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## MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Mediating an alternative public sphere: Malawian readers attitudes and perceptions towards a tabloid

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**Abstract:** In December 2013, the *Weekend Times*, a weekly tabloid newspaper owned by the Blantyre Newspapers Ltd ceased publication. The *Weekend Times* was Malawi's first and only tabloid. In its two years of existence, the newspaper enjoyed a faithful following among youthful urban dwelling readers. The paper attempts to understand why these readers enjoyed reading the *Weekend Times* and the effect the newspaper had in the communicative spaces occupied by the youth. The study uses Habermas's public sphere theory to examine how the newspaper mediated discussion in the youthful public sphere. Using qualitative data drawn from 98 essays written by university students exploring their perceptions and attitudes towards the *Weekend Times*, the study employed thematic analysis as a mode of arriving at themes which form the bedrock of the findings. Three main themes are presented here: the mediation role played by the *Weekend Times* in the youthful alternative public sphere, the sharing of stories among the readers and the ambivalent feelings among the readers arising out of the newspaper's sexualized content. The paper concludes by noting how the *Weekend Times*'s major contribution to Malawian journalism and the public sphere was its mediation of an alternative public sphere different from the politicized mainstream press.

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**Keywords:** public sphere; tabloid; journalism; alternative; youth; university students; newspaper; communicative space

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In this research article, I describe the uses, perceptions and attitudes of university students in Lilongwe, Malawi towards the *Weekend Times*, a newspaper tabloid that ceased publication in 2014. Through essays, which they wrote, students explained to me how they felt about the newspaper and its contents. I wanted to understand why this newspaper was popular among the university students. I found out that students loved the newspaper because mostly it focused on news that was not covered in the main newspapers in Malawi. I also found out that the students loved to discuss these news stories which focused on scandals and unusual happenings in the society. This means that the newspaper permitted these students to discuss something else other than politics.

## 1. Introduction

In January 2014, after two years on the market, the *Weekend Times*, a tabloid weekly newspaper owned by the Blantyre Newspapers Ltd ceased publication. No reason or warning was given for the cessation to the faithful following the newspapers had among urban youthful readers leaving both media scholars and professionals to speculate on the reasons behind the closure. It is not within the scope of this article to speculate as to why the newspaper was shut down. Using youthful university students' confessed attitudes and perceptions of the *Weekend Times*, and guided by the concept of the public sphere and reception theory, the intent and purpose of this article is to understand how the newspaper contributed to the development of a youthful public sphere.

Even though the *Weekend Times* ceased publishing, it is quite possible that the findings presented in this study can contribute to a better understanding of youth, and their perceptions and attitudes towards newspapers in Malawi. Further, the findings presented here may help scholars and professional journalists understand better the effects of tabloids on the public sphere. Generally, the study sought to understand the university students' attitudes and perceptions towards the *Weekend Times*. A further purpose of the study was to find out how these readers used the information they acquired from the *Weekend Times*.

### 1.1. The newspapers landscape in Malawi

The Malawian newspapers landscape is dominated by two main publishing houses: The Nation Publications Ltd (NPL) and the Blantyre Newspapers Ltd (BNL). The NPL has three newspapers in its stable: *The Nation*, *The Weekend Nation* and the *Sunday Times*. *The Nation* is one of Malawi's two daily newspapers. The other two are weekly newspapers published on Saturday and on Sunday respectively. The NPL also has in its stable a free weekly newspaper published in the vernacular Chichewa and Chitumbuka, *Fuko*. This newspaper is aimed at the rural farming community. The NPL was started by the late politician Aleke Banda and remains owned by his family.

The BNL stable consists of the *Daily Times*, the *Malawi News* and the *Sunday Times*. The *Daily Times* and the *Nation* are the only daily newspapers in Malawi. The *Malawi News*, just as the *Weekend Nation* of the NPL, is a weekly publishing every Saturday. The *Sunday Times* is also a weekly newspaper publishing on Sunday and providing competition for the NPL's *Sunday Nation*. The *Weekend Times*, which is under discussion in the article, was also part of the BNL's stable. The BNL was owned by Malawi's first president Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, and it is now owned by his family and managed by the Chayamba Trust.

Other newspapers include *The Weekly Globe* published by Globe Ltd. This newspaper is a weekly, which publishes every Friday. The Roman Catholic Church through its Montfort Press publishes the bimonthly *Mkwaso*, which is published in the vernacular Chichewa.

According to the Circulation Department of the BNL, the *Weekend Times* had a circulation of 27,000. Since there is no Audit Bureau in Malawi, it is difficult to estimate for certain what portion of the readership were youths. However, as part of this study 587 of 612 students in the study ranked the *Weekend Times* as their number one choice of newspaper. Further, of these 587 students 352 indicated that they used to buy the newspaper regularly. If this is anything to go by, the *Weekend Times* was quite popular among the students.

It is important to acknowledge that since Habermas conceptualised the public sphere theory the media landscape has changed even in least developed countries such as Malawi. Apart from traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television, internet based platforms such as social media have come to play a significant role if not a dominant one in the news sector. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that newspapers are not the only mass media that impact on the public sphere (Burgess & Green, 2009; Castells, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009).

However, this research study was restricted to the *Weekend Times* for the simple reason that *Weekend Times* as a tabloid was a quite a novel newspaper on the Malawian media landscape. It was the first tabloid the nation had ever witnessed. As such it was important to understand its reception among readers in Malawi.

