

# FROM WATCHDOG TO LAPDOG: POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF CHINA ON NEWS REPORTING IN MALAWI

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The arrival of China in Malawi has been characterised by a growing sense of uncertainty among academics who have expressed concern over the intentions of the superpower in the country. There are fears that China would like to extend its influence to Malawi as part of a broader push to increase its influence in global politics and economics. That push is in part exercised through the media. This study analyses the perception of Malawian journalists on news media reports of Chinese activities in Malawi. It uses content analysis to understand how the mediascape had changed from 2001-2007 when China had not yet established diplomatic relations with Malawi, and the period from January 2008-2020 in which diplomatic relations with China have existed. The article examines the shifts in journalistic representations of China in Malawi and develops prompts and probes from which journalist interviews were conducted.

From the content analysis, it appears that from 2001-2007, Malawian media, especially *The Daily Times*, was very negative about China, uncritically reproducing Western representations of China. This changed after January 2008 when the press leaned towards an acknowledgement of Chinese activities.

Through interviews journalists have indicated that the Chinese government offers certain opportunities such as exchange visits to journalists, making it difficult for them to bite the hand that feeds them. This 'soft power' is backed up by the repressive power of the Malawian government that uses intimidation to force journalists to report in their favour, thereby helping to create a positive image for China in Malawi. Journalists report that the significant shifts in journalistic representations of China have been mirrored by changes in the conceptualisation of journalistic roles in Malawi's mediascape.

**KEY WORDS:** SOLUTION JOURNALISM, CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM, CHINESE MEDIA, AFRICAN JOURNALISM CULTURE

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## Background information

When travelling through Malawi's capital city, Lilongwe, it is difficult not to notice the imposing structures that have been built with Chinese aid, such as the Bingu International Conference Centre (Banik, 2013). In villages across the country, Chinese shops are proliferating (Banik, 2013) and agriculture-related projects are expanding (Tang, 2019). This influence is escalating and impacting Malawi's news media. This article provides a detailed critical analysis of this phenomenon. It provides a qualitative content analysis of *The Daily Times* coverage of China over time, and through in-depth interviews with journalists, it explores some of the influences on news representations of China in Malawi.

The Malawian news media and government

Soon after Malawi attained independence from Britain in 1964, the media became a mouthpiece of the repressive Kamuzu Banda regime (Gunde, 2016). This changed significantly after the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1994: there are now six private newspapers and many private radio and TV stations (Macra, 2018). Malawian media largely draw on a Western media framework (Manda & Tsitsi, 2017), which assigns to journalists roles that are concerned predominately with promoting democracy through ‘monitorial’ and ‘watchdog’ functions (Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). However, the media’s perceived ‘Western framework’ often clashes with the government’s wish for a more compliant media that publish more ‘positive’ news (Manda & Tsitsi, 2017).

The Malawian government uses various methods, including outright intimidation, to force journalists to cover its work favourably (Gunde, 2015), a situation that White & Mabweazara (2018) describe as connected to the development of an increasingly ‘neopatrimonial’ state [in Malawi]. This concept captures a more self-interested government that sees itself as a ‘parent’, able to cajole and punish citizens and journalists into supporting its government strategy (Gunde, 2015).

A key hypothesis explored in the study is that the Chinese influence on Malawi’s news reports, aided by the Malawian government, is changing the visibility and perception of China in Malawi’s media. The hypothesis was put forward because Banda (2009) and Farah & Mosher (2010) in Umejei (2018) argue that China’s media expansion aims to move journalism away from ‘watchdog’ to a ‘lapdog’ role. The Chinese encourage or incentivise positive coverage, whereas the Malawian government cajoles – and in some instances, ‘forces’ journalists into toeing the state line. This study explores this hypothesis by collecting the perspectives of Malawian journalists and exploring their perceptions about how China is covered in the Malawian media, how representations are changing, and what is driving this change.

### **Theoretical framework**

The research draws on global media systems (including Chinese media systems), normative theories of the media and journalistic roles, African journalism culture, hierarchy of influences, and news sourcing theories. The media systems theory was developed by Hallin and Mancini to describe media systems in Western Europe and North America (Hallin, 2016). They argued that there are three media systems, and these are the polarised pluralist, liberal pluralist, and democratic corporatist. The polarised pluralist media describes a media system where political elites have strong control over media content (Hallin & ManCini, 2010) while the liberal pluralist model allows people to share their opinion freely, promotes fact-based discourse, and promotes news at the expense of ‘political parallelism’ (Hallin & ManCini, 2010; Yasin, 2015). The Malawian media is transitional and seems to lean towards the liberal pluralist model (Manda & Tsitsi, 2017). The democratic corporatist model is known for its ‘segmented pluralism’ in the sense that it includes several religious and ideological groupings tolerating each other on media platforms. The media systems theory is a Western framework and some of its arguments may not apply to non-Western countries. For example, although Malawi

seems to replicate the liberal pluralist model, there are constant battles between elites and the media when producing news. To augment this, this study also uses the African journalism culture theory, as well as Zhao's (2012) Chinese media theory which de-Westernises Hallin & Mancini's work. Zhao (2012) observed that the Chinese government exerts strong control over the media so that the media can help support development. There are private media houses, but this has raised concerns that it threatens China's system of government because, in a communist state, press freedom is first and foremost seen as a tendency towards more capitalistic control. The adoption of private media is seen as taking a step towards 'capitalist restoration' (Zhao, 2012). In 1994 the Chinese government put in place the Central Propaganda Department to implement a three-tier news review system, where it deploys 'news reviewers' to monitor news media daily (Luo, 2015). Journalists tend to resist the CPD, but they are sometimes less critical so that their stories can be accepted by the CPD for publication (Li & Rønning, 2013).

