

Framing the China-Malawi Story: A Content Analysis of Stories Published by Nation Publications in Malawi

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Abstract

Since China and Malawi established diplomatic ties in 2008, China-Malawi bilateral relations feature regularly and prominently in the Malawian media. The local media have shown interest from the controversy surrounding how Malawi dumped Taiwan in favour of China to how the two countries are currently conducting their diplomatic relations. This study seeks to analyse how and why one of Malawi's leading media houses, the private-owned Nation Publications Limited (NPL), reports the China-Malawi story. Two hundred twenty-one reports on China-Malawi bilateral relations in news stories, features, and opinion articles were collected from four NPL news platforms, namely The Nation, Weekend Nation, Nation on Sunday and Nation Online. Each media report was examined thoroughly using content analysis to examine how NPL employs the five popular media frames of conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic and human interest when the media house reports the bilateral relations between Malawi and China. The findings show that NPL mainly uses the economic frame while morality is the least used. The results further reveal that NPL frames the China-Malawi story to promote a meaningful win-win scenario between Malawi and China.

Keywords

Framing,
China,
Malawi,
Content analysis,
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Introduction

The genesis of the popularity of the China-Malawi bilateral relations story in the local media is closely linked to Malawi's severing of her diplomatic ties with Taiwan. For close to 42 years since attaining her independence from Britain in

1964, Malawi had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. However, in 2008, Malawi ended its ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Malawi's move to cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan and form new ones with China was big news in almost all major local and international media outlets. For example, the *New York Times* (2008) alleged that the Chinese government lured the Malawi Government with \$6 billion in aid and other inducements to sever relations with Taiwan. Another international media outlet, Reuters News Agency, in its story "Malawi ends ties with Taiwan in favour of China"—written by Mabvuto Banda, and published on January 14, 2008—quoted the then Malawi Foreign Affairs Minister, Joyce Banda, as saying that her country had decided to switch from Taiwan to Mainland China after careful consideration on the benefits that the government was going to get from Mainland China. Other international media outlets such as Aljazeera and *Taipei Times* also reported the development. In its story titled "Malawi cuts ties with Taiwan" (2008), Aljazeera quoted a Taiwanese official who accused China of 'stealing' Taiwan's allies and that Malawi had succumbed to China's evil forces, while the Taiwanese-owned *Taipei Times* (2008) described Malawi's move as a great insult.

Back in Malawi, the development was also widely covered by the local media and more than ten years down the line, the issue of China-Malawi bilateral relations continues to make headlines in the Malawian press regularly. To a greater extent, this coverage gives a clear portrayal of how the relations between China and Malawi have been progressing over the years. Since the ties were established, China's presence in Malawi has increased tremendously, creating enough fodder for newsworthy events either at a people-to-people level as some Malawians are sponsored to visit China, and some Chinese nationals visit Malawi or at the government-to-government level as high-ranking officials from both countries visit each other.

It is essential to establish how Nation Publications Limited presents the China-Malawi stories through employing the five popular media frames of conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic and human interest. In this way,

it is firmly believed that new insights into how China and Malawi can strengthen fruitful diplomatic ties can be generated.

The China-Malawi discourse

Many scholars have argued that one cannot avoid China's growing influence in Africa. Of late, China's presence in Africa has generated hot debate on almost all fronts, ranging from political, economic, and cultural. For instance, on the economic front, Lafargue (2005) argues that while China's economic take-off has brought benefits to African countries, giving them a new export outlet and, more importantly, bringing a welcome and significant rise in the price of raw materials, African countries must demand more equitable economic relations with China. Lafargue (2005) further states that African countries should not be satisfied with exporting their raw materials but should also request technological transfers in exchange.

Likewise, the issue of China-Malawi bilateral relations has ignited debate in Malawi and on the international scene as earlier highlighted. It is, therefore, of paramount importance for China and Malawi to forge ahead with their ties by reflecting on how the relations between the two countries are presented to the public. Given this, analysing how NPL frames and presents the China-Malawi story will mirror how the diplomatic affairs between China and Malawi are perceived since the media are believed to be 'the voice of the masses. This is also in line with what Van Dijk (1998) states that the media have an immense impact on how audiences view particular topics.