### **1.2. The political landscape in Malawi**

In 1994, the country transitioned from a single party dictatorship to a multiparty democracy. The Malawi Congress Party (MCP) of Dr Hasting Kamuzu Banda was voted out of power and the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Mr Bakili Muluzi was voted into power. In 2004, Dr Bingu wa Mutharika was elected president under the aegis of the UDF. However, he soon left the party to form his own party, the Democratic People's Party (DPP) with which he contested the 2009 election. Mutharika died in 2013 and was succeeded by his deputy, Mrs Joyce Banda, who had earlier been expelled from the party. Mutharika's death not only gave rise to Joyce Banda as president; it brought to the fore the People's Party (PP), which she had formed after her ouster from the DPP. However, the DPP returned to power in the 2014 elections under Professor Peter Mutharika. According to Khaila and Chibwana (2006), liberal democracy in Malawi is quite entrenched and all the political parties are committed to it. The one constant in this rotation of presidents and ruling parties has been how the MCP remained the biggest opposition party in parliament.

However, the role of the mass media has been a continuous source of contentious political and public debate. Some mass media scholars (Chipangula, 2004) have pointed to an adverse tendency of the mass media to intrude and insert themselves into the political debate on public policy and electoral issues in a manner that these scholars see as lacking in objectivity and balance. The same scholars have also noted that newspapers ownership in Malawi tends to be connected to political parties further buttressing claims of bias, which could be one reason for this perceived bias and lack of objectivity.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Tabloids: Definition and characteristics**

It is difficult to give a complete definition of the term "tabloid", as its characteristics are hard to pin down with precision. Tabloid journalism represents a "compressed" form of reportage featuring simplified stories that can be easily absorbed by the consumer (Burton, 2010, p. 233). In essence, "tabloidisation" is seen as a departure from the journalistic norm resulting in news that is centred on the human interest, over-laden with pictures and characterized by short, brief, highly stereotyped writing style. Sparks (2000, p. 10) argues that tabloids journalism places heavy emphasis on celebrity gossip and scandals, entertainment, sexual shenanigans, crime, sports and disaster stories. He further notes that tabloid journalism pays scant attention to issues that really matter including issues of governance and economics.

Apart from the difficulty of defining and conceptualizing tabloid journalism, its role in society is a subject of intense discussion among academics. Allan (2010, pp. 126–127) accuses tabloid journalism of narrowing the range of news and current affairs in the media through over simplification, personalization and dramatization. This, in turn, prevents citizens from fully understanding current happenings and their ramifications on society. Linked to the above, tabloid journalism has also been accused of keeping citizens ignorant because of lack of coverage of formal politics and the democratic debate (Wasserman, 2010, p. 8). The effect of all this is that tabloid journalism, according to Sparks (2000, p. 10) denies audiences the right to think rationally, resulting in a "crisis of democracy".

On the positive side, according to Wasserman (2008, p. 4), tabloid journalism brings the "politics of the everyday" to those readers who feel removed or detached from formal politics. Thus, as Glenn and Knaggs (2008, p. 107) points out, tabloids present an alternative reality away from that presented by the mainstream media by challenging the dominant discourse on social standards and

focusing on the real problems at grassroots level. Further, Wasserman (2010) argues that tabloids speak on behalf of their readers by presenting the readers as successful.

### **2.2. Tabloids and the public sphere**

Thus, proceeding from the above, the public sphere theory is a critical key to understanding the effects of tabloid journalism on news consumers because the public sphere is about space where citizens discuss matters of political concern. This includes the use of space for dialogue, debate and discussion. A key feature of the public sphere is that it is neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interest (Habermas, 1989, p. 49). It relies on rational-critical debate among private citizens. Considering the prevalence of mass media in modern day society, Habermas (1989) acknowledges that the media are the principal transmitters of information that facilitates such discussion or debate. Therefore, public life is marked by mediated publicness or a mediated public sphere.

Due to its mediated nature, and also due to the struggle for visibility, the media landscape serves a variety of public spheres including hegemonic and alternative ones (Rasmussen, 2014). Iosifidis (2011, p. 6) contends that a society served by more than one public sphere is more likely to develop into a better democratic society than one served by only one public sphere. In such societies, marginalized groups such as women, youth, manual workers, and ethnic and sexual minorities tend to form alternative publics. It is likely that these alternative public spheres will promote discourse that is counter to the mainstream discourse. This alternative discourse provides society with oppositional interpretations of political issues, identity interests and needs.

Quality journalism enables the Habermasian ideal of rational public discourse. In contrast, as noted above, tabloid journalism is seen as failing to meet the lofty standards of conventional journalism regarding the representation of social and political issues (Wasserman, 2010), choosing instead to focus on celebrities, scandal and sex. The above notwithstanding, Örnebring and Jönsson (2004, p. 206) argue that tabloid journalism facilitates an alternative public sphere by giving those on the margins of society an opportunity to tell of their daily struggle with life. When viewed as facilitating alternative public spheres, not only does tabloid journalism broaden the public sphere by validating a more diverse spectrum of topics and styles considered worthy of public discussion (Fuchs, 2010), it also represents a conscious inclusion of marginalized subaltern groups such as youth. Consequently, Örnebring and Jönsson (2004, p. 284) argue that tabloid journalism has restructured the public sphere in a way that is more inclusive.

