

Professional Socialisation and Training of Business Reporters in Malawi: A Case Study of *the Daily Times* and *the Nation* Newspapers

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Abstract

*In the past few decades, the proportion of business news compared to general news has increased tremendously across all media platforms in Africa. While the critical role played by business journalism is recognised, little is known about the people who write and report such news. Most studies on business journalism have tended to focus on analysing the content of business news, rather than the specific processes through which business journalists are socialised and trained. The findings of this study are drawn mainly from in-depth interviews with business reporters and editors at two leading newspapers in Malawi, *The Daily Times* and *The Nation*. Two major findings emerge from the study data. First, business journalists vary in their educational and professional backgrounds, as well as the reasons for working on this beat. Second, the majority of them have no prerequisite formal education and training in business journalism. The study recommends that business reporting should become an integral component of journalism education and training programmes in order to adequately prepare journalists for effective coverage of business issues.*

Key words: business journalism, education, mentoring, training, socialisation, specialisation,

Introduction

The professional socialisation and training of business journalists remains an underdeveloped area of research in Africa. A lot of studies conducted so far have tended to devote more effort to content analysis, examining how the business press report specific issues and events. For example, Kariithi and Kareithi (2007) did a critical discourse analysis of media coverage of the anti-privatisation strike of 2002 in South Africa, Kula (2004) investigated the coverage of inflation news by the South African print media while Manda and Chirwa (2007) examined budget reporting trends in Malawian media. Considering the increased growth and importance of business reporting across media platforms in Africa in the last decade and the contributions business journalists make to the debate surrounding the political economy of host nations, research on the professional socialisation and training of such group of specialised reporters remains a worthwhile area of inquiry.

The present study explores the professional socialisation and training of business reporters in Malawi. The objective is to understand the process by which people become specialised business news reporters. The study addressed the following key questions:

1. What motivates journalists in Malawi to venture into business reporting?
2. What processes do the journalists follow to become specialised reporters?
3. What mentoring process do they undergo?
4. What education and training do the journalists possess?
5. What education and training do the reporters believe is needed to effectively report about business?

Business journalism as a sub-field of news reporting

Business journalism refers to all reporting that is written not only about businesses but also on the economy (Roush 2006: 8). According to Kariithi (2003), three closely related forms of journalistic endeavour; business, economics and financial journalism are often used interchangeably even though there are distinctions between them.

Economics journalism refers to the coverage of national and international economic events and issues, business journalism comprises the coverage of local economic issues in an in-depth fashion while financial journalism provides a micro level perspective into financial markets (Kariithi, 2003:153). In this study the term business journalism is used to refer to all the three.

Roush (2004:2) observes that there is no more important work in today's media than that of a business journalist and as such vibrant business reporting is being encouraged in emerging democracies and emerging economies. Welles (2001:18) contend that this genre of journalism has acquired special status, as manifested in special newspaper sections, television and radio programmes as well as specialised publications and special editorial teams tailored to business. Business journalism has thus emerged as a distinct and legitimate news reporting sub-field with a number of specific practices and norms of its own (Kjaer and Slaata, 2007:38).

Business journalism in Malawi

Although business news has been a main offering of Malawian news media for many years, the institutionalisation of business reporting as a specialised area of journalism practice is a relatively new development. It dates back to just about twenty years ago. As Chimombo and Chimombo (1996) put it, the defunct *The Malawi Financial Post* and *The Malawi Financial Observer* emerged in the early 1990s as potential business news outlets, but they contained more political than financial news. Thus, to date Malawi does not have a free-standing business newspaper. Instead, business news is carried as a section in a general newspaper or as a supplement or pull out. The prominence of business reporting in Malawi emerged following the adoption of liberal politics in 1994. Since the end of one-party rule, issues of the economy and people's welfare have dominated political and civic debate. People have become more conscious of the performance of the economy and how it affects their livelihood and survival. In national elections, for example, sound economic management and improvement in living standards have become dominant campaign themes of various political parties and candidates. Manda and Chirwa (2007:2) argue that business reporting creates space for public debate on the national economy through the involvement of citizens in matters of formulating, implementing and monitoring of the national budget. Besides focusing on the national budget, business reporting in Malawi has been equally concerned with public accounting, corporate governance and economic performance of the private sector among other issues.

