Going Against the Grain

***Terry FitzPatrick** describes the challenges of being independent and professional in a country whose newspapers and state-run radio are political pawns*

The studios don't look imposing. An aging three-story building displays an awkward array of antennas on top. The letters MBC are perched on the roof, like a flag on an old radio microphone. But there's no mistaking that the state-owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation is an instrument of government control. The armed guards in army fatigues are a dead giveaway. So is the neighborhood.

"Next to MBC is the police, on the other side are the courts, and behind is the prison," my guide pointed out with a chuckle. "If you say something wrong on MBC, they march you out of the studio and take you from one building to the next, and to the next, and to the next."

An exaggeration, to be sure, but point taken. Freedom of speech and an independent press are enshrined in Malawi's constitution. But exercising those freedoms can be risky. An opponent of the president was recently sentenced to five months in prison for calling him "a pig and a thief" at a political rally. Media independence is something new for a society that is beginning to emerge from totalitarian control.

For decades, Malawi had only one media voice: state radio. This tradition continues today on MBC. Its producers generate some worthwhile documentary and magazine programs, but the newscasts are primarily propaganda. Story after story sings praise for the ruling party. Every movement of the president merits a live remote broadcast. Every dedication of a village well or pit latrine—even if built by a private organization—becomes an opportunity for a government official to steal the limelight by making it look like an initiative of the ruling party.

Enter MIJ—the Malawi Institute of Journalism. Its mission is to foster independent and professional reporting. At times it seems like mission impossible.

First, education

It's the opening day of class at MIJ. Students shuffle into a gritty room and nestle behind painted plywood desks. The group is quiet. All are young, nervous, uncertain of what lies ahead. Instructor Henry Malunda breaks the ice.

"I congratulate you," he says. "This is the beginning of a long road. A career in journalism is a long journey."

These students represent a new breed of reporter in Malawi: qualified journalists who learn the craft before they begin to practice it. In the past decade, Malawi has witnessed an explosion of free expression. Ten new radio stations have been allowed to broadcast and independent newspapers have sprung up. The problem is that the media have grown so quickly that many newsroom staffers have no clue what they are doing.

"MIJ was founded out of concerns in the journalism fraternity that most people went into the industry without proper training," according to MIJ Executive Director James Ng'ombe. "MIJ was initially a stop-gap measure, a place where short courses could be mounted to correct the situation."

From those humble beginnings in 1996 as a journalism workshop, the institute has grown into a force for change. Approximately 400 students have graduated so far, and MIJ alumni are present in most Malawi newsrooms.

Classes at MIJ are intense. Eight hours a day, five days a week. Media law and ethics, desktop publishing and layout, news writing and researching, broadcasting skills. Sixteen students are working toward a five-month beginner's certificate, 24 others are studying for a year to earn a coveted MIJ diploma.

"We call it a crash course," says Senior Course-manager Levi Zaleza Manda. "MIJ is not an academic institution. It is there to produce people that can quickly adapt to the environment. So we give them not the theory, but the skill." Manda is a former newspaper reporter who taught high school before becoming a journalist himself.

"We pride ourselves on having one of the most compact programs," adds Ng'ombe. "[They're] very job-oriented — almost artisanship. People are here with hands-on training, and they move away to use their skills immediately." Ng'ombe is a linguist by training and an author who owns a local publishing firm aside from his duties at MIJ.

"The best thing to do is to get them

(the students) action oriented," he says. "If you teach for more than two hours and they haven't done anything by way of practical response, you've wasted your time. They must be able to relate practically to what you are telling them. Talk. Do. Talk. Do."

Not quite all that it seems

Amidst the crime, coups, epidemics and famines gripping Africa today, Malawi has a reputation as an oasis of peace and pleasantry. Tourist brochures boast that this is "The Warm Heart of Africa" because people are so friendly. Guide books call it "Africa for Beginners" because people speak English and it's easy to get around. The legendary landscape made famous by missionary David Livingstone is a great place to visit. The scenery is stunning: "Cloud-capped mountains and broad blue lakes with sandy beaches." Sometimes the tourist brochures don't exaggerate! You rarely see the army. There are no insurgents fighting guerilla wars in the hills. You needn't fear thieves or rapists but for a few isolated spots. Police don't need to carry guns.