### **2.3. Youth and the public sphere**

As noted above, tabloid journalism has the ability to provide an alternative communicative space that can accommodate subaltern groups such as youth. Tenuous as it may seem, such a communicative space is critical in facilitating the voice of the youth. In criticism of the Habermasian public sphere, Fuchs (2014) points out that subaltern groups such as the youth, the economically disadvantaged and women are usually marginalised deliberative spheres. Frenette and Vermette (2013) supports the establishment of special spaces or spheres for such marginalised groups. This study focuses on informal social gatherings composed of university going youth. Even though, this includes youths from different social backgrounds including privileged ones, youths remain a subaltern group whose participation in community problem-solving debates is often limited or even neglected due to cultural and contextual factors. However, excluding youth from problem-solving debates and other processes of participatory development neglects an essential part of their preparation for leadership in the future.

Proceeding from above, the locale of the public sphere is also important. Habermas (1992) points out that citizens who meet in private gatherings such as coffee houses and salons (“sites of everyday talk about public affairs”) to discuss issues of concern form an alternative public sphere where discussion can take place without interference from authorities. Consistent with this, this study views informal gathering of youthful university students to discuss the contents of the *Weekend Times* as an alternative public sphere away from any form of authority. This aspect becomes important when

one understands the constraints placed on youth participation in open debate in Africa. Most African cultures, including in Malawi, place constraints on youth participation in open debate because youth are supposed to keep quiet and listen to adults. Through both formal and informal education sectors in Africa, youth are socialised to conform to community patterns of authority. If they do not conform, they are viewed as violent and problematic. Further, their participation in politics and economic activity tends to be minimal and subject to their subservience to authority even though their will to participate is very high (Mengistu, 2017, p. 2). Thus, most youths tend to contribute more freely in groups comprising entirely of youth. These informal gatherings by these university students are important in locating the public sphere in this study because without any authority figures attending, social distance is removed and feelings of belongingness and connectedness among the youthful participants is generated.

Of course, it is important to understand that these informal university youth gatherings took place on a university campus among students enrolled in the university. This means that working class youth and other disadvantaged groups were not represented in this sample. This tampers with the inclusion factor in the Habermasian definition of public sphere. This notwithstanding, it is clear that the alternative spaces of discussion formed by these students form counter-publics or alternative public spheres since they shift discussion from a formal settings to a purely informal one, if not altogether mundane.

#### **2.4. Conceptualisation of alternative media and alternative public sphere**

In viewing the *Weekend Times* as an alternative media creating an alternative public sphere, this study adopts Wasserman's (2010) approach. He argues that even though tabloids are not political enough, and even though they are owned by private commercial entities for profit-making purposes, by virtue of their content, they can still be viewed as alternative media. Wasserman (2010) argues that tabloid journalism fills in space vacated by alternative medium. In this respect, tabloids:

... open up the possibility for a counter-hegemonic discourse to emerge at the moment of consumption, when readers engage with tabloid news in such a way as to read against the grain of officials narratives and dominant meanings ... they contain the potential for critical 'counter-knowledge' to emerge. (p. 30)

Thus, even though tabloids are not participatory, they provide ordinary people especially the marginalised with opportunities to engage in a different kind of discourse. By providing such an opportunity, tabloid can contribute to an alternative public sphere. Örnebring and Jönsson (2004) argue that a public sphere becomes alternative when ordinary people are given space to present their stories and "struggles of their everyday lives into the public arena."

In this respect, tabloid journalism takes the role of alternative media facilitating an alternative public sphere. According to Wasserman (2010, p. 87), two key aspects are key to this state of affair. First, discussion related to contents of tabloids takes place away from the mainstream arena. Second, the participants are mainly subaltern groups who have been denied space in the mainstream public sphere. Thus, a different kind of discourse or debate takes place.

### **3. Research question**

Proceeding from the above, the study sought to understand how the *Weekend Times* facilitated discourse in an alternative public sphere of young university-going readers, and how the same readers perceived the newspaper. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the readers' perceptions and attitudes towards the contents and communication strategies of the *Weekend Times*?
2. How does the information acquired from the *Weekend Times* facilitate discussions in informal youth deliberative spaces?



#### 4. Methods

The study builds on reception theory which is grounded in qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis (Livingstone & Das, 2013). According to Mathieu (2015), reception analysis is a study of the social production of meaning. The approach focuses on examining what people see in the media, and on the meaning they produce when predicated on the assumption that people produce meaning from the media text they consume. Thus, the approach is to examine media text and the meaning attached to the text by the audience (Mathieu, 2015). In addition, Schroeder et al. (2003, p. 147) argue that reception analysis as a research methodology seeks to shed light on audience's practices and experiences, through:

... getting those involved to verbalise them in a non natural but open situation of the qualitative research interview, in which informants have considerable power to influence the agenda.

Based on the above, this study used two qualitative research methods to gather data from university students. The first approach was through essays on the *Weekend Times* which 612 students were asked to write. The second approach was based on four focus group discussions held with twenty students in groups of five each.

##### 4.1. Participants and data collection

In the first semester of the 2013–2014 academic year, the author taught a second year undergraduate academic and business writing course which is compulsory to students in the Faculty of Agriculture and the Faculty of Development Studies at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources. A total of 612 students registered for the course. As part of continuous assessment, the students were asked to write a five-page essay outlining and explaining their attitudes towards the *Weekend Times*. Four hundred and one essays were submitted as soft copies via email; one hundred and ninety-two essays were submitted as hard copies. In the end, 593 essays were received.

