Most of the community radio stations are faith based apart from Malawi Institute of Journalism Radio, Joy Radio, and Dzimwe, Tovwirane, Nkhotakota and Mchinji community radio stations.

Of all the print and broadcast houses, it is public broadcasters MBC and TV Malawi that have taken the lead to defend and parade ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) agenda (though they are supposed to serve the general public as is their mandate since they run on tax payers money) while Joy Radio, privately owned by former head of state, Bakili Muluzi, has dug its heels in the ground to defend and advance the ideals of Muluzi’s United Democratic Front (UDF), the former ruling party.

The function of a media full of undue interference from politicians is evident in the operations of the four stations who broadcast to over 14 million people who take what they hear from the broadcasts as gospel truth and have no means to verify information they hear from the media houses. This interference in media freedom is sinking the country many centuries backwards.

While the four broadcasters offer educative, entertaining and informative social programmes, most of their political programmes including news bulletins leave a lot to be desired.

In their quest to please their political masters, the four broadcast houses propagate hate, distrust and divisions among the citizenry and political opponents. To say the least, the four broadcasters do not serve to inform, educate and guide the masses on their political rights and choices.

Generally, press freedom is a reality in Malawi both in practice and in terms of the law though there is need to do away with some repressive statutes; endorse the Access to information Bill into an Act and implement the Communications Act in full.

There is also need for the Media Council of Malawi and the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) to flex their muscles and bare their teeth against flouters of media ethics and professionalism that are most pronounced at MBC, TVM and Joy Radio.

Some commentators argue that the opposition should not blame MBC and TVM for its volley of insults to opposition leaders because it is no longer operating on tax payer’s money since opposition members of parliament last year refused to fund operations at the two broadcast houses. They were allocated a mere MK1.00.

But is this good reason to forsake all sanity and ride on the back of incivility? The answer is a straight NO. Journalists at the two public run broadcast stations and private owned Joy Radio should all know that they have a profession and reputation to protect unless if indeed they do not have any.

News is just filtering in that MACRA is closing in on Joy Radio and that the station may soon close shop. But is this an answer to the problems the authorities have with the station? What about MBC and TVM? Are MBC and TVM being spared because they are state run? Has Joy been targeted because it is owned by a politician and a presidential hopeful?

It is not a sin for politicians to own media houses or for private media houses to take sides as long as they stick to the highest ethical and professional standards. However, one, even the apolitical listener, immediately notices the inflammatory language and music aired on Joy Radio. So too are MBC political programmes and bulletins full of ridicule of opposition party protégés especially Muluzi and his UDF party.

And so, as the news of the imminent closure of Joy Radio keep making the rounds, it would only be sane to treat MBC and TVM by the same measure otherwise the country may be sitting on a time bomb nurturing the death of media freedom and freedom of expression as we quietly watch growing intolerance to free media operations and as censorship silently creeps into the nation.

Suffice to note that the country still runs on old, draconian and media unfriendly laws such as the Prevention of Public Security Act, Protected Names and Emblems Act and others. All these pose a
threat to free press operations especially at a time when the media fraternity has been infiltrated with political spies working behind the silhouette of journalism.

It is unfortunate that both the DPP and the UDF have gone as far as recruiting journalists to peddle misinformation and create fear and mistrust in the media industry.

Just recently, journalist Wisdom Chimgwede of Zodiak Broadcasting Station circulated a document allegedly crafted by the ruling DPP as its 2009 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections campaign strategy. The journalist floated the document on the all media practitioner National Media Institute of Southern Africa (NAMISA) e-forum for members to examine its authenticity. One or some of the members of the forum went to government authorities to report that Chimgwede was circulating damaging material to the DPP. It was concluded by the authorities that Chimgwede was a UDF operative and he was immediately removed from the list of journalists who were supposed to travel to China on an acquaintanceship trip.

As much as media freedom and freedom of expression continue to be regarded as essential ingredients to the democratization process, practices within the industry and forces that be are eroding the hard won freedoms.

And as these mishaps keeps unfolding, it is time that media regulatory or representative bodies pull their socks and become more vibrant and visible in protecting the industry and the professionalism that goes with it.

It is high time the media mobilized itself to defend the industry especially the closure of any media house; and promote ethical and regulatory journalistic professionalism.

Some years ago when Journalists Raphael Tenthani, Mabvuto Banda and Horace Nyaka were arrested over the ghost-at-state-house story media workers downed their tools and ganged up to press for their release. So too, despite the shortfalls at Joy Radio, media freedom and freedom of expression must be protected and defended before closure of media houses becomes a norm.

Nobody else but the media itself has the sole duty to protect and defend the right to information dissemination. The role of the media in any country is prime enough to warrant the profession a place in the anatomy of the nation – the fourth arm of government after the executive, legislature and judiciary.

The four arms have a crucial role in the democratization and development processes of nations.

*Charles Mkula is a Media and Communications Coordinator for Hyphen Media Institute.

*Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [2] or comment online at http://www.pambazuka.org/ [3]

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**Article-Summary:**
Malawi’s media diversity continues to grow and vary especially in radio broadcast, a sharp contrast to the previous trend in the first ten years of multiparty politics where newspaper business mushroomed with down-market tabloid papers like the Democrat, the Chronicle, the Dispatch, the Generation and others making in roads and establishing themselves for critical reading.

And as the Daily Times, Malawi News, and the Nation took a traditional and sober stand, other papers in the likes … [read more] [6]
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