Some scholars have studied media coverage of China's relations with some African countries and China's presence in Malawi. For instance, Wekesa (2013) did an exploratory analysis of China in Zambian media by employing two frames: the optimistic (China as Zambia's benevolent development partner) versus the pessimistic (China as an exploitative, predatory force in Zambia). The analysis revealed that the optimistic perspective is motivated by the perception that China needs what Zambia is naturally endowed with, while Zambia needs investment

capital to exploit its natural resources, especially copper. On the other hand, the pessimistic frame rests on the understanding that Zambia might not be extracting a fair share from its natural resources or that the relations are slanted in favour of China, to the detriment of Zambia. In Zimbabwe, Vava (2017) analysed the image of China in Zimbabwean media by exploring concepts from the national image studies and employing the framing theory of the press. Vava's analysis revealed that the media in Zimbabwe present China's image positively and negatively in almost equal measure. This is because Vava's study analysed China's image in state and private media. The former presented a more positive idea of China than the latter, which dwelt more on the negative aspects of China's presence in Zimbabwe. The negative images of China in Zimbabwe's media result from the anti-East and pro-West narrative associated with the private media in the country.

Of particular note is a study by Nyirongo (2020), which analyses how one of the Malawian dailies, *The Daily Times* (owned by Times Group), reported about China before the country established diplomatic relations with Malawi and how the paper reported China after the two countries became friends. Nyirongo demonstrated that *The Daily Times* presented China largely negatively between 2001 and 2007, while from 2008 onwards, the paper reported China largely positively. Another study by Nkhoma (2021) researched what might have prompted Malawi to make a diplomatic choice between Taiwan and China. Nkhoma's investigation established that Malawi's selection was based mainly on economic reasons and the changing global politics.

Some studies have been mainly on Malawians' perceptions of China from when Malawi and China became diplomatic partners. For example, Nkhulembe (2014) researched the two countries' bilateral relations by analysing CCTV-Africa's impact on Malawians' perceptions of China. Nkhulembe established that much as Malawians view China as a friend, they are also cautious of the relations, fearing that the country has intentions to turn Malawi into a colony. Another study by Jossiah (2015) also looked at Malawians' perceptions about China through watching Chinese movies. Jossiah's study established that Malawians' perception

of China and Chinese people tended to be divided between positive and negative. The positive phrases included hardworking people, rich culture, rich history, an emerging economic superpower, home of best science and technology, friendly people, beautiful country, home of Kung Fu, and powerful men. On the other hand, negative phrases included cheap/low-quality products, fake products, overpopulated countries, and people who eat everything.

China's presence in Malawi

Since China and Malawi forged diplomatic ties in 2008, China has continued to register its presence, mainly in construction and business. Chinese construction companies have been quite busy in Malawi. For instance, the country's Parliament now operates from a brand new building funded and constructed by the Chinese. Among several other infrastructure projects are the Malawi University of Science and Technology, the Bingu National Stadium and the Karonga-Chitipa Road. As for the national stadium, Ritcher (2015) refers to it as 'Stadium Diplomacy', pointing out that China is well known for its cultural diplomacy focusing on symbolism and apparent public objects throughout Africa that remind the general public of its benefactors. A national stadium was also constructed in African countries such as Angola, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea. However, Ritcher states that Chinese diplomacy focuses on building and donating football stadiums across Africa.

On the economic front, a 2010 report from Malawi's Ministry of Trade indicates that the value of trade between China and Malawi doubled since 2007, reaching \$100m in 2010. Mweninguwe (2018) reports that Malawi's Ministry of Trade figures indicated that China's trade volume with Malawi had reached \$500 million in 2018. There has also been an influx of Chinese traders in Malawi. However, as French (2014) observes, much as many Africans are receptive to Chinese investment in their economies, what they want is a mutually beneficial relationship in which African workers should, for instance, receive the training necessary for lucrative jobs and a larger share of profits reinvested into local communities. This is also the case with the Malawi-China trade and investment deals as noted by Kaminjolo (2014) that some Malawians feel disgruntled that

Chinese companies bring into Malawi hordes of workers, both experts and non-experts—an arrangement that robs the locals of job opportunities.