After marking and awarding grades, 98 essays were purposefully selected for their fullness in meeting the purpose of the essay. The writers of these essays were approached and permission sought to use their essays in this study. Twenty-one of the students approached did not respond in time to the request while 77 gave permission. Of these 77 essays, 16 were hard copies. These were scanned and turned into soft copies using optical characters recognition software. Each essay was assigned a number beginning with serial number in order of submission and either an M or an F depending on the gender of the essay writer (3/F). Thus with 3/F, 3 means that it was the third essay counted among the 77 essays, and F means that it was written by a female student. All the 77 essays were then submitted to the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner.

For purposes of selecting the essays for inclusion in this study, the researcher selected only those essays that exhibited clear explanation of the writer's newspaper preferences and newspaper reading habits, a nuanced explanation of the writer's perception of the *Weekend Times* and its contents, the writer's knowledge of the newspaper market and newspaper products, the writer's habits of buying and reading the *Weekend Times*. Apart from the preceding individual characteristics of newspapers use, the researcher also selected essays that exhibited the writer's use of the newspapers for social functions such as emotions including laughter, sympathy, and empathy.

In December 2013, the researcher purposefully recruited 10 students from the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Bunda Campus. All respondents were aged between 18 and 24 years, and were pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in a variety of agriculture-related disciplines. The respondents were then divided into two groups of five each; and then over a period of two weeks, the author held two focus group discussions with each group resulting in a total of four sessions. Each session was between one hour and one hour thirty minutes. The focus group discussions were held in hired meeting rooms or in open air study spaces. The proceedings were recorded, and then transcribed for analysis purposes. Videotapes of the focus group discussions were then used to

identify speakers and to confirm the accuracy of the audio transcripts. Each focus group transcript was numbered, and soft copies of the transcripts were submitted to QDA Miner in a file separate from the essays data.

#### **4.2. Data analysis**

For purposes of data analysis, a theoretical thematic analysis was used to inductively derive meaning from the essays and the proceedings of the focus group discussion. The aim was to gain a rich, yet complex account of the data. According to Clarke and Braun (2013, p. 6), theoretical thematic analysis can be defined as a identifying and analyzing patterns within data. Clarke and Braun (2013) further argue that this approach is useful because it enables a user to interpret data in light of existing theoretical frameworks from previous relevant research works without requiring the researcher to subscribe. This allows the user to capture emerging patterns and themes inherent in the data-set, and to explain their importance, depth and broader implications. In applying theoretical thematic analysis, the researcher attempted to strictly adhere to the six-step approach to thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun (2013): (a) familiarisation with the data, (b) generation of initial codes (c) identification of themes (d) modification and/or adjustment of themes, (e) definition of themes, and (f) production of a report.

By way of data analysis, each essay and focus group discussion transcript was reduced to individual snippets with a snippet being defined as the smallest meaningful statement. For a statement to count as a snippet it had to offer one complete thought and be more than a reaffirmation of a previous statement. From the transcripts and the essays, a databank of 973 snippets was created in QDA Miner. Finally, the researcher created a coding scheme to which each snippet was placed under a theme.

Six main themes emerged inductively when the snippets were assigned to emerging groups. The data transcripts and snippets were re-examined, before the six main themes were plotted through mind-maps to understand how they aligned and related to each other. Following this exercise, the themes were reduced to three, which were then assigned labels. In labelling the themes, care was taken to elucidate and determine the narrative provided by each theme, and how each theme related to the original research questions. Finally, memoranda were written to analyse and explore the variety of perceptions and attitudes students had towards the *Weekend Times*, and how these were rationalised. The findings reported here derive primarily from an analysis of these themes.

#### **4.3. Limitations of the methodology**

It should be acknowledged here that this type of interpretative research framework and its attendant purposive sampling has major drawbacks including vulnerability to errors in essay selection by the researcher (Yauch & Steudel, 2003, pp. 472–473). In this respect, the researcher attempted to overcome such bias by using a rubric for grading all the essays objectively. Every single essay of the 612 submitted by the students was read and graded using the rubric prepared by the author. Thus, the researcher was assured of high quality in the essay. Hand in hand with errors in judgement is the low level of reliability and high levels of bias (Yauch & Steudel, 2003, pp. 472–473). This is apart from the fact that the researcher is unable to generalize these findings. However, following the tradition of qualitative research, such purposive sampling for extreme cases is allowed.

Overall, this research framework allowed the researcher to explore university students' attitudes and perceptions towards a newspaper, and how they used that newspaper to facilitate discussion in informal settings. Given that this group of students is fairly homogenous in age and levels of education, this approach was fairly useful in unpacking the diverse perspectives in this community. Thus, the research study could uncover information that may not have been noticed if a more quantitative approach was adopted. Clearly, the research study design helped the researcher understand the students' underlying values, beliefs and assumptions which they bring to the fore when reading the *Weekend Times*.

## 5. Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis described above: the *Weekend Times*'s influence on discussion of public issues, the *Weekend Times*'s contents and its influence on morality, and the reading habits associated with the *Weekend Times*.

