the existence of these two trade unions, to date not much seems to have improved in terms of the welfare and work conditions of Malawian journalists.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected using two semi-structured questionnaires. One for journalists and the second for media owners of each the 21 radio stations, six newspapers regular newspapers, and the Ministry of Information which is responsible for the welfare of district information officers and Malawi News Agency staff. The target was to interview three journalists (MANA) in all the 21 radio stations and two major newspapers and one Malawi News Agency reporter from the districts of Zomba, Dedza and Nkhata Bay, which were identified purposively for their adjacency to the major cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu respectively where journalists are mostly clustered. However, only fifty respondents, representing almost 25% of the journalists' population in Malawi, were willing to participate in the study (see **Table 1** for the distribution of respondents by age).

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents

| Respondents | 15-24 Years old | | 25-34 | | 35-44 | | 45+ | |
|-------------|-------------------|--------|----------|----|---------|---|--------|--|
| Age | Reporter | 3 (6%) | 25 (50%) | | 1 (2%) | | - | |
| N=50 | Sub-editor | - | 6 (12%) | | 5 (10%) | | 4 (8%) | |
| | Editor | - | 1 (2%) | | 3 (6%) | | 1 (2%) | |
| | Managing Editor | - | - | | - | | 1 (2%) | |
| | Total Respondents | | | | | | 6 | |
| | | 3 | | 32 | | 9 | | |

The questionnaire was administered *in situ* or by email. No response was received from the media owners or their representatives. Arrangements to hold key informant interviews with media owners did not yield any response.

Six field data collectors were deployed in Mzuzu (two), Lilongwe (two) and Blantyre (two). Data supervision, entry, analysis and interpretation were conducted by the authors. In addition to administering the questionnaire, the field data collectors also asked for qualitative explanations to get ideographic information on certain key issues such as adherence to employee/employer contracts.

Limitations

Copies of a differently worded questionnaire were sent to media owners with the aim of comparing journalists' responses with employers' views. However, despite frequent reminders, only two media owners responded. It is not clear as to why most media owners were unwilling to complete the questionnaire or to be interviewed. Also some journalists working outside the mainstream media (such PROs and NGO Communication Officers) were contacted as one way of comparing their conditions of service with those of mainstream media journalists. Only one person responded. This one respondent's answers were considered inadequate to provide trends. As such, responses from media owners and PROs and NGO communication officers were not considered for analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The sections below link the findings of the study to its objectives and research questions.

RQ 1: What are the demographic characteristics of journalists in Malawi?

A profession of youths

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondents and suggests that the majority of journalists in Malawi are young (70% aged below 35 years). This age distribution is slightly lower than what Manda & Malunda, (2003) found. Then young journalists constituted 76% of the journalism workforce in Malawi. These young people occupy the lowest ranks (reporters) in newsrooms with only 12% and 2% falling within the sub-editor and editor categories respectively. Only 2% of the respondents aged over 35 years reported to be reporters. It would appear that, in Malawian journalism, the younger one is the more likely one will be a reporter.

Radio is the biggest employer

Table 2: Media types respondents belong to

| Media Type respondent belongs to (N=50) | Radio | TV | Print | Other (eg Malawi News Agency) |
|---|----------|---------|---------|-------------------------------|
| | 31 (62%) | 7 (14%) | 9 (18%) | 3 (6%) |

As **Table 2** indicates, the majority of the respondents (62%) worked for radio stations, 14% for television, and 18% for the print media (newspapers) and 6% for other news organizations, such as the Malawi News Agency or Ministry of Information district information offices. The dominance of radio as journalist employer could be the result of the rapid expansion of the broadcasting sector since 1998 when the Communications Act was passed allowing for the establishment of private commercial, community and religious radio stations, thereby ending Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)'s three decade dominance of the radio broadcasting landscape in Malawi. Although a number of influential online publications have emerged since the mid 2000s, no respondent described oneself as an online journalist probably because at the time of the study internet based journalism was still in infancy in Malawi (see Chikunkhuzeni, 2011) and had not yet evolved into a credible genre journalists would wish to be associated with.

