

## He who Pays the Piper, Calls the Tune: Ownership and Editorial Control within Select Private Radio Stations in Zambia

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### Abstract

This paper proceeds from a study done on control and dictation of editorial content within selected media houses in Zambia. The overarching intention of the researchers was to interrogate the statement “he who pays the piper, calls the tune” within the Zambiamedia context, with specific focus on radio stations in Zambia. The aim was to gain an insight into the assertion that owners, who are often times the financiers of these media concerns do interfere with and dictate the decision making processes for editorial content being churned out from the radio stations. This study was an attempt at answering the question, does the one who pays the piper really call the tune within the Zambian media context? Granted the owners were in the habit of dictating content for whatever motivations, the status quo would be a very sharp contrast to the contention that Zambia was a democratic polity that must allow for the independence of the press with muzzling either from outside or within the media establishments. In order to collect information useful for the study, a total of ten (10) private radio stations were sampled and professional journalists, either managing the concerns, the news or responsible for collecting media content were interviewed. Narrative analysis was used to evaluate the information gathered from the interview. It was established that indeed editorial content in radio stations was being dictated by the owners and/or financiers.

**Keywords:** Media Financing, Editorial Content, Editorial Control.

### Introduction and Reviewed Literature

This research was aimed at investigating the assertion that “he who pays the piper, calls the tune” within the media establishments in Zambia, specifically privately owned radio stations. The research interrogated the claim that owners of radio establishments were directly involved in dictating editorial content because they were the ones financing the operations.

As a way to appreciate the phenomenon of control and dictation of editorial content by the owners and/or financiers, a range of secondary sources covering research content related to this research were reviewed. It was discovered that different scholars have written on the aspect of control of editorial content by owners and/or financiers of media establishments.

In the article titled 'Global Issues: Media in the United States of America', Shah (2012) writes;

*"In recent years, the American media has been plagued with all sorts of problems including, sliding profits, scandals about manipulation, plagiarism, propaganda, lower audiences, dumbing down, and so on."*

Shah further states that media omissions, distortion, inaccuracy and bias are some of the things that media managers and executives have acknowledged as going on within their establishments. However, those problems have made it very difficult for the average American citizen to obtain an open, objective view of many of the issues that involve the United States, and with the global standing and influence of the United States culturally, socially, economically and politically, the world as a whole gets to be misinformed and misdirected. It is clear that the depths to which the American media has stooped are the result of meddling by the owners of capital, whose agenda it is to project what is in their best interest, and not in the interest of the masses.

In the year 2002, the United States media had abandoned their responsibility to the country. The view that got advanced was no longer the view of the 'little guy'. It was the view of owners, of top media executives and of corporate interests. With this perspective, editorial decisions are made with one eye on the political slant that would best benefit the company, and other eye on the bottom-line, which is the interests of the financiers. The corporate view is tainted, in that it looks for the best way to advance the corporation's financial interests. The result is this—instead of behaving as the watchdog of democracy, the media has become the lapdog of government and of those with financial muscle.

John Swinton (1883), the Editorial Chief at the *New York Times* in the 1860s clearly stated how the media was manipulated to suit certain vested and special interests. Swinton said:

*"There is no such thing, at this point of the world's history, as an independent press. You know it and I know it. There is not one of you who dare to write your honest opinions, and if you did, you know beforehand that it would never appear in print. I am paid weekly for keeping my honest opinions out of the paper I am connected with. Others of you are paid similar salaries for similar things, and any of you who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the streets looking for another job. If I allowed my honest opinions to appear in one issue of my paper, before twenty-four hours my occupation would be gone. The business of the journalist is to destroy the truth; to lie outright; to pervert; to vilify; to fawn at the feet of mammon, and to sell the country for his daily bread. You know it and I know it and what folly is this toasting an independent press. We are the tools and vassals of*

*the rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks, they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.”*

Sozeri (2016, pp. 84-95) highlights the case of Turkey as being no different from the United States of America scenario. Owners of the media organisations in Turkey have a known tradition of using their media outlets as tools through which they extend their investments and business interests in many other sectors such as construction, energy, telecommunications and banking. This is a widely accepted phenomenon in the country. Dominant media owners have instrumentalised the media for private business interests disregarding public interest and the role of the media in democratic jurisdictions. The media owners in Turkey are eager to establish close clandestine links with the aristocracy in government for their business ventures to continue flourishing even in times of negative economic winds.