### 5.1. Mediating an alternative public sphere

Although the university students contributing to this study expressed disaffection with power politics which dominates the quality press, they tended to view the contents of the *Weekend Times* as an important outlet valve for their frustration. The following remarks drawn from the essays show how differently the students perceived the *Weekend Times* from the quality press:

There can be no doubt that the other newspapers serve an important purpose in our democracy. But they lack that human touch which is needed to lighten life. (24/F)

These more serious newspapers are quite full of politics ... its like our nation is about to die ... It is important to lighten up sometimes. (56/F)

... corruption, conflict, foolish statements and depressing news can be quite depressing to read on a daily basis ... the *Weekend Times* is a welcome distraction .... (17/M)

The investigative analysis in the daily papers is good for an informed citizenry but a people need a laugh sometimes. (1/M)

Clearly, from the above quotations the university students find that there is room for a tabloid such as the *Weekend Times* in Malawi. The main function of the tabloid is to provide a welcome counterbalance to a daily press that is beginning to strongly fulfill its duty of balanced presentation and critical analysis of the political affairs of the country. However, the daily staple of a "... a nation in crisis ..." (18/F) proves to be too much for these young readers who believe that the *Weekend Times* provides a welcome variety for the newspaper reading public.

However, this does not mean that these students are alienated from the politics and daily tragedy reflected in the daily newspapers. While they are engaged and are aware of the state of the nation and all the challenges facing it, the students look to the *Weekend Times* to lighten life. In fact, the *Weekend Times* was not even seen as an alternative to the dailies. The following quotations are illustrative of the students' feelings:

The *Weekend Times* can never replace the dailies; it will be a sad day when that happens. (72/F)

The *Weekend Times* simply caters to our desires for escape from every day pressures. (33/M)

I hope that the *Weekend Times* succeeds ... but I hope that this is the only such paper in the country. We don't want to be too distracted and entertained. (29/M)

In essence, the *Weekend Times* was seen as a necessary tool to counter the serious and "... sometimes depressing ..." (18/M) contents of the daily press. Mabweazara and Strelitz (2009, p. 293) and Örnebring and Jönsson (2004) argue that when mainstream prestigious newspapers fail to properly address issues of concern to readers, readers may turn other non-political institutions to meet their needs. From the foregoing quotations from readers, it would appear as though the *Weekend Times* filled the gap between the readers' approval of the critical-analytical investigative journalism witnessed in the two daily newspapers and the desire for a lighter more entertaining newspaper. Thus, the *Weekend Times* creates an alternative public sphere away from the mainstream public sphere served by the daily newspapers. In this alternative public sphere, the readers give voice to human interest stories so far removed from the serious political issues raised in the daily newspapers.



Further, the readers debate these human interest issues and reassert a common human identity affected by the immediate happenings in their community.

For these young readers, the *Weekend Times* provided an alternative news outlet providing them with entertainment, celebrity news and local gossip. In reading about the glamorous lives and adventures of local and international celebrities, they experience vicarious pleasure, and form bonds that bind them together. The following remarks are illustrative:

My friends and I like to keep up with celebrities ... I am envious of the celebrities such Beyonce and Rihanna. We enjoy reading about them and discussing them. (9/F)

When you are sharing a light moments at the students centre over a beer, you can go over it (the *Weekend Times*) ... and talk about the rich and famous ... maybe be envious as well. I enjoy the local gossip because I see those people and feel good knowing that they are not perfect ... they are just like me. (17/M)

Thus the *Weekend Times* becomes a form of resistance against the polarizing influence of power politics as presented in the two daily newspapers. It offers the readers an opportunity to find a point of unity away from the divisive politics that finds its voice in the daily newspapers. This is in agreement with Wasserman's (2008, p. 22) argument that tabloids have the ability to facilitate resistance against political power by sensationalizing human interesting stories that raise the emotions of the newspaper reading public.

In concluding this section, it is perhaps important to note Mabwezara and Strelitz (2009, p. 121) assertion that if a newspaper is measured by its ability to widely and thoroughly cover power politics, then newspapers such as the *Weekend Times* are of no consequent to the prevailing political order. However, the very resistance to the all-pervasive and dominant power politics indicates the inability of mainstream newspapers, political parties and governance institutions to reach the readers of the *Weekend Times* in a creative manner that stimulates interest in the discussion of power politics without the divisive element that comes with it. Indeed, the above discussion indicates a yearning for an alternative public sphere that is not dominated by power politics.

### **5.2. Exposing a nation in moral flux**

The above positive view of the *Weekend Times* notwithstanding, one of the striking results from the interviews and discussions with readers of the *Weekend Times* was that quite a good bit of them especially the female readers view the contents of the *Weekend Times* in a rather negative manner, and tended to denounce the *Weekend Times* for perceived erosion of morals in society. Some of the adjectives used to describe the pictorial content by readers included "trash" (which was used 37 times), "nonsense" (appearing 46 times) and "pornography" (used 23 times). Basically, such criticism included accusations that the *Weekend Times* caters to the base needs of men who seek titillation in sexually suggestive pictorials and visuals that are misogynistic and exploitative of women. Witness the following remarks from some of the female students:

The pictorials are so disrespectful of women ... you can actually see that they photograph women dancing in night clubs and public events. This is intended to attract male readers. (46/F)

The *Weekend Times* contents can be quite dangerous to the morality of Malawi. The Action Girl on Page 8 is just intended to excite boys. It's disgusting. (4/F)