Nevertheless, Malawi, like many other African countries, lacks a well developed business journalism practice. This could be attributed to two major factors. Firstly, the one-party rule which prevailed for 30 years after independence did not allow any journalism schools to operate (Chimombo and Chimombo, 1996:6). Formal journalism education and training was only introduced after the adoption of multi-party politics in 1994. Secondly, the existing journalism education models emphasise training for general reporting (Jamieson, 2005: 29). Since there had been no formal training and education for business reporting, general reporters routinely transform into business journalists. This situation called for an investigation into the socialisation and training of business reporters considering that business journalism poses its own unique and complex challenges.

Business reporting at The Daily Times and the Nation newspapers

The Daily Times and *The Nation* are the only two daily newspapers in Malawi. *The Daily Times* is the oldest newspaper in Malawi. It was established in the early 1960's by the family of the country's first post-independence president, the late Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. *The Nation*, owned by late veteran politician, Aleke Banda, was established in 1993 during the transition from single party to multi party political dispensation. *The Daily Times* and *The Nation* define and dominate business reporting in Malawi. The two newspapers were appropriate for the study because they covered more business issues and in greater detail than other media organisations in Malawi. Furthermore, they were significant as they had set up business desks alongside other regular news beats such as politics, entertainment and sports.

The papers had deployed full time staff for the business desks both at their main offices in the commercial city of Blantyre and at regional bureaus in Lilongwe and Mzuzu. They also enjoyed the highest circulation and readership in Malawi. At the time of the study, *The Daily Times* and *The Nation* had a circulation of 12,000 and 15,000 respectively (MISA 2012:47). The business desk at *The Nation* was set up in 1995 and in 1996 for *The Daily Times*. *The Daily Times* has a four page section of business news daily with a sixteen page *The business Times* pull out on Wednesday. *The Nation* on its part carries four pages of business news daily except on Sunday and publishes its eight-page supplement on Thursday.

Research Design and Methodology

To answer the stated research questions, this study adopted a case study approach. As Stake (1995: 112) notes, cases are chosen and studied because they are considered “instrumentally useful in furthering understanding of a particular problem, issue, or concept.” The study targeted business journalists of two leading daily newspapers in Malawi namely *The Daily Times* and *The Nation*. Data was mainly collected through face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews with selected business reporters. The in-depth interviews were used to obtain detailed information about specific aspects of the respondents’ work as business journalists. Where appropriate, follow-up questions were asked to gain more depth to answers provided to the study question. This allowed a substantial room for respondents to express themselves more openly and for the researcher to probe explanations (Wimmer and Dominic 2004). Additional information was gathered through in-depth interviews with editors of the two newspapers. This was used not only to complement data from business reporters, but also to get an alternative perspective. At the time of the research, the business desk at *The Daily Times* and *The Nation* had 4 and 5 reporters respectively. In total 11 people participated in the study (nine reporters and two editors).

All interviews conducted with reporters and editors were recorded and later transcribed. Given that the interviews produced data in form of verbatim transcripts, the researcher interpreted the meaning of the data and presented it in a critical and coherent manner. The researcher reported those sections of the interviews that shed most light on the research question in narrative form with pertinent quotations used to illustrate major findings of the study.

Study Findings

Motivation for becoming a business journalist

Analysis of the interview transcripts indicated that the majority of the interviewees came upon business reporting as a career serendipitously. Their transition from general assignment to business reporting did not have a single catalyst. They gave various motivations for choosing business journalism as a career path. Nevertheless, three basic patterns emerged from the interviews; those who became business journalists out of passion for the beat, those who joined the business desk just for the sake of reporting something different, and those who were forced by circumstances.