Chinese journalists also practice constructive journalism; MacIntyre & Gyldensted (2017) and Bro (2019) explain that constructive journalism describes a relatively recent journalistic reform movement that has sprung up in Europe, with a similar offshoot in the United States called 'Solutions Journalism'. Wasserman (2016) says that Chinese constructive journalism, which has its origins in development journalism, aims at preventing social divisions, and "works within a positive and solution-focused frame. The theory takes a decolonial turn by recognising traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism to explain media practice. It conceptualises government as "the conscience of society and the voice of the people" – hence the media has a duty "to enlighten the public to recognise their, and the nation's interests" (Zhao, 2012).

Normative theories of the media were developed by Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White (2009), in a text entitled *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies* that explores the philosophical and political underpinnings of a normative approach to the question of the role of journalism in a democratic society. These theorists argue that there are two theories of the press: those that explain what media roles ought to be (normative theory) and those that explain the 'factual role' of media in society (media sociology). They propose four key normative roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative roles. Although the theory seems to explain the significance of a collaborating press in developing countries such as Malawi, it could be argued that China's soft power approach to encourage a collaborative role for the media is underpinned by the hard (repressive) power of the Malawian state, which does not constitute a voluntary, 'fully normative agreement' for cooperation between the Malawian media and the Malawian and Chinese states.

The African journalism culture theory was developed in its more recent form by White & Mabweazara (2018). It suggests that post-colonial political forms and neo-patrimonial arrangements influence African journalists in ways that make it more likely that they will create content that is acceptable to editors, who in turn tend to publish or broadcast what is acceptable to local political elites (White & Mabweazara, 2018), of which the editors are often part. Elites of course control (Thomson, 2010) and share these resources "to strengthen personal and/or partisan power and favour allied news organisations" (Wais-

bord, 2013). Journalists in private media have, in some countries, created fascinating cultures of resistance, such as seeking legal protection against external influence (Kasoma, 2010), but there is a tendency to ‘buy’ personal allegiance (White & Mabweazara, 2018). This study also draws on the journalistic roles theory to better locate the sense of what it means to be a journalist, and how what journalists ‘do’ is understood (by journalists) to establish how those ‘role conceptions’ play out and interact. The journalistic roles theory goes as far back as the 1950s, but has, in the past decade, been significantly refined by a global research project, The Worlds of Journalism Project, which elicited views of thousands of journalists on issues such as ethics and autonomy (<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/>) in dozens of countries. Thomas Hanitzsch & Tim Vos (2018: 152), drawing on this decade-long project, suggest that journalism roles exist as part of a broader framework of meaning, within a discourse that sets parameters of what is desirable in a given institutional and national context; and they are subject to (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation and contestation in discursive fields .

The hierarchy of influences model, primarily developed by Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese in the 1970s and 1980s, theorises layers of interacting influences on news media. These range, in their schema, from ‘macro’ influences such as the nature of the social systems and ideological tropes of particular societies, to the ‘meso’ nature of particular social institutions, which refers to work culture, routines, and daily practices of media organisations. The theory is rounded off with a focus on individual roles, perceptions, and skillsets of individual journalists at the micro-level (Reese, 2016). The ‘media organisation’ level was particularly useful for this study because it examined how journalists negotiate values to satisfy organisational needs (Reese, 2007) and mix these with routines and practices, which they characterise as naturalised rules, norms and procedures. The study drew on all these levels to understand where and how China is influencing Malawian news production, journalistic practice, and identity.

Lastly, the study used the news sourcing theory as advanced by Daniel A. Berkowitz (2009) in his article entitled *Reporters and Their Sources*. The theory probes bias, power, and influence in news reporting. Berkowitz (2009) questions whether news sources favour or exclude some issues over others and how this shapes the news. Berkowitz (2009) argues that most of the news comes from sources that deliberately assemble news to have their voice heard. He further explains that when the source has too much power, efforts to gather information can be thwarted while if the journalist has a lot of power, rich information may be gathered. By understanding the sources of the news, the researcher was able to understand why a specific tone was used in some of the reports.

### **Research goals**

The study aims to understand the perceptions of Malawian journalists regarding Chinese influence on Malawian journalism. A detailed content analysis was conducted to track and analyse shifts in newspaper representations of the role of China in Africa. However, the main goal was to understand how journalists themselves make sense of the changes in media coverage of China and to explore possible changes to their normative conceptions of what they ‘do’ as journalists and what journalism is ‘for’. In particular, how do

they perceive the influence of China on the way China is reported? What do they perceive are the biggest influences on their coverage of China? How do organisations (societal, institutional, media), routine practices, and personal backgrounds, role conceptions, and skill levels of the journalists impact the way Malawian journalists report on China, and how does this in turn impact the national discursive contestation regarding journalism roles?

### **Methodology**

The research used a qualitative design and drew on a social constructivist epistemological approach within the interpretive tradition (Bryman, 1988). The research used qualitative thematic content analysis to understand content from *The Daily Times* newspaper, one of the biggest print media organisations in Malawi. Two articles per year mentioning China between 2001 and 2020 were randomly selected to gain an understanding of the trends in coverage of China over this period.

While the information provided insight into the articles, the main aim of the analysis and the reason only one publication was chosen was to provide a small sample from which to gain a broader understanding of trends in media coverage of China, and to provide prompts and probes for the interviews conducted with journalists. The analysis examined issues around tone of coverage, bylines, language and meaning, and changes in the style of journalism.