Further, due to the sexual content, the stories were also criticized for having no other purpose than to titillate those who have an unhealthy interest in sex. In fact, some readers charged that the *Weekend Times* would not sale without the sexual content. In this case, the students accused the *Weekend Times* of masquerading as a moral agent yet pandering to the needs of readers who have an unhealthy interest in sex and profiting from excessive and deviant sexual content. A quite

illustrative statement here comes from a female respondent who called the *Weekend Times* ‘rather ridiculous’ and stated:

... in its editorials, the *Weekend Times* makes it appear as though it is a strong moral agent of sexual morality. But that paper would never sale without the sexual content ... so it is laughable to me for them to be moralizing against deviant sex when in actuality it is what they sell ... they go around searching for these stories ... if these stories dry up, they will not be able to sell any papers .... (13/F)

Another student argued that:

I think that the reporters who hunt for these stories have an unhealthy interest in sex; it’s almost indecent. (7/F)

Continuing along the same line of argument, another student wrote:

There is a moral issue here; as a God-fearing nation, it is shameful that we should be exposed to scantily dressed women such as the “Action Girl” and some in compromising position such as in those in the photo-essays ... Even most of the internationally sourced stories are selected for their deviance, decadence and salacious content. (72/F)

Indeed, the sharp criticism was presented, in some instances as a reflection of a nation in moral decline. The *Weekend Times* was labelled as merely reflecting the state of the nation. The following interchange during a focus group discussion is illustrative:

- Student A: ... it is rubbish because we are a rubbish country ... that is what is happening in our country ...
- Student B: (amid laughter) ... yes! ... You are so right! They are not making up ... these stories ...
- Student F: (amid laughter) ... happening in a God-fearing, Bible reading nation ...
- ...
- Student G: (laughing) ... hypocrites all of us ...
- Student B: ... because we all want to read and know about the dirty little sex details of other people’s lives (more laughter).
- Student G: ... yeah, they have a word for that in English ... .
- Student E: ... what do you mean?  
(Silence)
- Student G: I suppose I could say that it is voyeuristic.  
(Short silence followed by the whole group laughing)
- Interviewer: ... someone who enjoys watching other people during intimate moments.  
(Short silence followed by an outburst of loud laughter)

Thus, even though the students questioned the *Weekend Times*’ contents from a moral point of view, the general position was that the *Weekend Times* could not help but present its readers with such content since such content was reflective of the state of the nation. Further, the nation was perceived as possessing an unhealthy desire to know the sordid details of citizens. As the above interchange is evidence, the students seemed to think that the nation itself had an unhealthy interest in sex resulting in sexual deviance which the *Weekend Times* reflected in its contents. Even the *Weekend Times*’ exploitation of such contents and subsequent profit from such contents was seen as normal in a deviant “voyeuristic” nation in a “nation obsessed with sex ...” (7/M). The prevalence of religion in the country was viewed as both laughable and hypocritical.

Perhaps, it is here that the most negative feelings towards the *Weekend Times* was expressed by these university students. In essence, drawing from the foregoing paragraphs, the newspaper was seen as playing an insidious and pervasive role in corrupting the morals of the nation. According to

Allan (2010, p. 125), this kind of attitude as taken by these youthful readers is not uncommon among tabloid readers as it gives them an opportunity to judge others and their behaviour. In essence, the readers gain a sense of power and tend to view their own circumstances in a more positive light. In this respect, the readers accused the newspaper of exploiting sex and sexual deviance to gain readership and to feed the nation's inordinate fixation with sex. Further, in agreement with this study, Johansson (2007, pp. 68–69) found that female readers were the ones more likely to condemn the highly sexualized content in tabloid especially the scantily clad models. As Johansson (2007) asserts, this is mainly because female readers were more likely to feel humiliated by their boyfriends' or husbands' interest in the models. Women use these highly sexualized graphics to negotiate and construct an identity opposite to the one that is represented by the newspaper. Thus, the *Weekend Times* was seen as repeatedly setting and testing boundaries of moral propriety which its female readers rejected and condemned even though some male readers showed interest.

### 5.3. Sharing emotive stories

Even though the *Weekend Times* elicited such negative views as noted above, its content was also capable of generating intense but light-hearted discussion among these student readers. It was the casual and real nature of the contents that excited debate and was responsible for the light-hearted moments. The data showed evidence of readers enjoying moments of fun and humour when reading gossip of local and international celebrities. For instance, a story entitled “Robin Ngalande in Love Triangle” (*Weekend Times*, 14–16 June, 2013) described the fallout of a love triangle involving Malawian professional soccer star Robin Ngalande, South African soccer star Siphiwe Shabalala and a South African woman. Most of the essays referred to this story as a major source of discussion and fun and humour. The following statements in the students' essays are illustrative:

My friends and I thought that he (Robin Ngalande) was foolish to get involved with a woman who he knew to be going out with another man, and I had no sympathy for him. (2/F)

We laughed about the fact that he showed bad judgment and he deserves everything that is happening to him .... (3/M)

My friends and I discussed how this girl is really stupid and promiscuous ... how can she not know the father of her unborn baby ... she gives women a bad name, and these two guys are really stupid. (34/F)

Some stories elicited deep sympathy. One such story entitled ‘Soche East Man Saw his Grave being Dug’ (*Weekend Times*, 31 August–2 September, 2013), reported on the murder of a man in Blantyre's Soche East Township by his two servants. The story noted how the neighbours noticed the two servants digging a pit in which they would later bury their boss' body. The neighbours believed that the murdered man may actually have seen the two servants digging, and the two may have told their boss that they were just digging a rubbish pit. This story was cited several times in the essay with students expressing sympathy for the murdered man. The following statements drawn from the essays are illustrative:

We all agreed that he died a horrible death at the hands of people he probably trusted ... if he had known he probably would have sacked them. (11/M)

My friend and I just wondered how can you even tell what is going on in the mind of another person? (6/M)

One of the guys said, “you can't trust anyone at all, even your own mother”. We all didn't agree with him but we all got the point that you cannot be too trusting. (13/M)

Some stories elicit laughter and banter such as one entitled “Sex-Starved Men Cry Foul” (*Weekend Times*, 31–2 September, 2013) which reported that women in two districts of Malawi's Central Region

were depriving their spouses of sex as a way of settling misunderstandings. In particular the male students joked about the whole purpose of marriage:

What is the use of getting married if you cannot have sex ... it's a funny situation. (9/M)

This story was quite funny; I laughed over that one ... those men thought that they would get some regular and frequent sex by getting married; now they are no better than bachelors. (11/M)

My friends and I just laughed hard about this story. (23/F)

Other stories elicited outrage; these included stories of sexual violence and human exploitation. Both male and female students expressed anger at such stories. Some of the students wrote the following:

What really annoys is this child rape business; I think men who do this should have their balls cut off! (Student D, Focus Group Discussion 3)

It is a shame that this nation is unable to stop the rape of the most innocent in our society. (6/M)

Our country can survive disease, poverty and ignorance but it will never prosper until we get justice for these children. (45/F)

It is noteworthy that the students used the *Weekend Times's* content to find light moments and find humour in stories that may, otherwise presented, be very serious. Further, the emotions of outrage and sympathy tapped into a framework of identification with the suffering of other people. The strange human interest stories placed the newspaper within the realm of the emotive – funny, humorous, outrageous, and sympathetic. This demonstrated that the *Weekend Times* had the ability to craft and present news in a manner that superseded the informative value of news. Such an emotive function arising out of an intense focus on human interest aspects can be viewed as demonstrating that *Weekend Times'* presentation of the news went beyond the wider aspects of mainstream journalism to focus on entertaining its readers or drawing out empathy for the news actors among its readers.

As can be noted above, the *Weekend Times* content provided moments of humour and moments of sadness for its readers. With regard to humorous stories, Johansson (2007, p. 90) points out that it characterizes tabloid newspapers. These humorous stories form the basis of discussion in the youthful communicative spaces. In this respect, according to Allan (2010, p. 127), humour then functions as a social tool to establish common ground, initiate conversations or help readers to fit into groups. Further, the *Weekend Times* appears to have been so finely tuned into these youthful readers' fears and aspirations eliciting emotional responses from the readers as noted above. As Johansson (2008) point out, understanding readers' emotional responses to humour and sadness is fundamental if newspapers are to survive.

Undeniably, it is this focus on the emotive human interest content that made the *Weekend Times* enjoyable to its student readers and made it worthy to share copies of the newspapers amongst themselves. The students' ability to recall and discuss stories from the *Weekend Times'* content demonstrates the memorable nature of the *Weekend Times's* presentation. The newspaper's style of presentation made imprints on the student readers, who became familiar with the style and made it part of their everyday talk. That explains why some of the students wrote that:

... the *Weekend Times* is so easy to read .... (8/F)

... the newspaper is down to earth ... the reporters are not out there in the clouds writing like

Shakespeare .... (12/M)

The newspaper does not suffocate you with big words and complicated sentences ... it just gets on with the business of reporting the story. (3/M)

This newspaper is consistent ... it gives you what you want week in, week out. It does not mess around with unfamiliar subjects. (5/F)

The *Weekend Times*, then, was seen as a read for convenience. Describing the reading as “easy” may also have to do with the cognitive processes of making sense of the content, which draws on readers’ experiences and expectations of the newspaper, on their understanding of the subject matter of the paper. Clearly, being knowledgeable about the type of content gives a background knowledge that assists in the understanding of the content.

## 6. Discussion: Theoretical implications

The preceding discussion would suggest that the concentration of Malawi’s mainstream newspaper on matters political (Gunde, 2015) created opportunity for the *Weekend Times* to rise and fill in the space ignored by these mainstream newspapers. This phenomenon is in agreement with Wasserman’s (2010) assertion that when truly alternative media vacate a communicative space, tabloid tend to exploit the vacuum. The writers of the essays used in this study found the *Weekend Times* favourable for an alternative domain of debate and discourse focused on non-political issues. In this way, the *Weekend Times* and its youthful readers established cohesive platform for challenging the heavily politicised discourse dispensed by the mainstream newspapers.

This is not to argue that the *Weekend Times* offered the only opportunity for an alternative communicative space for these students. As noted earlier, the students had access to the internet which, according to Ndlela (2010, p. 94), offers immense opportunities for alternative public spheres for those marginalised by the mainstream media. Unlike the *Weekend Times*, which may not be viewed as a true alternative media due to its link to a powerful commercial entity and non-participatory production techniques, the internet offers these students opportunities to directly participate in the production of content and discussion of the same on much wide forums (see Fuchs, 2010). These forums have far much wider potential for participation than that offered by the *Weekend Times*. Thus, regardless of the *Weekend Times*’ popularity and its ability to provide an alternative communicative space to these students, it is difficult to ignore the following non-compliance with the principles of alternative media and alternative public sphere.