Media in Malawi

The media outlets in Malawi are mainly private-owned. Private media include, among others, NPL, Times Group, Zodiak Broadcasting Service, Capital Radio, Ufulu FM and Joy Media Group, while government-owned media include the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Malawi News Agency (MANA). In addition, there are also faith-based and community media houses.

This paper analyses how one of Malawi's major media houses, NPL, framed the stories on the China-Malawi bilateral relations from 2008 to 2018. NPL was established in 1993, and the media house's newspapers reach all parts of Malawi, including rural trading centres. The media house publishes *The Nation*, *Nation Online*, *Weekend Nation* and *Nation On Sunday*. NPL also runs a vernacular newspaper called *FUKO*. On several occasions, NPL has won the Media House of the Year Award during the annual Media Institute of Southern Africa (Malawi Chapter) awards. Gunde (2015) singles out NPL—through what he describes as “its highly political weekly paper, *Weekend Nation*”—as the most critical media house on governance issues in Malawi. The scholar argues that it is only NPL that has, over the years, attracted the wrath of ruling parties in the country's democratic era—right from the Bakili Muluzi presidency to the Joyce Banda administration. Gunde further highlights that, because of its exceedingly critical political and governance columns and particular pages, President Bingu Wa Mutharika in 2010 ordered all government ministries, departments and agencies to stop advertising with NPL.

Furthermore, of particular interest to this study is that NPL also publishes stories from the government-owned MANA. This is due to an arrangement between NPL (alongside other private media houses) and MANA, whereby the former can publish MANA-generated stories as long as they are duly acknowledged. Moreover, in the early stages of the coverage of China-Malawi bilateral relations, most Chinese government officials preferred granting interviews to government-

owned media in Malawi. As such, MANA was a valuable source of such news for private-owned media outlets at that material time. This study, therefore, also considered for analysis any MANA story on China-Malawi bilateral relations featured in NPL publications.

Framing theory

The paper employs framing theory. Boettcher (2004) states that, broadly, framing refers to the process through which individuals or groups make sense of their external environment. Works by framing theorists such as Erving Goffman come in handy here. According to Goffman (1974), frames are a central organising idea that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, and they suggest what the controversy is all about and the essence of the issue. For example, the way China and Malawi established their ties was quite controversial as it triggered a debate on whether Malawi had made the right decision to dump Taiwan for China. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation for the item [issue] described” (Entman, 1993, p.52).

Methodology

Since the study is media-oriented, content and textual analysis were deemed the most appropriate for examining the media content. According to Berelson (1971), content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of the communication. Holsti (1968) says that content analysis is any technique for making inferences systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. For example, the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts is determined after the researcher makes inferences about the messages and their author or audience. Furthermore, Berelson offers several reasons for using content analysis, which appeared quite relevant for this study: (i) the technique reveals international differences in communication content. This study involved a

Malawian media house reporting on relations between Malawi, an African country, and China in the Far East. (ii) The technique helps identify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual or institution. For example, the study sought to identify NPL's intention or trends when reporting the Malawi-China bilateral relations.

Some elements of the textual analysis technique had to be used because, according to McKee (2003), when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text. Given this assertion, it was vital for this study to borrow some textual analysis techniques to assess how NPL is presenting the topic of China-Malawi bilateral relations to the audience. In addition, it helped to conduct comprehensive quantitative research on specific messages being put across by the stories in the Malawian media.

Two hundred twenty-one reports on China-Malawi bilateral relations collected from *The Nation*, *Weekend Nation*, *Nation on Sunday* and *Nation Online* were analysed for this study. The materials to aid the research study were essentially media reports in news stories, features, and opinion articles (including the photos accompanying them). Each media report was examined thoroughly by looking at headlines, sub-headlines, images used, photo captions, leads (introductions for stories), selection of sources, quotes and concluding paragraphs, among other elements of the story. The research study employed purposive sampling to collect data. According to Davidson (2006), purposive sampling is a technique used when the items to be part of the sample for the research are selected based on the researcher's judgement. Given this research, stories on China-Malawi bilateral relations and those related to the topic from 2008 to 2018 were duly collected from the four NPL news platforms. The reports selected for the study were analysed to establish how NPL covers China-Malawi bilateral relations.