A reporter of *The Daily Times* belonged to the few that had the initial passion to report business. As he put it:

“The field was uncharted and so [I] wanted to do something unique in Malawi journalism, to take up the challenge to help bring awareness among people on various business policies being introduced and implemented and how they affected the country’s development agenda. Also it was the idea to associate with the cream of the world. Economists, business and financial experts are regarded as the top ranks of decision making on issues of the economy. Issues of the economy are regarded as tough and difficult. For belonging to the business desk, one is seen as belonging to unique and special class of journalist. Many reporters would refuse to be on the business desk because they think it is difficult. To be a business reporter is special, one interacts and associates with top notch intelligentsia, people with knowledge about business and the economy.” (Interview, September, 2012)

For three reporters at *The Nation* and one at *The Daily Times*, the motivation to enter business journalism was the desire to report on something different (to break away) from the usual routine, mainly the emphasis on political reporting. And for two reporters at *The Daily Times*, circumstances forced their entry into business journalism; they were ordered to move to the beat due to shortage of staff on the business desk.

Based on these findings, it can be said that many of the reporters had no initial motivation to venture into business reporting. Only a few had considered it in the first place. The rest were, to say the least, dragged into the field for various reasons cited above. These findings support Marchette (2005) assertion that journalistic specialisation was not compatible to academic disciplines, because there were no formal entry requirements. For the journalists at the two newspapers under study there was no specific academic qualification or any other conditions attached for them to become business reporters.

Recruitment for business reporting

The newspaper editors were asked, “What was the pre-requisite education and training for business reporting? In other words, what criterion was used by the editors for recruiting and re-deploying staff on the business desk?” Their responses revealed that experience in journalism rather than background knowledge in business or economics was the most important factor considered when media institutions hire business reporters. Editor of *The Daily Times* explained that:

“Recruiting staff for the business desk is a challenge because most of the media training institutions do not offer specialised training for business reporting. So usually most of the people that we have hired are those that got basic training in journalism then probably had chances later on for further studies specifically in business and economics news coverage. Most of the time we target those who have had training outside their normal or basic journalism training, and also had opportunities to do short courses in business and economics reporting. In addition we usually also look for some work experience, those who have been on the business desk before.” (Interview, October, 2012)

On the other hand, editor of *The Nation* said for business reporting the paper usually targeted people with a relevant first degree and at least with some knowledge of economics or business. The editor observed that it was ideal to target those with an economics degree in economics because this knowledge was vital, citing an example of one of the paper’s business reporters who was an economics graduate from Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi. Editor of *The Daily Times* said his organisation had tried the approach of recruiting economics or business studies graduates since it would have been the best option. But he pointed out that such graduates were usually not settled because they could get more competitive salaries elsewhere. He said economics and business studies graduates found lucrative jobs elsewhere rather than in the media. He said, when they came to the media, it was because they had nowhere to go at that particular time. This editor observed that unless remuneration and work conditions in the media improved to become competitive as those offered by the corporate and financial sector, the chances of maintaining economics and business studies graduates were minimal. Editor of *The Nation* agreed with his *Daily Times* counterpart that it was not achievable to get economics and business graduates as they were mostly unwilling to work in the newsroom but instead preferred the corporate world where salaries and conditions were attractive. He added that it had to be understood that these economics and business graduates were not in principal professional journalists by training but just happened to be suited to journalism, hence their primary target was the financial, business and corporate sectors. The editor’s advocating for economics or business graduates as the most ideal for business reporting was contradicted by a very experienced business reporter at *The Daily Times* who argued that he would give priority to an experienced reporter to learn on the job over an economics graduate turned business reporter. To him, the economics or business graduate would fail to communicate information to the masses. He added that the experienced journalist would look at issues with the eye of an ordinary person. Another reporter at *The Nation* supported this position that economists or business studies graduates were not best suited for business reporting noting:

“It is true that some people who are economists have ended up being good business journalists. But you also have got cases around where you find people who have never been trained as economists ending up being good business journalists. I think we should first understand who a journalist is; a journalist is a communicator whether it be in science or politics. So in the case of business reporting, it is anybody else who is interested in reporting business news, what is important is to equip them to understand the issues. To me, it is better to have an experienced journalist rather than a graduate economist to report on business. Even if one does not have a background in economics or business studies but if you have an interest in that particular sector then you can turn into a good communicator of those issues. What is important is to be good communicators and interpreters of the issues.” (Interview, October, 2012)

From the sentiments of the two reporters, it can be argued that the position of editors on recruiting business and economics graduates for business reporting seems idealistic. What was more practical and manifested on the ground was that journalism experience surpassed all other considerations. Of the nine business reporters interviewed during the study only one had a degree in economics. This indicated that while economics or business qualification was preferred, it was not attainable and that journalism experience was the most used criterion for recruiting staff for business reporting. The situation at the two Malawian newspapers seemed to agree with Reed and Lewin (2005: 14), who noted that it helped if the reporters had experience covering other types of stories before moving over to business, as experienced reporters needed less direction while greener reporters required more mentoring. Nearly four decades ago, Turnstall (1971:24) also made similar observation that in specialist reporting preference had always been on general experience and competence rather than specialised knowledge.