First, the prevailing economic situation in the country made it difficult for the students to acquire the newspaper all the time. While a good number of the students could buy the *Weekend Times* each week and share it with their fellow readers, the price was beyond the reach of many of students. This means that as a facilitator of a communicative space, the *Weekend Times* was quite exclusionary and elitist as only those with extra cash could afford it. Ironically, this is the same problem that readers of the newspaper expressed about the internet and its attendant social media platform which could form alternative public spheres. The Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA, 2015) estimates that internet penetration is at 3.3%. Just as is the case with the *Weekend Times*, the internet’s potential as a public sphere is lost when people are excluded due to cost. The cost of the accessing the Internet hampers the students’ ability to upload content and participate in debate and discussion (see Manganga, 2012, p. 116).

Proceeding from above, the second aspect that affected the newspaper’s impact was that the *Weekend Times* did not have a critical voice to reform the establishment. A critical voice is one of the hallmarks of alternative media needed for creating an alternative public sphere (see Fuchs, 2010). Even though the readers in this study felt that it offered relief from the heavily politicised content of the daily newspapers, the newspaper itself did not attempt to be a platform for the students to



reform this shortcoming on a national level. Its agenda remained largely profit. As in the preceding paragraph, this highlights the lack of participation of its readers in the production of the content.

Finally, as noted above, its content was driven by professional journalists serving the profit motives of their employers the Blantyre Newspapers Limited. As Bolton (2006) notes, this reveals professional journalistic tendencies, which determine who and what is to be included in the content. In that respect, as Ndlela (2010) argues, the effect is to “eventually silence the very voices that the alternative public claims to amplify” (p. 95). This, once again, underlines the lack of readers’ participation in the production of the content.

The above notwithstanding, it can be argued that the *Weekend Times* provided its university-going readers with a platform to conduct alternative discourse and debate since it filled a vacuum ignored by the mainstream daily newspapers. Its demise probably deprived Malawian democracy of a voice that concentrated on issues different from the staple of power politics reflected in the daily newspapers.

## 7. Conclusion

Regarding its effects on the public sphere, what is clear from this study is that the *Weekend Times* used to provide its youthful readers with space for discourse that ran counter to the dominant narrative of power politics as presented by the two daily newspapers - the *Daily Times* and the *Nation*. The *Weekend Times* served the purpose of mediating a discourse that is counter to the daily discussion of power politics giving rise to an alternative communicative space in which youth have the opportunity to lighten up and discuss their nation without the “... heavy, disheartening reports of feuding politicians and a nation in decline ...” (53/M). Almost without design, the *Weekend Times* facilitated the rise of a youthful public sphere with a different discourse from that of the mainstream to challenge the dominant status quo elements and narratives crafting the mainstream discourse. This discussion in this alternative communicative space used to focus on the social ills of the nation such as social and sexual deviance. It offered the youthful university-attending readers an opportunity to reflect on the state of the nation minus the undoubtedly permissivist focus on power politics. It can be argued here, as Shirky (2011, p. 10) notes, that alternative media have immense potential of enhancing democracy in states where a public sphere already holds government accountable. The *Weekend Times* provided space for its youthful readers who were leery of the quality press’s focus on divisive power politics and its exposure of wrong-doing among public servants. The *Weekend Times* also provided its readers with an alternative view of their nation. As Örnebring and Jönsson (2004, p. 286) argue, an alternative platform is distinguished from mainstream media in terms of topics and approach. The issues presented in the *Weekend Times* were mostly ignored in the quality daily press.

Second, even though the *Weekend Times* clearly stayed away from power politics and did not focus on the country’s ruling class and elites, it focused on international celebrities. Even though it focused on deviant happenings, the actors tended to be elites in the political and entertainment arena. Thus, the hegemonic journalism practice of focusing on elites as key news actors remained very much in use at the *Weekend Times*; this, in turn, tended to make elites the very centre of the *Weekend Times* albeit only in bad light. According to Ndlela (2010, p. 94):

... this practice can eventually work to silence the very voices that the alternative public sphere claims to amplify. The pluralism expected from these alternative media can also be reduced by the presence of active participants who tend to dominate the discourses.

Thus, even though the newspaper mediated an alternative public sphere, by design or default, the *Weekend Times* remained as exclusionary and elitist as the quality press. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that among its youthful university-going readers, the *Weekend Times* was a powerful force in generating debate and discussion of the social deviance being perpetrated in the country.

Third, due to its content, the *Weekend Times* aroused ambivalent feelings among its readers. The highly sexual Page Eight girl and the cartoons featuring women with exaggerated features and in suggestive poses drew the anger of the female readers, and accusations of pandering to the inordinate sexual cravings of its male readers. As Johansson (2007, p. 103) argues this as the effects of satisfying male “erotic voyeurism”. However, even the highly sexualized contents of the *Weekend Times* were viewed as reflecting a nation obsessed with sexual even though the vast majority of Malawians are religious people.

Fourth, the study has revealed that these youthful readers were actively engaged with the contents of the newspaper, and they negotiated and derived meaning from the contents. These readers were able to discriminate the content of the *Weekend Times* from that of the quality daily press. It was possible to understand the conceptual contexts in which the readers used the *Weekend Times*. Thus, as Johansson (2007, p. 58) noted, an understanding of the daily context in which readers use media can facilitate an understanding of why they use the media. In this case, the *Weekend Times* provided an alternative reading that brought escape from the daily presentation of a nation in crisis as presented in the quality daily press.

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