Yilmaz (2017, p. 120) highlights how media houses aligned themselves to government leadership. The history of the Turkish republic suggests that there was a deep desire to ensure the society was purged of this kind of state of affairs as it was happening in the pre-Turkish republic establishment. Many methods are said to have been employed as a way to muzzle journalists including appointing them into the state assembly and into some senior government jobs. Those journalists who spoke against the political establishments were banished to work in remote villages and at times were even dismissed from their jobs.

Another form of control of the media through financing is advertising. Advertisers have such pronounced and prodigious power and control over the media establishments that they dictate the editorial content that hails from a particular media firm. In their research on advertising and bias in the financing of media establishments, Jonathan Reuter and Eric Zitzewitz stated that, “The independence of editorial content from advertisers’ influence is a cornerstone of journalistic ethics.” They tested whether this independence was observable in practice and their findings showed that media establishments lose their independence the moment matters of financing are introduced. This is because financing is considered the life blood of the firm and, therefore, executives ensure that the flow of financing is not impeded even if it takes the whole editorial policy of the firm to shift to advantage the financiers.

This research was hinged on the assertion that those who own and/or finance media organisations control the editorial content ensuing from the firms to the extent that they only content that promotes the interests of the financier lives to see the light of day. The intricacies of professionalism of the executives, editors and writers are sacrificed on the altar of expediency, correctness and the pleasing of the master, hence “he who pays the piper, calls the tune”.

## Problem Statement

It has been argued that the phenomenon of media content control has been the norm and continues to be over the years by those who own and/or finance the media firms going by John Swinton's statement. What is considered to be the norm, however, contradicts the injunctions and tenets of democracy. A truly democratic polity allows for self-determination and independence of the press. The owners and/or financiers who in most instances are not journalists have limited appreciation for the intricacies of the profession to include the interests of the public whom the media establishment is to serve. Zambia is one such acclaimed democratic state. The expectation is that such intrusion into the production of editorial content must not be entertained, and instead self-determination must be promoted. From the abridged review of literature, there seems to be inadequate evidence that demonstrates the state of media content control in Zambia. This study intended to close this information gap and to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of media content control by those who own and/or finance the media firms.

## Research Questions

The research specifically focused on media house personnel such as executives, managers and journalists who work for the selected radio stations in Zambia. In-depth interviews were conducted and the following were the guiding questions in the interviews:

1. Who is/are the owners of this radio station?
2. Who funds this radio station?
3. Who is responsible for producing content that is broadcast in your radio station?
4. Who possess the final word for the content to be broadcast in your radio station?
5. Do your funders have an influence on the content being broadcast?
6. What in your view would happen to you if you decided to broadcast what you deem in the interest of the public and not the owners and/or financiers?
7. How do you feel about the way the radio station is operating currently?

## Research Design and Methods

This research adopted a qualitative design where research information was collected using in-depth interviews and analysed using narrative analysis. Clandin and Connelly (2000, p. 98-115) state that narrative analysis (sometimes referred to as narrative inquiry), which arose as a branch of learning from within the broader field of qualitative research in the early 20th century, uses field texts, such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos as well as life experience, as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives.

## **Sampling and Sample Size**

The situation in Zambia currently is that there are nearly 100 radio stations dotted around the country. The choice, therefore, was to conveniently identify at least 10 stations that would be the target of the research. The choice for the 10 was on the basis of convenience and feasibility. For ethical reasons, the names of the radio stations are withheld, and are only identified with the numerical symbolism.