Induction and mentoring newly recruited business reporters

Editors of the two newspapers under study agreed that mentoring for newly deployed reporters on the business desk was an important requirement to have the people orientated to the expectations and mode of operations on that particular desk.

Editor of *The Daily Times* however observed that sometimes formal mentoring was not always possible, especially if the new person came to the desk when more experienced reporters were busy. In that situation, he confessed, de-briefing and mentoring was sometimes overlooked and the new person was left to swim on their own. He said what would be done instead was to constantly give feedback to the concerned person. He noted for example that if there was something which could be improved on, they would be advised accordingly. The editor said the responsibility of mentoring would be left to the business editor because he possessed specialised knowledge in that field. Editor of *The Nation* said the process of mentoring on the business beat was the same for reporters on other desks. The only difference was that as part of the mentoring process they were encouraged to read widely literature on business and economics to keep themselves abreast with latest developments. The two editors admitted that induction and mentoring of new recruits was compromised because they were not governed by any written rules but carried out as routine practices when necessary.

However, most reporters expressed concern over lack of mentoring and socialisation at the time they joined the business desk. One reporter of *The Nation* explained that he was not mentored or inducted in any way on business reporting as the experienced reporters were then not available to do so. A reporter of *The Daily Times* said in the absence of formal mentoring in the early days, he familiarised himself through reading articles in international business newspapers and magazines. Two reporters of *The Daily Times* who had the privilege of being inducted and mentored admitted it was a useful process that nurtured and sharpened their skills.

These findings revealed that while mentoring was an essential process in the professional socialisation of business reporters, it had not been carried out to the expected levels or in some cases not at all. Most reporters interviewed lamented how they had struggled to cope with demands of the business desk and ended up making mistakes in their writing which could have been avoided if they were formally and properly inducted and mentored. Most newly recruited reporters on the business desk said they had been left to find ways of doing things on their own.

Education and training of business reporters

In this study, education was used to refer to academic qualification that emphasise theoretical aspects while training denoted qualification that focussed on practical elements of a profession. Within training, a distinction was also made between short term courses pursued at workshops and seminars, and long-term courses leading to award of a certificate, diploma or degree. In terms of their formal education, findings revealed that the highest academic qualification for two reporters of *The Nation* and three of *The Daily Times* was The Malawi School Certificate of Education (an equivalent of British GSCE O-level certificate). One reporter of *The Daily Times* had a diploma in journalism, one reporter of *The Nation* possessed a bachelors degree in economics while two reporters (one for each paper) possessed bachelors degree in journalism. (Refer to Table 1)

Table 1: Academic Qualifications

Qualification	Number of people
(a) M.S.C.E. (British GSCE O- level equivalent)	5
(b) Diploma	1
(c) Bachelors degree in journalism	2
(d) Bachelors degree in economics	1

The academic qualifications as shown by table above indicate that most business editors ventured into business reporting unprepared without any pre-requisite knowledge and expertise.

Professional Qualifications

All the journalists interviewed indicated having no initial exposure or background knowledge in business or economics except one who had a bachelors degree in economics. The rest only possessed qualifications in general journalism ranging from certificate to a bachelors degree (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Professional qualifications in business/economics

Qualification	Number of people
(a) Certificate in business /economics	0
(b) Diploma in business /economics	0
(c) Bachelors degree in business /economics	1
(d) Masters degree in business/economics	0

It was because of knowledge gap in business and economics as depicted by the table above that most reporters indicated that short term business reporting courses were critical for them to meet the demands of the beat.