Eight journalists from MIJ radio, *The Daily Times*, *Nation*, and Zodiak TV were interviewed for about 30-60 minutes each, as these are the biggest media houses with the largest audiences in Malawi (Pasungwi, 2018; Kainja, 2009). The selection of journalists was purposive, by selecting those that had previously covered China. Two journalists from each media house were approached for the interviews after having accessed media coverage by those organisations and identified journalists with the most experience. In-depth interviews were used to allow participants to openly engage with issues around perception and practice (Byrne, 2016). The researchers used Fiske's ethnographic coding to identify themes from the conversations, and to generate meaning.

### CHINA IN THE NEWS

#### *China in the news from 2001-2007*

From 2001-2007 China did not have diplomatic or significant economic relations with Malawi, and all of the reports in those years emanated from the Western news agency Reuters, which was broadly reflective of the Anglo-American foreign policy towards China at the time. It was also reflective of a Western journalistic style, rhetorical language use, bylines, tone, etc. So, in effect, at this stage we have Western journalism about China in a Malawian newspaper. Malawian editorial resources were not deployed to cover China as it was not deemed important at the time, *The Daily Times* merely reprinted articles framed and produced in the West, which is a rather passive editorial stance.

### Tone in covering China

Basically all of the analysed *The Daily Times* articles from that period were in fact written by Reuters. They demonstrate a condescending tone that seemed to patronise China as a deviant country that needs redemption. For example in “*China set for new image*” (22/2/2001), the Reuters News Agency wrote: “On the first working day of inspectors evaluating Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Olympics, Major Liu Qi sought to shake off the city’s dark past yesterday and present a new image of democracy, openness and prosperity.” This statement portrayed China as using the Olympics as a public relations (PR) stunt to create a positive image for itself. The journalist quoted Mayor Liu Qi who claimed that China had made dramatic changes to encourage a more open society. The journalist does not substantiate this quote by including examples where China had registered progress, leaving the audience wondering if the change could be true and the journalist seemed interested to sustain this pessimism by arguing that China was still being shunned by Western media; implying that things have not changed. The Reuters News Agency wrote that Tiananmen, where the Olympics would be conducted, has a dark history; for example, the 1989 massacre derailed the country’s bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games. The article argued that the country still banned oppositional views, which led to radical protests such as suicide, including a middle-aged woman who burnt herself to death to make a statement of her discontent with the poor human rights record in the country. Other articles, such as “*Merkel to seek help from China over Darfur*” and “*Merkel prods China on rights*”, both published in 2007, also report on the perceived Chinese deviance.

Articles on China also employed an accusatory tone, blaming China for the majority of disputes it gets into. This was done by focusing on the aggressive advances made by China without shedding enough light on the causes of these advances. For example, in the article published on January 2, 2004, entitled “*Taiwan urges China to seek peace*”, Reuters revealed that China had pointed its missiles toward Taiwan in readiness to attack the country and this made China seem hostile. However, China placed the missiles in the same way that Taiwan had. Taiwan was accumulating weapons donated from the United States and it was in fact Taiwan that had started preparing for an imminent war. Similarly, in the article entitled “*RoC cancels war games*” published in *The Daily Times* of August 8, 2002, Reuters blamed China for the fact that Taiwan had cancelled its games to avoid an imminent war with China. Though this was the case, it was RoC (Taiwan) that had first considered conducting a referendum to decide whether or not they should declare war on China, which might have already alarmed China and the games would have made little difference to China’s war preparations.

There seemed to be few articles that were positive about China, such as the article published in 2005 entitled “*Koizumi visits war shrine, China, S. Korea protest*” and an article published on August 27, 2002, entitled “*Another storm forecast in China*”, where Reuters demonstrated the country’s readiness to contain floods.

### Rhetorical language usage

In terms of language usage, the articles in *The Daily Times* used words that invoked people's emotions so that they develop a negative attitude towards China. For example, in the article entitled "China, India may face Aids 'catastrophe", published on July 4, 2003, the word 'catastrophe' was used to show that there would be a rapid growth of the population living with HIV/AIDS in China, without taking into consideration that China is a highly-populated country. The articles also used words aimed at making China look inferior compared to Western powers such as the US. For example, in an article published in 2004 entitled "China tells US to back off on Hong Kong", Reuters used the word 'superpower' to describe the US. The article quotes China's foreign ministry as urging the United States to stop 'meddling' in Hong Kong internal affairs. To show that the US had the power to override the demand, Reuters describes the US as a 'superpower' thereby making a point that China was not well placed to ask the US to 'back off.'

### News byline

The study has revealed that *The Daily Times* often simply reprinted stories directly from Reuters and Reuters appeared as the writer of the story instead of giving the actual name of the journalist. The Reuters article "How the byline beast was born" (2012) and *The Economist* (2012) article "Why are *The Economist's* writers anonymous?" argue that the absence of bylines in papers protects journalists' privacy, allows them to assume different voices and gives an impression that the editorial teams are more powerful than they really were. Reuters might have been used in *The Daily Times* because of unfamiliarity with Chinese sources of information, lack of agreements on content sharing, lack of trust in Chinese media and also due to the hegemonic power and reach of Western media organisations, even though the Chinese media might have had a direct access to the sources and context of the stories. Malawian editorial resources were also not deployed to cover China as it was not deemed important enough at the time. It is therefore not surprising that *The Daily Times* is replicating the subjective negative rhetoric from Reuters. Reuters has a policy to present objective news reports, but this is contrary to observations made in the news sourcing theory that sources present subjective information to support, in this case, their geopolitical interests.

The continuing repression of alternative views in news reports on China may have signified an attempt to represent China negatively which is contrary to section 2.1 of the Media Council of Malawi code of conduct. *The Daily Times* could have considered reconstructing the stories to include views from different media platforms such as the *Xinhua News Agency*. This tendency was not in line with Berkowitz's (2009) idea of a professional interpretive community where journalists need to demonstrate impartiality when reporting news.