How NPL uses the five frames

The study analysed NPL's coverage of China-Malawi bilateral relations using the five popular media frames: conflict, economic, human interest, morality and attribution of responsibility. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), Iyengar (1991) and De Vreese (2005) proposed the five as the significant frames commonly used by the media when reporting a particular topic.

According to the analysed data, NPL used the economic frame in 94 stories out of the 221 stories collected, representing a 43% occurrence rate, while the frame of attribution of responsibility was employed in 40 stories, representing an 18.1% occurrence rate. Furthermore, the conflict frame was used in 49 stories, representing a 22.2% occurrence rate, while the human-interest frame was used in 32 stories, representing a 14% occurrence rate. Finally, the morality frame was used in reporting six stories, representing a 2.7% occurrence rate. Given these findings, the significance of China-Malawi bilateral relations in NPL's coverage is mostly of an economic issue (especially focusing on trade and investment) compared to the other four.

Conflict frame

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) state that the conflict frame reflects the clash among individuals, groups or nations. NPL employs the conflict frame in its coverage of China-Malawi relations. The coverage, time and again, highlights the conflict that has been and continues to be there due to the two countries establishing diplomatic ties. The conflict frame takes different forms: either at the government-to-government level, people-to-people level or even at the people-to-government level.

NPL reported the conflicts between the Government of Malawi and that of Taiwan the moment the former switched allegiance to China. NPL refers to the diplomatic switch in its coverage of China-Malawi relations. For example, James Chavula's story published in *The Nation* on July 23, 2017, titled "Rusty remains of Malawi-Taiwan ties". It is a story about a Taiwanese construction site for the

Karonga-Chitipa Road that teems with rusty construction machinery hurriedly abandoned by the Taiwanese years ago after Malawi unceremoniously severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The tone in Chavula's story echoes the conflict that popped up between Malawi and Taiwan way back in 2008. It reads in part:

It [the machinery] bears testimony to Taiwan's uneasy withdrawal after Malawi switched ties to Mainland China in 2007. Then, when Lilongwe defected from Taipei to Beijing, the Taiwanese company contracted to construct the Karonga-Chitipa Road was swiftly substituted with China Roads and Bridges Corporation.

It has also been noted that each time NPL reports on Malawi and China celebrating their bilateral relations, the media house refers to Malawi-Taiwan diplomatic debacle and often the expression used is 'Malawi dumped Taiwan for China' ("Malawi, China committed to diplomatic ties", Nation Online, December 30, 2012).

Since Malawi and China established diplomatic ties, there has been an influx of small-scale Chinese businesspersons in the country, sparking conflict between them and their Malawian counterparts. Malawian businesspersons accuse the Chinese of snatching business opportunities from them. John Kasalika's story "Who will save Malawian traders?" published by *Nation Online* on May 15, 2012, aptly illustrates this conflict by amplifying the voices of lament from small-scale Malawian traders in Karonga Nkhata Bay and Mangochi. These business people accuse the Chinese of bringing unfair trade competition. One small-scale businessperson, Lyton Mangochi, laments thus: "We are being edged out of the market by the invasion of Chinese traders. They are offering low prices that we cannot compete with. As a result, our businesses are falling; we are failing." At times, the conflict between Malawian and Chinese small-scale traders turns physical, as was the case in 2016 when a Malawian online publication, *Nyasa Times*, reported that businesspersons in Mchinji District chased away Chinese traders, accusing them of employing unfair trading practices ("Malawi border rural residents chase Chinese traders": "Ministry closes 23 shops", *Nyasa Times*, December 22, 2016)

Sometimes the conflict borders on labour issues as Chinese construction companies in Malawi are accused of bringing labourers into the country doing the work that Malawians can do equally. A *Nation On Sunday* story (April 20, 2015), “Chinese firm accused of exceeding the number of expatriates”, written by Rex Chikoko, is an example of NPL using the conflict frame on labour issues. In the story, Malawi’s Immigration Department accuses the Chinese-owned Segecoa Golden Peacock Hotel of breaking the country’s immigration laws by exceeding the number of expatriates. However, in an earlier story by NPL’s Singayazi Kaminjolo titled “China defends labour export to Malawi” (*Nation Online*, March 14, 2014), a former Chinese diplomat justified China’s labour export policy, arguing it is one way of curbing unemployment rate in China. An analysis of the two headlines reveals that NPL demonstrates conflict by using such words as ‘accuse’ and ‘defends’, respectively. The media house is also seen to be fighting for Malawians, and this is in line with the argument put forward by French (2014) that what African countries want is a mutually beneficial relationship in which African workers receive the training necessary for lucrative job opportunities created by the Chinese in the continent.