Professional short courses

All reporters interviewed indicated that they had attended short-term professional training at either a workshop or seminar. Topics covered during such training included the following: reporting corruption, corporate governance, budget reporting and analysis, reporting business news, globalisation, understanding the global financial crisis, and reporting the national economy. Most of the workshops and seminars, it was observed took place locally and organised by institutions such as the University of Malawi, the Reserve Bank of Malawi, National Bank of Malawi, Standard Bank, Malawi Revenue Authority, Office of the Director of Public Procurement, Economics Association of Malawi, Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Malawi Stock Exchange, Malawi Economic Justice Network and Institute of Internal Auditors, and the local offices of international institutions such as the World Bank, Canadian International Development Agency and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Some reporters indicated to have attended such short term courses outside the country organised by international institutions such as the Reuters Foundation, European Union, African Development Bank, Reserve Bank of South Africa, and Johannesburg Stock Exchange among others.

The two editors admitted that due to cash flow problems it became difficult for the media institutions to sponsor reporters for professional training in Malawi or outside the country. They instead encouraged reporters to seize opportunities of fully-funded training. They said in some cases their organisations would meet part of the costs such as transportation expenses when the tuition and other costs were paid for. But they emphasised that the initiative had to be with the reporter to identify and apply for a course and only inform management should they needed support.

In-house training

Editor of *The Daily Times* added that apart from training offered by other institutions within and outside the country, in-house training is sometimes organised. This usually involved inviting officials of business and economics institutions who would make presentations to the business reporters. He said such presentations supplemented the mentoring and socialisation that took place on the desk and had proved very useful. He explained how it was done:

“We have in the past tried to call people and organisations to come and make presentations on particular areas of business and economics as one way of improving the performance of our business reporters. For example the Economics Association of Malawi would do some training for journalists on specifically how they want people to cover economics issues, the Bankers Association of Malawi would give a briefing on how to handle issues concerning banks, the Malawi Stock Exchange would also hold a training session specifically on how best they could be covered. So business reporters benefit from such presentations” (Interview, October 2012)

The above explanation showed that the media organisations complemented efforts of external organisations in providing training to business reporters. All reporters were unanimous in acknowledging the significance of long and short term professional courses to their business reporting careers. One reporter of *The Nation* put it that:

“When I was going into business reporting I did not have the much needed knowledge and experience, therefore such training have been like eye openers because they helped me understand issues in business and I think they have helped to shape me to where I am now” (Interview, October 2012)

Most reporters said the courses exposed them to new business knowledge, and provided new insight and helped them gain confidence. In one unique case, as part of professional training, one reporter of *The Daily Times* said he had benefited from a six month internship at the business desk of *The Chicago Tribune* in the United States of America

Membership to professional organisations

Socialisation and training through membership to professional association was also mentioned by the business reporters as another useful intervention. One such body was the Association of Business Journalists (ABJ). In the words of a reporter of *The Nation* who claimed was a founding member of ABJ had contributed tremendously to the quality of business reporting:

“The association has done an incredible job to enhance the professionalisation of business journalists through exchange of ideas and public talks where professionals in economics, business and financial sectors present working papers and discuss issues. In addition members have benefited from the association as a forum for networking, interaction, knowledge sharing and discussion of issues to develop business journalism profession, lobbying and negotiating with organisations for training.” (Interview, October, 2012)

In addition to the local organisation, other reporters said they were members of international professional bodies such as the African Economics Editors Network through which they had benefited in form of training, networking and sharing of knowledge and skills with other reporters across the African continent.

Education and training the reporters needed

Despite benefiting from short and long term professional training, the reporters explained that they wished they could undergo more training to enhance their skills especially in aspects they faced challenges. The areas identified included: monetary policy, international financial market systems, globalisation, interpreting national budget, bond and commodity markets, interpreting statistics, and analysing company financial statements. This showed that while the business reporters had undergone some professional training, there existed knowledge gap that required more exposure and training. In a study of 18 west coast newspaper editors and reporters in the United States of America carried out over a decade ago, nearly all agreed that business journalists needed classes or training in business and economics to do their jobs well (Ludwig 2002:129). Going by the study findings, the scenario in the United States appear to hold true to the Malawi situation. As articulated by reporters of the two newspapers under study, their exposure to different forms of professional training had significantly improved their capacity to cover business. They indicated that they needed to take classes in business and economics to provide them with tools necessary to do their work properly, although they were mixed responses on what form the courses should take and the specific areas or topics.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of the study established that for most business journalists at the two daily newspapers, there was no initial motivation to venture into business reporting. Most of them began their careers as general reporters and few had considered the choice of business journalism as a career option as there was no initial passion and inspiration. For some it was a matter of moving away from their usual routines especially political reporting while others were forced by circumstances, for example shortage of personnel on the desk. This showed that most of them were to say the least dragged into it for various reasons. The study also revealed that the business reporters had different educational and professional backgrounds and experiences. Although the editors of the two daily newspapers under study said they preferred business or economics graduates, most of their business journalists at that time did not possess those qualifications. The majority of them had no formal training in business or economics and had to be exposed to the field through short and long term on the job training.