News reports in this phase were also solely written by foreigners and there was not a single instance where local journalists reported. This might have been because of the geopolitical context where Malawi did not have significant economic and political relations with China, making news on China less important for Malawi and thus for *The Daily Times* to dedicate resources towards it. Even the citizens at large were not interviewed to

give their opinion on any news having to do with China, thereby side-lining Berkowitz's (2009) *interpretive communities* in meaning making.

On the other hand, *The Daily Times* had local journalists covering Taiwanese activities in Malawi where development projects supported by the Taiwanese government were reported. Similarly, but just like the Malawian reports, other articles from the Reuters News Agency were also positive about Taiwan and aligned themselves with Taiwan over China on issues such as recognising Taiwan as a separate country.

### Conclusion

News coverage of China before the coming of China to Malawi was negative because most of the articles were simply copied from the Reuters News Agency, which is aligned with Western foreign policy. Though some stories had positive and optimistic reporting, the coverage was mostly negative, impacting on the reputation of China in the international space, signifying a lack of *professional interpretive community* values. This reporting replicates Hallin & ManCini's (2010) liberal pluralist model where the media assumes the watchdog role when reporting on China and the democratic corporatist model when reporting on Taiwan where it can be noted that its reports on Taiwan are influenced by the political alignment between the West and Taiwan.

The media also employed a collaborative role concerning coverage of Taiwan during 2001-2007 and a monitorial role concerning China. They were monitoring China's power, human rights record, etc. from a Western perspective and supporting Taiwan. In terms of Hanitzsch and Vos journalistic roles, *The Daily Times* took the roles of monitor, detective, and watchdog toward China and a collaborative role towards Taiwan. Concerning the Chinese media theory, *The Daily Times* reflects the political priorities of its elite political establishment.

The style of the reports changed with emergence of a new political environment in 2008, showing new Chinese influence, especially within the political subsystem, thus supporting the hierarchy of influence theory.

### *China in the news from January 2008-2020*

This section addresses the question: were there any changes in tone, rhetoric language use, news bylines, and journalism style in news reporting in *The Daily Times*?

#### Tone in covering China

From January 2008-2020, after China had established diplomatic relations with Malawi, the tone of articles in *The Daily Times* began to change as they now portrayed China positively. The articles were now largely written by Malawian journalists and some of them portrayed the benevolence of China by reporting how China came to Malawi's rescue following floods. Banda (2011) wrote that China had donated K7 billion to buy maize, but he did not inquire where the maize for distribution would be bought and how best the donation would support those affected. Philanthropist and founder of Africa Classroom Connection (ACC), Henry Bromelkamp (2014) notes that there is a tendency among donors that sometimes instead of buying relief items locally, they tend



to buy overseas, hence the money remains in the donor or foreign country instead of empowering local people.

From 2008 onwards *The Daily Times* articles also represented China as innovative and creative. The innovation was seen through what was described as the ‘ingenious programs’ that the Chinese government was implementing in Malawi in different sectors. For example, having seen that the tourism industry in Malawi was lagging, Suzgo Khunga (2012) writes that the Chinese government signed an MOU with the Malawi government on ‘travel groups’ where tourism companies in Malawi would work with Chinese tour operators to allow people from China to travel to Malawi as tourists. This was seen as something that would boost tourism in Malawi as the article argued that China was becoming a tourism giant, with about 100 million departures annually. Growth of tourism would allow Malawi to fight unemployment, increase national income, and foster cultural exchange in Malawi. The article “Jaguar to assemble in China” written by Reuter News Agency on June 10, 2010, and also copied in *The Daily Times*, also reflected an enterprising side of China that offers cheap labour that would allow Western companies to flock into the country, thereby fighting unemployment. The article “China agri-bank seeks record US\$23 bn IPO” published in 2010 by the Reuters News Agency, also demonstrated China’s innovative stock investment and clientele management that was leading its economic growth.

Although the majority of the articles by Malawian journalists set a positive tone, there were a few cases where they wrote negatively. For example, “Chinese shop workers agitate better perks” published in 2014 by journalist Edith Gondwe and “Court stops Chinese company from producing fake acrylic” published in 2015 by Deogratus MMana, represent China negatively. MMana wrote about the unethical trade conduct by the Chinese. However, the article would have made more sense to ordinary people if he had indicated what this meant to the Malawi population because Malawians were also victims of this malpractice as they bought counterfeit products. Similarly, in 2014, journalist Alick Ponje wrote of fake products being produced in the country by Chinese nationals, but he based his report on revelations made by a Malawian of Chinese descent, thereby portraying an image that not all immigrants from China have bad intentions.

#### Rhetorical language use

In the later articles, *The Daily Times* continued to use rhetoric devices such as hyperbole to convey meaning, but the difference was that that the devices were mostly used to create positive stories about China in reaction to the support that the country is giving to Malawi. An example of an article where rhetoric devices were used was the article entitled “China pledges K 7 bn for relief food” where Boniface Phiri used a hyperbole ‘history’ to show that the Chinese would help to make floods become ‘history’ in Malawi as they had done at home. This was an exaggeration because the Chinese, though they demonstrated preparations for flood control in their country, continued suffering from the same not only in 2015, which was just a year before the article was written, but also in 2016-2020. Boniface might have used the word to show that the assistance was immense, but some people who do not follow international news would have taken the word literally. This is

negligence in terms of *professional interpretive community* values such as being factual when presenting news.