The conflict frame in NPL coverage of China-Malawi bilateral relations is conspicuous in the stories about Chinese nationals in conflict with Malawi Government laws. Since China and Malawi established diplomatic ties in 2008, several Chinese citizens have been flocking to Malawi, with some of them finding themselves on the wrong side of the law, and the local media has been covering such incidents. As a result, Chinese nationals working in Malawi in construction or as traders have featured in several unwelcome headlines in the country’s media. Most of the crime stories border on smuggling ivory, forex and timber (“Chinese national arrested for ivory”, *The Nation*, April 1, 2013; “Malawi police impound four truckloads of timber”, *The Nation*, November 25, 2014). There was, however, an isolated case of a Chinese national who was found guilty of making fake Malawi National Football Team replica jerseys (“Police bust Flames replica jersey syndicate”, *Nation Online*, January 9, 2013).

Attribution of responsibility frame

The attribution of responsibility frame is defined as “a way of attributing responsibility for [a] cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 96). NPL uses the frame mostly when presenting stories on Chinese infrastructural development in Malawi; and the cultural exchanges between the two countries, among others.

Several infrastructural developments have taken place in Malawi due to the country forging bilateral relations with China, and NPL’s coverage aptly captures these. There has been remarkable infrastructure development in Malawi, courtesy of Chinese loans and grants and Chinese investors, leading to positive reporting of China in Malawian media as established by a study done by Nyirongo (2020) on how *The Daily Times* reported China from 2008 onwards. In NPL’s coverage, one finds such stories as “APM opens MUST” reported by *The Nation* in which the then State President Arthur Peter Mutharika (APM) officially opened the Chinese-funded Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST). In the story, NPL uses the attribution of responsibility frame to show that the construction of the university was linked to the China-Malawi bilateral relations through such statements as:

The People’s Republic of China, which has fully funded the construction of the university with a loan worth US\$89 million (31billion Malawi kwacha), said it was exciting to see the friendship between Malawi and China producing excellent results.

The prevailing tone in the story is generally positive, with Malawi heaping praise on China for constructing the university. Through infrastructure development, China has also, in a way, managed to export and promote Chinese culture in Malawi. Such structures as MUST in Thyolo District, the Bingu National Stadium in Lilongwe and Golden Peacock Hotel also in Lilongwe are an accurate replica of Chinese architectural designs, and NPL in its coverage duly attributes all these to the fact that China and Malawi are now diplomatic friends.

Furthermore, on the cultural front, NPL's coverage also highlights the point that due to the establishment of China-Malawi bilateral relations, there have been noticeable cultural exchanges between the two countries. For example, there have been Chinese cultural festivals staged in Malawi since the two countries forged bilateral ties. Some of the stories that amplify cultural exchange due to Malawi and China's diplomatic relations include "Malawi's Mudzi dancers China-bound" (*The Nation*, November 13, 2012). The story reads: "Malawi's Mudzi Cultural Troupe is expected to tour China in what promises to be a spectacular celebration of the two countries' ties."

Another NPL story that illustrates how the media house uses the attribution of responsibility frame is titled "China brings Spring Festival to Malawi" (*The Nation*, February 3, 2015). The following sentence demonstrates that the Spring Festival was brought to Malawi for the sake of cementing the two countries diplomatic ties: "Breaking the news in an interview, Chinese ambassador to Malawi Zhen Qingyang assured there will be 'something for everyone in attendance, adding the move hopes to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries.'"

Since 2008, many Malawians have also been to China on various Chinese-sponsored tours. Through the use of the attribution of responsibility frame, NPL demonstrates that these developments are a result of China and Malawi becoming friends. For example, in "Oriental lessons", a story published by *Weekend Nation* on June 14, 2016, NPL arts and culture journalist Howard Mlozi quotes visual artist Elson Kambalu who touts China as a country boasting a rich culture. The artist said this after returning from a sponsored trip to China, where he toured seven cities, among them Beijing and Shanghai. Kambalu's sentiments echo the findings from Jossiah (2015) study, which established that Malawians perceive China as a country with rich culture and history.