A profession for the undereducated

In terms of academic qualifications 50% of the respondents held Malawi School Certificate (MSCE equivalent of British Ordinary Level Certificate), 30% boasted journalism diplomas, 18% had bachelor's degrees, and only 2% indicated having Master's level education (see **Table 3**).

Table 3: Respondents' academic/professional qualifications

| Academic Qualification (N=50) | MSCE (O Level) | College/University Diploma | Bachelors Degree | Master's Degree |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | (25) 50% | (15) 30% | (9)18% | (1)2% |

Although academic qualifications are just part of what makes a journalist (Skjerdal & Ngugi, 2007) the professional and academic education levels of the majority of Malawian journalists are still too low for a profession that requires logical thinking, analysis, contextualization, in-depth understanding, and interpretation of events. In South Africa, a journalist is more likely to hold a college diploma or degree. However, if recent local advertisements are anything to go by, a

journalism diploma and degree are henceforth the requisite qualifications for a journalism job in Malawi.

RQ 2: What are the salary scales for journalists in Malawi and how do they compare with salaries of typical employees such as civil servants?

Majority earns less than monthly living wage

Table 4: Journalists salary ranges (2010)

| Salary Ranges (MK/Month) | >MK10,000 | MK10,001-20,000 | MK20,001-30,000 | MK30,001-40,000 | MK40,001-50,000 | MK50,001-60,000 | MK70,000+ |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| journalists receive N=50 | 5 (10%) | 7 (14%) | 12 (4%) | 4 (8%) | 4 (8%) | 5 (10%) | 13 (26)% |

Table 5: Monthly cost of living (MK) in Malawi early 2010 (MK150=1 US\$)

| City/Month | January | February | March | April |
|------------|---------|----------|-------|-------|
| Blantyre | 54962 | 58493 | 55041 | 51846 |
| Lilongwe | 52293 | 55612 | 45039 | 55589 |
| Zomba | 49360 | 51334 | 51689 | 44784 |
| Mzuzu | 47953 | 48681 | 46039 | 44209 |

Source: Compiled from Centre for Social Concern (CFSC) data (2010)

Table 6: Typical salaries for other sectors

| | Teacher (K) (MSCE) | Nurse (I) (DIPLOMA) | Petrol/Diesel Attendant (MSCE) | Waiter in Local Restaurants (Below MSCE) | Shop Attendant (MSCE) | Security Guard in Private Firm (MSCE) |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Monthly Wage. | K15, 422 - K17, 203 | K37, 275- K32, 893 | K7, 000- K10, 000 | K3, 000- K8, 000 | K5, 000- K10, 000 | K3, 000 K5, 000 |

Note: US\$ 1=MK 250 in 2010.

Table 4 summarises the typical salaries of Malawian journalists. Centre for Social Concern (2010) estimates that for an average household of five members to live comfortably in the early part of 2010 in Blantyre, Zomba, Lilongwe and Mzuzu, it needed a monetary income of no less than K40, 000 in recurrent expenditure only (see **Table 5**). In addition, a working family needed daily transportation costs, such as MK200 – MK220 for Lilongwe; MK120–160 for Blantyre; and MK140 – MK180 for Mzuzu per person (CFSC, 2010). Thus, for the majority of journalists (46%) the monthly incomes were well below the monthly living wage or cost of living. It is

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worth noting that journalists are not the only employees who are grossly underpaid. **Table 6** shows salaries of typical employees, in Malawi, whose academic qualifications match those of the majority of journalists (Diploma and below). Conditions of service and salary levels match with a profession's social responsibilities. Civil servants, fuel attendants, and others have no stringent ethics and standards to observe and therefore can engage in other economic activities. Indeed, Mkwambisi *et al.*, (2011), Kafundu and Milanzi, (2006), have observed that to supplement their salaries, most lowly paid urban dwellers in Lilongwe and Blantyre resort to such coping mechanisms as urban farming, beer brewing and selling, and in extreme cases, prostitution, the very acts that journalists are refrained from openly engaging in or due to strict deadlines cannot do. It is not clear what coping mechanisms underpaid journalists in Malawi resort to short of accepting bribes or soliciting chimpondamthengo (brown envelopes), also known amongst Malawian journalists as "logistics".