An essential outcome of the study was the recognition that training was one of the central pillars of the professional socialisation of business reporters. Kariithi (1995:376) puts it that studies of how African journalists cope with demands of business journalism have found that even without considering the impact of other factors, the writers lacked technical skills for comprehensive reporting and analysis of business issues. The way the business reporters were socialised was reflected on the kind of content they produced. Since an understanding of business and economics issues is a pre-requisite for effective dissemination and interpretation of information to the public, business journalists required to be trained. The study revealed that there were a handful of trained business reporters, hence the added need for more training. However, specialisation in business reporting had not fully taken root among Malawian journalists. It was noted that lack of adequate specialised training was particularly cardinal. Local institutions that offer journalism education and training did not have specialised programmes targeting business reporting and therefore most of them became business reporters by need other than ability.

To this effect, the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the Polytechnic, a constituent college of the University of Malawi, as a key journalism education and training institution, needed to strengthen its curriculum to accommodate the training of business reporters. The department’s revised curriculum of 2010 which incorporated some business journalism modules was a move in the right direction. As Pardue (2004) observed, until specialised training in business reporting was integrated into journalism programs, a gap would remain between what editors needed and what poorly prepared graduates would deliver.

But more could be done by the University of Malawi and other private journalism and media training institutions by either introducing a speciality programme in business reporting or by allowing specialising from third year of the current general degree programme. Meanwhile, the two daily newspapers in Malawi should continue to provide professional training opportunities through which their business reporters could hone their skills. Also not to be underestimated would be the value of what journalists could learn on the job. As the study showed, most of the business journalists joined the beat without any previous knowledge. Therefore induction and mentoring needed to be given special priority. Interviews with reporters and editors attested that on the job training remained a neglected aspect. Therefore induction and mentoring needed to be strengthened and encouraged. Further, the media organisations should hire economists or business studies graduates and train them as business journalists. In the process, their in-depth knowledge of economics and business coupled with an understanding of news reporting would combine to making business news more interesting to the public.

Areas for Further Research

This study was an exploratory enquiry into the socialisation and training of business reporters in Malawi. The findings and interpretations presented in this paper are only the beginning of an important area of study worth pursuing. A lot of questions still exist about business journalism in Malawi and these could be answered by embarking on further studies within the sub-field. While this study provided a good snapshot to understanding socialisation and training of a group of specialist reporters at the two daily newspapers, it was narrow in scope. A broader enquiry could be undertaken nationwide targeting business journalists in other newspapers, radio and television stations, as well as magazines. Also an audience reception study could be conducted to investigate public engagement with business news. Such an enquiry would seek answers to the following questions: how does the Malawi public understand and use business news? How is business news evaluated by the audience? How much does it contribute to the formation and development of public opinion on the economy? How does it influence civic discussion on other issues affecting society?

Conclusion

A lot of studies have been conducted on business journalism but mainly analysing the content of business reporting. There is however dearth of research targeting people responsible for writing and producing business news. This study is but a small contribution in that regard as it examined the professional socialisation and training of business reporters at two leading newspapers in Malawi. It has provided a rich picture of how such reporters became what they are. Findings of this study would be useful to editors in needs assessment process for hiring and training business reporters, and for journalism schools in the training of such reporters. It is also hoped that this study would contribute to a knowledge base journalism scholars can draw from when understanding and interrogating the socialisation and training of business journalists in an African context in general and Malawi in particular.

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