Many Malawians now get Chinese government scholarships to study in China, unlike when they flocked to Western countries courtesy of such education initiatives as the British Chevening Scholarships and the American Fulbright Scholarships. *The Nation* Online on September 7, 2012, published a story titled

“34 Malawians awarded Chinese Govt Scholarships” and to indicate that this development was because of the China-Malawi bilateral relations, the story’s last paragraph reads thus: “Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 2008, 142 Malawians have so far benefited from the programme.”

Morality frame

The morality frame puts an event in the context of morals or social prescriptions. According to Neuman *et al.* (1992), journalists and editors use the frame indirectly through quotes or inference rather than directly. In the analysed NPL stories, the morality frame is mainly used in two types of accounts: those that questioned whether it was morally right for Malawi to dump Taiwan and switch loyalty to China after 42 years of diplomatic relations with the former and those that question whether it is ethically right for Malawi to continue relying on Chinese aid, loans and grants for her development projects. NPL repeatedly reminds the Malawi government against over-relying on assistance from China, arguing the practice is not morally right as it reduces Malawi to an embarrassing level. An opinion article by Wilkins Mijiga titled, “On the Brink of a Colony, Malawi in 2015?” published by *The Nation* on August 5, 2015, cautions against relying on Chinese loans and aid, warning that Malawi could, in the long run, turn into a Chinese colony. The article reads in part:

Cry my beloved Malawi for one fear to imagine what being colonised by China would be like. One is sure that it would be a horrendous nightmare considering how poorly and ruthless China treats its people. We will be treated in a viciously punitive fashion for us who will be in debt and not of its kin and kith; tears of blood meander down my cheeks for our children.

As suggested by Mijiga (2015), the moral thing for Malawi to do is to learn as much as possible from the Chinese on how they managed to transform their country to the levels of development it currently basks in. The writer advises thus:

But then we can start acting now to avert that calamity visiting our posterity. First, the basics- we need to borrow from our potential colonisers, the Chinese and the works of their founding father, Chairman Mao. He

transformed China from an impoverished rural state into a superclass of modern economies.

Mijiga's sentiments echo Nkhulembe (2014) findings, whose study established that much as Malawians view China as a friend, they are also cautious of the relations, fearing that the country has intentions to turn Malawi into a colony.

Economic frame

The economic frame reports an event in terms of its economic consequences. Neuman et al. (1992) identified it as a typical frame in the news. The broad impact is a substantial news value, and economic consequences are often considerable (Graber, 1993). Regarding the prevalence of the dominant frames in the analysed media reports, the findings reveal that NPL treats the topic of China-Malawi bilateral relations mainly as an economic issue (trade and investment). This agrees with Nkhoma (2021) results that Malawi's choice of China over Taiwan was primarily due to financial reasons. This finding further concurs with Lafargue (2005), who states that China's arrival in Africa provides African countries with a new economic horizon. The author urges African countries to take full advantage of this development.

On trade and investment, NPL appears to advance the agenda that the type of trade between Malawi and China should exist that will see the two countries buying from each other and not only Malawi buying from China. An article authored by Innocent Helema and published by *The Nation* of August 29, 2013, raises critical issues regarding the China-Malawi trade imbalance. The said article, titled, "Malawi's trade policy: What a trade friend we have in China", reads in part:

But how much are we exporting to China concerning what we are importing? ... Malawi's diplomatic marriage with China dates to 2008. And since then, in terms of trade, the mark of this romance has not been impressive. Data provided by the Trade Law Centre (Tralac) indicates that Malawi's imports from China obscenely jumped by a staggering 211%, from \$80 million in 2008 to \$249 million in 2012. At the same period, Malawi's exports to China show a visibly stunting growth of 500% from \$8 million in 2008 to \$48 million in 2012.

The trade imbalance between China and Malawi echoes the findings from Wekesa's analysis of China-Zambia relations as portrayed by the *Zambian media* regarding the economic benefits of the links. Wekesa established that, to some extent, the *Zambian media* asserts that China is in Zambia as an exploiter, especially when it comes to trade and investment.