#### News byline

From 2001-2007, news articles were mainly lifted from the Western media, especially the Reuters News Agency. However, from January 2008 to March 2020, *The Daily Times* journalists began writing news on China themselves. They could interview Chinese officials, Chinese citizens, Malawian leaders, and Malawian citizens, and present the reports from a Malawian context. For example, in the article “Security lapse irks Chinese community”, Taynjah-Phiri (2013) interviewed the Chinese community in Malawi for his story. Of the analysed articles 19 were written by *The Daily Times* journalists and 7 were written by Western media. Most of the articles written by Malawians were about China in Africa, whereas most of the Reuters’ articles were about China.

The reason that there is deeper and more nuanced coverage of China after January 2008 is a result of the political and economic shifts that occurred. In covering China more fully, *The Daily Times* journalists would have followed conventional news values and in line with the news sources theory *professional interpretive community* values they were picking up news stories that they deemed were of consequence to their readership. However, most of the time the articles did not include views from all the parties involved in the stories, hence they were sometimes not balanced enough as required by section 2.1 of the Media Council of Malawi Code of Conduct. The sourcing theory also suggests that imbalanced reporting takes place when journalists have limited sociological power as compared to the people they are interviewing. In this case, the journalists had limited power over the governments, so it was challenging for them to get all the information they might have needed from their sources.

*The Daily Times* also maintains the use of non-Chinese articles, such as those syndicated from the BBC and Aljazeera and these did not indicate the media houses as the authors of the stories instead of the journalists. The BBC is a Western news agency that draws its support from the British Parliament and is mostly negative about China. Aljazeera draws its support both from the host government and its audience and journalists from across the world, making the house more independent and not beholden to a specific country as is the case with the BBC (Powers, 2011: 17). Malawian media also used China’s Xinhua to develop stories, and this show that there was a radical shift in the way Malawian media views Chinese news media. For example, journalist Foster Benjamin in his article entitled ‘Lightning kills 3 in Shire Valley’ published in *The Daily Times* in 2020, quotes Xinhua News Agency that Malawi has some of the world’s highest deaths stemming from lightening. However, Western syndicated stories do dominate and it can be argued that this is the case because most journalists are still used to using Western resources unlike resources from the ‘new friend,’ China. The question that may arise here is “if China is interested in extending soft power in Malawi, why haven’t they tried harder to get Malawian newspapers to be publishing some of the stories that are in their Xinhua News Agency publications?”. The probable reason would be that the influence of China in Malawi varies from media house to media house. *The Daily Times* might not have used

syndicated stories from Xinhua News Agency but other news outlets such as the MBC do use media content produced in China, even without editing it. This might mean that *The Daily Times* does exercise some level of partiality, unlike the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation.

### Conclusion

The articles from this period display a mixture of negative and constructive journalism where most of the articles are positive. Most of the negative reports were lifted from Western media while most of the articles written by Malawian journalists replicate the ‘constructive journalism’ approach. This raises the question, “Why is *The Daily Times* reproducing negative Western articles, but at the same time writing their own more positive stories? Why not simply ignore the negative stories from Reuters altogether?”. A possible explanation for the status quo could be that there might be vestiges of the old political order at work, or perhaps it is simply a case of economic pressure. It is in any case a fact that from 2008 onwards most articles in *The Daily Times* are less critical of China and put much more emphasis on positive stories. For example, the article entitled “China reassures of dollar before G8, markets subdued” published in 2009 by Reuters News Agency, also reflected positively on China.

The lack of critical elements in news reporting was for instance reflected in the articles about Chinese donations to Malawian hospitals, published on November 20, 2012 by Rose Cross and the article entitled “China tops as Malawi’s flue-cured leaf importer” by Jassi. For instance, Jassi glorified the growing leaf trade between China and Malawi without scrutinising the implications of this trade. Tobacco farming across the globe has faced growing criticism in that it is responsible for lung-related diseases, such as lung cancer. The use of large numbers of trees to treat flue-cured tobacco has also been argued to be one of the causes of deforestation in Malawi. If Jassi was critical enough in the article, he would have considered the implications of such trade on Malawi and on international health and environmental concerns. This is clearly a lack of critical engagement, maybe as a result of poor journalism.

It can be noted from the papers that *The Daily Times* journalists mostly wrote about China if there was an event and when Malawi or Africa was receiving donations from China. This means that the mushrooming of the Malawian reports on China suggests that journalists were simply applying universal standards of newsworthiness to stories, for instance about development aid as the aid directed to Malawi by China was real and therefore worthy of coverage. However, the lack of critical reporting is noteworthy. If there had not been any donations, the articles about China in *The Daily Times* would have been few and most of them would, just like before January 2008, be copied from Western media and would have been mostly negative.

*The Daily Times* reports that were syndicated from Reuters at this time continued to replicate Hallin & ManCini’s (2010) liberal pluralist model to satisfy the watchdog role. However, the reports written by the Malawian journalists seem to lean towards Christians et al (2009) collaborative role of the media where *The Daily Times* supports the Chinese and Malawian government development initiatives. It also replicates and Hanitzsch & Vos

(2018) collaborative role where the media acts as part of the state apparatus to take a propagandist or agitators role.

#### PERCEPTION ON JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE

##### *Perceptions of representation of China*

The journalists interviewed agreed with the content analysis that indeed China is now largely covered positively as compared to the time before diplomatic relations were established. Madhlopa said:

“...the change in coverage makes sense because China is now one of the biggest financiers in Malawi’s social projects .... [such as] the Malawi University of Science and Technology. Before then, we had Taiwan so coverage favoured Taiwan. When a country has established strong relations, it becomes necessary to change the way you cover the country.”

With this argument, Madhlopa was suggesting that *The Daily Times* covered China positively because some activities of China in Malawi were in the public interest, thereby in line with journalistic roles, routines, and practices. His argument also suggests that journalistic roles have not changed at *The Daily Times*. He is implying that there has always been an indirect influence of China in news reporting in Malawi in that when the Malawian political elites jumped horses from Taiwan to China, the press followed this shift uncritically, reflecting the media’s ongoing alignment with the neo-patrimonial political system and the ‘collaborative’ role of the press.