## **Findings**

The findings for this research are the following:

### **Radio Station One**

The respondent from Radio Station One outrightly admitted that funders of the station, that is the owners and their business associates, had a heavy hand of influence on the content being broadcast. The owner and his/her associates' dictated assignments and wanted to ensure their editorial content flowed as they dictated it. The respondent said there was no way one could ignore what the owner and the financiers such as the advertisers with big accounts wanted because the owner made sure the content that favored them or that they preferred was broadcast. The respondent also revealed that as a reporter, instructions were given directly to him by the station manager who spelled out the demands of the owner, which made it difficult to arrive at professional decisions that benefit the masses. The respondent also said that the owner of the station had the final say in determining what went on air. He said that he felt that this was not how the station should be operated especially that there were various professionals at different levels of the station such as the news editor who should decide on which assignments to cover. He said that being a reporter meant being able to decide what was new worth and he would rather have the liberty to decide. The respondent felt that that was a major challenge for professional development as reporters were not allowed to freely apply their ethics and judgment in their operations, which had gravely affected professionalism.

### **Radio Station Two**

The responses from Radio Station Two had similar annotations stating that head office, based in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city, generated stories that were forwarded to the station, which was based in one of the peripheral towns. The respondent stated that the own, based at the Lusaka office was the one who determined what was to be aired in a particular broadcast segment. The respondent stated that the stories imposed on the station were often times mostly of no interest to the local people. Instructions were directed to the staff through the station manager who dictates to the the staff which news events to covered. The respondent stated that failure to follow such instructs had on several occasions resulted in the suspension of a particular member of staff concerned. The respondent felt that professionalism within the

radio station had been sacrificed and that expediency and the fear of losing one's job were the reigning norm. The respondent further stated that they would rather have total control of what happens within the radio station and only engage Head Office in Lusaka when there was a genuine challenge that the station could not handle. Otherwise, there was no need to hire journalists if the owner felt that they needed to run the affairs of the radio station themselves.

### **Radio Station Three**

The respondent Radio Station Three stated that the station manager who at the same time was the proprietor of the radio station decided what was to be aired. He said that there were times when some programmes that were paid for had to be cancelled because a pastor or a minister of the gospel had paid to have their content aired. He said that meetings were called where retribution was unleashed on members of staff who failed to do what was directed. Senior members of staff within the station were scared petrified to make independent decisions without running them through the manager for fear of losing their jobs. The respondent felt that he would be given the liberty to decide what was aired since he was in charge of programmes and was involved in the day-to-day operations of the station.

### **Radio Station Four**

The respondent from Radio Station Four felt that the media house was controlled by the politicians especially the party in government. He said that owners of the station had little say because the government could use legal means to close the stations or put in place measures that would make it impossible for them to operate. The respondent cited media houses that were closed just after the August 11, 2016 general elections, because they did not toll a certain party's line. He said that the owners of the station had little to do with what went on air, but had instead left that to the politicians. All the owners cared about was the money that the station was receiving for complying with the demands of the political aristocracy. He said that instructions are given to the station manager who should make sure that everything aired on the station is in good taste with the authorities so that no one should have a reason to want to close the station down.

### **Radio Station Five**

The respondent from Radio Station Five felt that the government officials or the party in government had too much control over what was broadcast. He said that he was forced to abandon other assignments to cover government officials because they run the country and what they said had an effect on the entire country. The respondent said whether the public was happy with what the party in government wanted to be aired or not was not the issue because eventually, what was said would still affect them, positively or otherwise. He felt that the station has sacrificed professionalism in favour of survival for the station. The respondent felt that it was better to be controlled in this manner so long as the station continued to operate. The station was challenged by lack of sponsors for some programmes

which limited the revenue. The respondent said that politicians had the financial muscle to travel with reporters to different parts of the country and what the reporters wrote about was inadvertently controlled by the politicians who paid for their travel.