Another story published earlier by Helema raises similar concerns surrounding the issue of Malawi not exporting much to China. The story bearing a telling headline, "Chinese imports jump 120%", portrays a clear picture of the situation on the ground, replete with statistics:

Malawi imports from China jumped by a staggering 120% to \$249 million in 2012, from \$113 million in 2011, indicates available China-Africa trade data. However, the data sourced from Trade Law Centre's (Tralac) website suggests that Malawi's exports to China marginally rose by a meagre 4% from \$46 million in 2011 to an anaemic \$48 million in 2012.

Furthermore, NPL uses the economic frame to push for a policy implementation that would force China to invest more in the manufacturing industry in Malawi, which is envisaged to open up factories/companies, hence creating jobs for the locals and boosting Malawi's economy at both household and national level. NPL's business editor, Dumbani Mzale, in a story titled, "Mutharika lures Chinese investors", uses words, expressions and quotes that aptly push for the trade-and-investment agenda. The story's introduction reads thus: "President Peter Mutharika yesterday enticed Chinese investors, saying Malawi is fast becoming an investment haven for southern Africa."

The use of such words as 'haven' and the expression 'fast becoming' paint a picture that will persuade the Chinese to consider Malawi as a potential investment destination. This is complemented by a direct quote from the President later in the story, which reads:

Said Mutharika: "Malawi is at a turning point. In the last two years, we have begun to do what we have never done at any point in our history. We are moving Malawi from aid to trade, and I want to assure you [investors] that the government is set to provide security of your investment, life and

property. This includes flexibility in the repatriation of profits without exploiting Malawians.”

Human interest frame

The human-interest frame “brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). The frame stimulates the psychological pulse of people to influence emotional response and, after that, place blame on someone or something. NPL appears to use the human-interest frame when covering several issues surrounding the China-Malawi bilateral relations. For instance, apart from Chinese labourers snatching perceived job opportunities for Malawian labourers discussed earlier, NPL has also repeatedly reported stories on the ill-treatment the local employees face, mainly at Chinese construction sites. It is the same issue that Vava (2017) highlights in his study on China’s negative image in Zimbabwean media.

However, it should be noted that the frame is used to amplify the plight of Malawian labourers and that of Chinese investors in the country. From time to time, NPL publishes stories about Chinese nationals in Malawi as victims of criminal acts such as theft and, in some cases, even murder. Christopher Jimu’s story, “Chinese investors ask for more security” (*The Nation*, September 27, 2014), is a case in point about NPL using the human-interest frame with the Chinese as the victims. The story quotes Councillor in the Economic and Commercial office of the Embassy of the Peoples’ Republic of China, Wang Jiaxin Hudson, requesting the Malawi Government to protect Chinese nationals following a spate of robberies targeting investors from China. To drive the point home, Jimu presents a quote from the Councillor:

Said Wang: “We are unfortunate with the increased incidences of robberies affecting the Chinese nationals. The deteriorating security in Malawi will completely erode the confidence of many investors, and at the end of the day, the robbers are ruining the future of the Malawi nation.”

Another story by Edwin Nyirongo, “Chinese Embassy deplores insecurity” (*The Nation*, September 27, 2014), also uses the Human-interest frame to present

the vices the Chinese nationals encounter in Malawi. Nyirongo's story is about Zhoe Feng, a Chinese national who was shot dead in chasing robbers who had stolen money from his cooking oil factory at Mapanga in Blantyre.

Conclusion

This study has established that NPL's coverage of the China-Malawi bilateral relations employs all the five popular media frames: conflict, economic, morality, human interest and attribution of responsibility. It has also been established that the media house mainly uses the economic frame when presenting the China-Malawi story, while the morality frame is the least used. This is because the prevailing motive for NPL's consistent reporting on the China-Malawi bilateral relations is to push for a win-win scenario for both countries so that the ties benefit their people equally. For instance, NPL uses the conflict frame to condemn China's practices on labour, trade, and Chinese nationals' involvement in criminal acts. On the other hand, NPL employs the attribution of responsibility frame to praise China for the initiatives that will benefit Malawi, such as infrastructure development and cultural exchanges. On the whole, NPL's framing of the China-Malawi story aims at promoting socio-economic development for the people of the two countries.

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