Journalist Shaba said that the influence of China in *The Daily Times* reports was sometimes ‘in the moment’ in that a positive article was written about China when there was a particular reason and not that they were subjected to overt pressure or had a normative arrangement with China to always write positively. For example, when China donated computers in 2017, *The Daily Times* felt compelled to write positively and dedicated two pages to the story because they wanted to reward them for their generosity.

On the issue that *The Daily Times*, before the increase of China’s presence in Malawi, largely reported using the Reuters News Agency, the journalists indicated that this was because of individual choices of media houses. Media managers always encouraged their journalists to copy news from media houses that they have good relations with and during that time it was Reuters News Agency. It is arguable that the Agency might have been subjected to the hierarchy of influences, but the editor of *The Daily Times* had a responsibility to decide if the news reports being copied from Reuters subscribed to the institution’s news ethics. This negative portrayal was also in line with the official Malawian foreign policy at the time.

It is arguable that Malawian newsrooms have limited resources and cannot provide their own independently verified reports on the world – so, they rely on inexpensive copy from the most powerful news agencies in the world which, in the case of Reuters, is a Western news organisation aligned with Western geopolitics. China’s increased presence in Malawi created tension for these editors. Their government (with whom they are, broadly speaking, aligned) shifted their allegiance from a Western-aligned power, Taiwan, to state capitalist China. These editors still received mostly negative Reuters copy streaming

into their newsrooms, but they (and the Malawian government) were now seeing China as an ally and in some cases, the news organisations were benefiting directly from the benevolence of the Chinese state. This was a contradictory situation and may account for the confused mixture of positive and negative news about China in the 2008-2020 coverage. The West still has power at the social systems level, but that power was now being contested by China.

Similarly, the journalistic roles of Malawian media were probably heavily influenced by liberal pluralist media theory before 2008, but are now being challenged by Chinese media theory/systems. Malawian media is transitional and differs from both the West and China. Similarly, Umejei (2018: 2) observes that the authoritarian Malawian neo-patrimonial political system is in some ways similar to China, but there is probably more freedom of expression in Malawi than in China. This puts Malawi somewhere in-between the West and the East.

#### *Social system and extramedia influences*

The study revealed that the Chinese have adopted ideological, political, and structural strategies to influence Malawian media which will be outlined here and the researchers will focus on the social systems and extramedia layers of the hierarchy of influences.

#### *Ideological influences*

Journalists indicated that before Malawi and China established diplomatic relations, the reports were negative because most journalists were not exposed to China, and China was not an official friend of Malawi. Because Malawi is a former colonial territory of Britain, most journalists knew China through a Western lens taking in Western cultural influence, education, and media houses.

With the establishment of Malawi-China relations, journalists became more familiar with the Chinese role in the world, and Madhlopa argued that most journalists realised that China was not as bad as most Western media portrayed it. Through cultural exchange programs, fellowships and scholarships, to mention a few, Malawian journalists reported becoming aware that most of the time China supports Africa and there was no need to be unnecessarily critical of the Chinese.

Madhlopa also claimed that Malawian journalists have learnt that the ‘state capitalism’ which is practiced in China was not inherently evil as many sections of the mainstream Western media have tended to portray it. Malawi has always embraced economic liberalism even when it was not appropriate. Madhlopa gave the example of the IMF and its structural adjustment programs that it issued to Malawi in the 1990s, with sometimes detrimental results.

Respondents also argued that though people generally complained about the problems that were being faced in Malawi as a result of the coming of the Chinese, such as poor-quality phones, they generally saw China as a lesser evil as compared to the country’s traditional donors such as the United States. Chisale accused Western countries of “forcing their values, such as human rights, on the Malawi population” which was not the case with China. Malawians do believe in human rights but some people think some rights are

'foreign' hence eroding the country's cultural values. Tasokwa stated that one of the examples of Western intrusion in Malawi was when the UN secretary-general flew to Malawi and forced the Malawi government to release Malawi's first publicly known gay couple. Some journalists were wondering whether the West cares about African independence while others argue that they would feel thrown to the wolves if Western governments did not object to these violations. China, which did not interfere with local politics, was seen as more tolerant and respectful of Malawian independence. The question of independence and human rights raised an ethical question on whether it was important to let Malawians exercise their independence even when their actions infringed on equally important minority rights. It could be argued that China does not preach about human rights because to do so would expose its human rights failings and that their silence is less about their benevolence, but about the preservation of their own economic and geopolitical self-interest.

Chisale observed that the other ideological shift was the realisation that hard work pays. China, though a developing country, has become one of the biggest economies in the world over a short period of time. One of the reasons for such change is hard work. Chisale says Malawian journalists have been inspired by such progress and when they think of a country that Malawi can emulate, China comes to their minds. This ideological shift was reflected in the media – while most Western media were accusing China of creating debt traps, Malawian media were praising China for the loans.

#### Political influence

The Malawian government exerts strong political pressure on the media – and it is strongly interested in positive media coverage of its political allies, such as China. This is a form of influence by proxy or indirect Chinese influence on media representations through the Malawian political elites. Journalists observed that the Malawian government protected the Chinese public image in Malawi through its direct control of public, community and private media.