### **Radio Station Six**

The respondent from Radio Station Six said that those who were funding the radio station were in total control of the content at the station. He said it was true that, “he who pays the piper calls the tune.” The respondent said if one decided to go against this directive, they were as good as having fired themselves because one was obligated to follow what the owners wanted without question. He said those who were frustrated by being told what to do would do well to establish their own stations and see if they would allow other people to determine what should be aired. He however, felt that the news editor would do well to be allowed to run the newsroom and decide which content would be aired while the station manager should concentrate on administrative and financial matters. The respondent felt that the news should be managed by trained people in this area which was also a challenge because the station had failed to recruit and retain a lot of qualified personnel.

### **Radio Station Seven**

The respondent from Radio Station Seven did not mince her words and stressed that she was funding the station together with her associates and what was broadcast on the station was up to them to decide. She said that the station had an agenda to broadcast programmes aimed at encouraging a green environment and slowing down climate change. Those who provided the resources to achieve this agenda, therefore, were free to decide the editorial content for the station. She said that she was entrusted by the Board of Directors of the station to make decisions on behalf of the station and what she decided was what goes on air. The respondent said that this kind of operation though negatively affects the professionalism of members of staff also protects the station against other interests that may not benefit the station. She said those who finance the radio station had the privilege to decide what is broadcast on the station to ensure its sustenance.

### **Radio Station Eight**

The respondent from Radio Station Eight revealed that it was the owners of the station that controlled what was broadcast. The respondent said the station was basically established to make money for the owners and they had to make sure what goes on air was in line with their objective which was to make money. He said the owners had the final say and other employees were required to follow suit. The respondent felt that that was not good for the journalism profession. Professional must not be compelled to go against their ethics because it directly abrogates professionalism.

### **Radio Station Nine**

The Radio Station Nine said that the editorial content of the station was affected by those who finance the station. She said the owners of the station gave instructions to the station manager who manages the day to day operations of the station. She stated that the station manager decided who would be hired or fired without consultation with other members of staff especially those who work closely with the affected employees. The respondent said the station had no transport and employees used their own resources to source for news and other programme materials. She said this gravely affected the operations of the station especially since employees mostly relied on news sources to provide them with resources such as transport money or buy cellphone credit to communicate. She felt that as the news editor, she needed to be the one to make most of the editorial content decisions without interference. The respondent said that the station manager had too much power that ultimately impacted on the operations especially that he tended to abuse the authority and propagated his own interests affected.

### **Radio Station Ten**

The interview with the final respondent Radio Station Ten also revealed that editorial content was affected by those who funded the station. She said that a certain business firm which donated goods to the station for onward donation to the under privileged communities dominated editorial content as well as what was to be covered because of the fact that they made some substantial donations to the station. The respondent further said though that the station, being a religious one, required that management as well as the staff adopted a particular ethos in their work which was consistent with the dictates and demands of the advertisers and those who purchased airtime for their programmes. She said that political aristocracy had also infiltrated the radio station through sponsored programmes and were using the station to propagate their own political agenda. The respondent felt this was not good because the station's initial objective was to propagate religious content.

### **Interpretation**

As can be seen, all the stations whose professionals were interviewed in this research insisted that there was some form of interference from those who either owned the stations or financed operations through donations, grants or advertising. In most instances, meddling directly and negatively impacted operations to the extent that professionalism is sacrificed at the altar of expediency, aggrandisement and a desire for financial gain or support. From the interviews done, the respondent wished they could be permitted to operate as professionals in order for the media entities to thrive as professional establishments and the citizenry then would be provided with professional content, which was in their best interest.



## Conclusion

This research established the fact within the Zambian media context, in this instance the radio sector, those who “pay the piper, indeed call the tune”. Owners and financiers were the ones who dictated the kind of content that went on air. Without a research of this nature, speculations and assumptions would have perpetuated regarding the correlation between radio station ownership and financing, and determination as well as control of editorial content that ultimately is broadcast.

## Recommendations

This research was foundational and exploratory in nature, which utilised a qualitative design. The researchers, however, call upon those interested to investigate further the “he who pays the piper, calls the tune” phenomenon using a quantitative design in order to establish statistically with a degree of certainty the correlation between ownership and financing, and control as well as dictation of editorial content.

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