RQ 3: Do Malawian journalists have written conditions of work, including contracts and editorial policies, and if so, how strictly are they adhered to?

Some have signed contracts

The majority of the respondents (56%) claimed to have signed work contracts while 34% reported not to have signed any contract. Ten percent were noncommittal. Only 47% of the respondents reported that they were aware of the presence of any editorial policy in their newsrooms; 39% were not aware while 4% were sure that no editorial policy existed. 10% decided not to answer the question. However, 72% of those who were aware of the editorial policies were satisfied with the contents of the policies, which stipulated rights and responsibilities of employers and employees and copyright ownership of published material.

Table 7: Adherence to contract conditions

| Adherence to contract | By | Rate/Intensity | Frequency | % |
|-----------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|------|
| N=28 | employee | Strictly | 12 | 42.9 |
| | | Somehow | 13 | 46.4 |
| | | Never | 0 | 0 |
| | | No Answer | 3 | 10.7 |
| | employer | Strictly | 7 | 25 |
| | | Somehow | 13 | 46.4 |
| | | Never | 2 | 7.1 |
| | | No answer | 6 | 21.4 |

However, as **Table 7** illustrates, only 12 (42.9%) of the 28 (56%) who claimed to have signed contracts indicated that, as employees, they strictly adhered to the contracts while slightly above 46% thought they somehow adhered to their contracts. About 10% were noncommittal. As for the extent to which the employer abided by the letter of the contract, 25% reported that their employers strictly adhered to the contracts, some 46% said the employers somehow abided, while 7% were categorical that their employers did not abide by the contracts signed. Over 21% of the respondents chose not to say anything.

It is worth noting that a number of journalists who claimed to have signed contracts could not be drawn to explain their silence on the critical issues (such as adherence and ownership of copyright of published materials) relating to their contracts. This could point to uneasy employee-employer relations or journalists' lack of interest in their own welfare. In a country where journalism-related jobs are hard to come by fear of betrayal by the researchers could explain why some journalists were unwilling to discuss their contracts with academics who were researching journalists' welfare.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that incomes of journalists are not different from those of other employees. Research has shown that salaried urban residents in Malawi devise coping mechanisms such as street vending, urban farming, prostitution, and beer brewing (Mkwambisi *et al.*, 2011; Kafundu & Milanzi, 2006) to survive. It is not clear whether journalists do resort to similar mechanisms or have other means of beefing up their incomes to live a reasonably acceptable life free of the attractions of corruption as journalism ethics and standards demand.

Literature on journalists' coping mechanisms' in Malawi is virtually non-existent. However, Skjerdal (2011) cites a plethora of studies that have linked journalists' poor pay worldwide to "brown envelopes" or "logistics" as bribes are euphemistically called in media-speak. Mabwezara (2011) has noted that corruption in the media takes many forms, such as moonlighting and mercenary activities that include the amplification of the public image of the "brown envelope" givers, usually politicians and elite members of society, and the symbolic annihilation of the less materially endowed ones.

From the missionary and investigative no-nonsense journalism, Malawian journalists would generally be described as "critical change agents" (Hanitzsch, 2011; *Worlds of Journalism*, 2011) committed to improving the welfare of the poor. However, some of them seem to have resigned to their fate if information gathered through this study's open-ended qualitative interviews with the respondents is anything to go by. For instance one MANA interviewee reported that although he had worked as a district information officer for ten years, he was only there as an intern. Asked further why he did not fight for fulltime employment, he said he did not know how to go about it, and that God would take charge of his destiny, anyway. Another interviewee reported that he did not want to join any union because he did not care about unions and media organisations. Yet another respondent retorted flatly that although she was aware of the existence of an editorial policy in her newsroom, she had had no time to read it because it did not matter much. So, unless this sense of dejection, fatalism, and individualism that seems to shroud Malawian journalists, and the culture of information withholding pervading the media owners are overcome, the dream of acceptable conditions of service for journalists in Malawi will take a long time to attain and journalists' coping mechanisms in such a harsh economic environment as Malawi's will always be subject to speculation.

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