The government in the past also used this force to influence media, but before China came to Malawi, the main beneficiary of this power was Taiwan because it had good relations with the United Democratic Front, which was the governing party then. The Malawian government thus continued to exercise influence on the Malawian media, but now it was benefiting China. For example, during a press conference, some members of the Democratic Progressive Party youth wing, called 'Cadets', stood behind the journalists and started issuing threats to deter journalists from asking questions that might be perceived as 'critical,' which made it difficult for some journalists to gather courage and ask the much-needed questions. Commenting on the threats, Nsapato said:

*"I think to some extent this is cowardice from the side of the journalist because when you want to get to the bottom of an issue, you ask no matter what. Of course, there are rogues when journalists are asking [critical] questions [but the journalist has to stand on his ground]. I don't have any experience where the Chinese embassy did the same."*

Some journalists were ready to risk their lives and careers, but others were forced to exercise self-censorship, as Chisale stated:

*“There are silent policies. For example, if there is a minister, you try to be positive. In 2010-2011, I don’t think that has changed, roughly, 40% of adverts were from the government. The bosses will not tell us to highlight a story [that involves government] but as an editor, you know that it is important to highlight it. [In due course] this reflects the Chinese positively. Sometimes we get informal demands such as questions; ‘are your reports helping Malawians?’ This influences how we approach stories.”*

Based on these two direct quotes, it can be argued that the Malawian and Chinese governments’ normative conceptions of the proper role of the press in society are quite closely aligned (i.e. the collaborative role). While, in a democracy, this role is usually understood as a voluntary agreement between the media and the state, there appears to be an element of coercive force in the case of both the Chinese and Malawian states in securing this collaboration. However, China, following its soft approach, does not use coercion inside Malawi, but instead uses the Malawian state as a proxy. However, by not interfering, it could be argued that it colludes in the perpetuation of neo-patrimonial rule in Malawi and advances the interests of its authoritarian system.

The Malawian government also aided China to influence media in Malawi by encouraging journalists to attend media events in China. The events were ostensibly organised to expose journalists to the Chinese ways of living and not necessarily to force them to adopt ‘positive journalism’. Madhlopa said:

*“[During media trips], they don’t teach us how to write stories...they will leave it to you to decide. There are many media events; there is a media fellowship where journalists go to China for nine months. There are visits where journalists go there for three weeks. All these are funded by the Chinese government, directly.”*

In this sense, China was not trying to explicitly change the routines and practices of journalists or even their normative journalistic roles; their influence was subtle. These events were attended by journalists from both the private and public media, and they exposed the journalists to the positive aspects of Chinese culture, economic and political systems, which sometimes motivated them to write positively about China (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017).

Sometimes the Malawian and Chinese governments sponsored journalists to cover their stories. In such cases it was very difficult for the poorly paid Malawian journalists to write negatively because if s/he did so, the fear was that s/he would not be shortlisted again for these functions, forgoing allowances that would uplift their lives.

Madhlopa rejected the idea that the money influenced what journalists reported on, even though other journalists indicated the malpractice. The perception of Madhlopa on the role of the funds on news reporting is in line with the African journalism culture theory which suggests that African journalists accept the funds not because they are corrupt but rather to help reduce reporting costs considering that most media houses on the continent are struggling financially.

Chisale said that although there were limited financial incentives from the Chinese, the Chinese-sponsored events themselves were designed to influence reports. He said:

*“The Chinese ... have a very subtle approach to issues. Sometimes they will not give you money, but they will say, for 32 hours can you fly to our country? And when you go there, they don’t put you in cheap hotels; it’s a five-star hotel, five-star treatment, police escort, with a convoy. You go to Shanghai, Beijing, then back to Malawi. You can eat any kind of food that you want in China. If they treat you like that, what can you do as a poor Malawian? You can’t write anything negative.”*

This influence seems to be extramedia, but one that is targeted not at media organisations or newsrooms, but at individual journalists.

Lastly, sometimes Chinese authorities encourage journalists to write positively. When negative stories are being published, and the authorities did not appreciate these articles, the Chinese sometimes talked to journalists. Zgambo said:

*“I remember clearly, [the ambassador] called for a meeting at the Chinese embassy and he just lost it. He was literally shouting at people. He was like, why are you people doing this? He had a long list of what the government of China has done in Malawi and he couldn’t understand why the media in Malawi could report on China so negatively and he went as far as calling Malawi a poor country and I remember the people were not amused by it. They said we may be poor but we still have our pride so please do not attack us on poverty. His understanding, and I believe it is the understanding of the Chinese government, was that because they are doing all these good things in Malawi; they deserve to be covered positively. Even when there are bad things, the media should look the other way.”*

Sometimes the Chinese nagged journalists, asking why they did not take their pictures or cover a story that would have been in favour. Because journalists do not want to frustrate them, they played the ‘diplomatic ball’, and they ended up being influenced in some way, but this did not mean that they were chained altogether. Nsapato said:

*“You can make a decision whether to shut them out or not. You have to learn how to strike a balance, where to stop. You have to know that as a media house, you are in business and you have to find a way to side with the people.”*

#### Structural influences

The study revealed that there are structures both in media houses and institutions in general that influence media content. The Malawian and Chinese governments have public relations personnel who control the outflow of information in their institutions in terms of what, how, and when people should know about a particular story. They make press statements that set the agenda of how and what people can talk about. Journalists usually just adopt these statements and report them as news without investigating further in what is called ‘protocol news.’ Madhlopa argues that the Chinese are not forthcoming with information, unless they have something they want you to cover.

However, journalism is not only about ‘protocol news’; monitorial journalists need to be critical of publicity statements made for them to present objective news (Christians et al.,



2009). Journalists reported that not all of them have a critical eye to see donations from different angles and this might be because of unsatisfactory journalism training, which does not fully equip the journalists with the skills to problematise development projects and critique national plans and their implementation.

Although Zgambo complained about declining education standards, Malawian newsrooms have several educated academics, some with Masters degrees that they obtained from some of the world's top universities, and they have senior positions such as director of programs. Ideally, these intellectuals should be in a position to develop and control the quality of news work. However, Zgambo explained that news work is a value chain; it needs teamwork, and each participant affects news quality, he said those with good education are overwhelmed and they do not have the time to make all the corrections.

#### *Normative roles of journalism in Malawi*

Journalists did emphasise that they have important roles as far as news reporting is concerned. They believe that they have a role to inform their audience by providing accurate up-to-date information so that their audience can be well aware of what is happening around them. Nsapato said that any journalist by nature of his or her profession needs to inform the masses where China is helping, or not.

In the transmission of social values, philosophies, and economic ideologies, Madhlopa claimed that journalists need to use news as a means of promoting such attributes to champion human respect and dignity. Journalists indicated that there are some economic ideologies, such as 'state capitalism', that are usually portrayed in a broadly negative light but they are not always adverse. In reporting on China, values, philosophies, and economic ideologies are spread through positive reports that cover the Chinese way of life, such as those displayed during Chinese independence celebrations in Lilongwe annually.

The journalists have a duty to educate the masses by tackling issues that the public is misinformed about so that they can get the right information and possibly change their perceptions. Journalists have the privilege of reaching out to so many people over a short time, meaning that they can help to provide civic education to so many people, thereby contributing to social change. Shaba stated:

*"Many Malawians think the Chinese are trying to depopulate their country, settling in Malawi and finding a home in Africa and that they are trying to take Malawian businesses. You would expect then that if they wanted to invest in Malawi, they would have bigger industries and not small-scale businesses. Some even operate grocery shops. The question is, how are we allowing this to happen? Those two perceptions provide that the journalists should be there to explain to people if this is indeed true or not."*

Lastly, it was also claimed that journalists work as watchdogs in that they have to report cases of injustice in need of public attention. Chisale argued:

*"We also provide checks and balances and [work] to support organisations like the anti-corruption bureau, office of the ombudsman, and even the courts ... to make sure that good government works. Of course, it's not formal but we do that. We also speak for the voiceless, those people*

who have a stake in their government but do not have a platform where they can articulate their issues.”

#### *Contestation of journalistic roles*

Although a good number of journalists believed in the above roles, there was a contestation of journalistic roles where some expressed concern that there was a limit to what extent one would hold on to the above-mentioned roles. For example, although there was a general consensus that it is important that the journalists provide information that is critical to their audience, some journalists expressed that it was not always necessary to do so. They indicated that there was some diplomatic information that does not need to be shared with the masses, with an eye to the proper execution of development projects. This belief seems to be in line with Christians et al’s (2009) idea of the collaborative role of the media where the media has a duty to willingly support government development agenda’s, which in the long run makes the media less critical. Such an influence on news content happens at the extramedia level of the hierarchy of influences when the media is developing content that is supporting government policy.

Furthermore, Zgambo argued that what has become critical among journalists was the issue of whether journalists should be activists. Some people have argued that the role of journalists has evolved; journalists have to do more than reporting while others have contested that the role of a journalist is just to report. For them, one cannot force them to start investigating and persuading people to change. For example, Madhlopa said that if the Chinese have built a good university and the journalist has reported on it, the job is done. Whether there are flaws in the construction or there was some misappropriation of funds, is none of their business. This influence takes place at the individual level of the hierarchy of influence where the journalists choose to reject some external forces, which might corrupt reporting.

#### *Changes in the role of journalism*

We do realise however that the roles of journalism in Malawi are changing in that, unlike in the days of Dr. Banda and Dr. Muluzi, where journalists mostly practiced collaborative and monitorial roles respectively, now journalists are asking themselves about the importance of their reports. They want their reports to mean something; they do not want to critique just for the sake of arguing – they want to foster change. It is arguable that this has been one of the reasons why some journalists rarely critique China because they think that the Chinese are doing so much for the country and they need support from the journalists.

This trend is in line with the collaborative role of journalism espoused in the theories of the media (Christians et al., 2009) and is in line with Chinese media system theory which presses for a more compliant media. This collaboration is playing out both by acceptance and by coercion, where some journalists willingly collaborate while others are threatened to do so. On the one hand, one could say that the collaboration is essential in that it helps in fighting several challenges affecting Malawi such as poverty and shortage of infrastructure. On the other hand, the educational role of the media is fading away. Not

only because journalists are less critical, but also because educational programs are not seen to attract large audiences and advertisers anymore. There used to be educational programs, including actual classroom activities, as claimed by Shaba:

“There were educational programs that were being featured in most of the media houses. Even newspapers had some columns where you would put some school staff in there. There could be a class session on the radio, of course, they were targeting primary education, but there it’s slowly fading....between 2009 -2015, there was Tikwere program on radio, and newspapers had quizzes.”

## Conclusion

This study has shown that there have been changes in the way China has been covered in *The Daily Times* from 2001-2020. In the period from 2001-2007, the coverage of China took a negative tone that represented China as socially backward with a record of gross violations of human rights. Poetic devices were used to further paint such a negative picture and the journalism style was negative. All of the articles were simply copy-pasted from the Reuters News Agency. After January 2008, the tone changed in that it was now more positive, representing China as innovative and benevolent. Journalism practices were more positive and local journalists were able to write original stories on China.

The study has also shown that journalists in Malawi think that there has been both a subtle and direct influence in news reporting from the Chinese, but that also the Malawian government has greatly influenced the news reports. The Malawian government exercises firm control over the media and this has worked to the benefit of its allies. The control has been changing in terms of tactics as it now mostly bends the journalists will through intimidation as opposed to laws and terror, as was the case in the times of Dr. Banda. Journalism roles have also been changing to some extent in that journalists now are interested in making reports that would help promote socio-economic development in Malawi which refers to their collaborative role.

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