MIJ's guiding lights: Executive Director James Ng'ombe and Senior Course-manager Levi Zaleza Manda.

That's not to say Malawi is paradise for those who live here. It's one of the world's poorest countries. The World Bank says 60 percent of the population lives below the $1 per day international poverty line. The Malawi government says less than six percent of the population has access to electricity. One million people are HIV positive—nine percent of the population. The International Monetary Fund and many European donor countries have been withholding aid because of corruption and abuse at all levels of government.

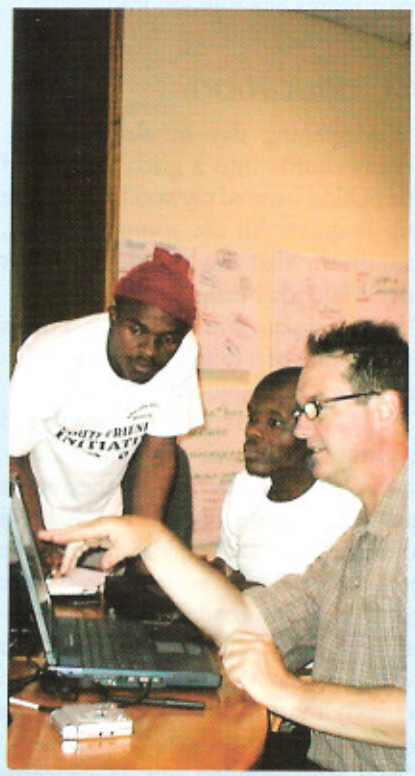
Malawi is struggling to reinvent itself after 30 years of totalitarian rule by self-declared "President for Life" Hastings Banda. When Banda left office in 1994, his successor freed political prisoners and allowed the independent news media to take root. MIJ came onto the scene two years later, backed with funding from the European Union. The institute currently operates on tuition from students and donor funding from Denmark.

What do Malawi's reporters need in the way of training? In a word: everything. They lack adequate exposure to even the most basic of journalistic techniques—such as how to conceptualize a story, find multiple sources, prepare for interviews, structure a report, identify quotes for print or edit soundbites for broadcast, compose a publication or compile a newscast. One observer has noted that Malawi has reporters by default instead of by design.

A celebration on International Press Freedom Day provided a window on some of the problems. A public forum entitled "The Role of the Media in Democracy," turned into a debate over journalism ethics. Young reporters in the room criticized the "old blood" at the head table and said it's wrong for them to preach U.S. ethical standards in Africa. Several reporters seemed to defend the

Although he is based in Seattle as a freelance radio and television journalist, **Terry FitzPatrick** says he suffers from "incurable wanderlust." So far, this has inspired him to report from six of the world's seven continents — including Antarctica. FitzPatrick's television work has ranged from reports on presidential politics for "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" to a History Channel documentary on the New York Stock Exchange. On radio, he has served as a staff correspondent and senior editor for National Public Radio's weekly environmental news program, "Living on Earth." FitzPatrick has conducted numerous journalism-training projects in Kosovo, Georgia, Uganda, Liberia, Ghana and the United States.

FitzPatrick was a Knight Fellow in Malawi and South Africa from February through August 2003.



widespread practice of receiving "allowances" from news sources.

"We don't do it willingly, but we are poorly paid and overworked," said one woman. "So I think receiving freebies will never end."

"I think there should be a blanket ban," said another. "But how do you stop it? You can't compare us to the United States of America. How are journalists to survive?"

Many in the media recognize their shortcomings. Press Freedom Day gave birth to Malawi's first-ever journalism-awards banquet. In introducing the event, the vice president of Namisa, the National Media Institute of Southern Africa, Aretha Kamwendo, noted that it might seem odd to be honoring media performance, which overall she characterized as "pathetic."

Malawi's newspapers are highly partisan and reflect the rough-and-tumble nature of the nation's fledgling multi-party political landscape. Many newspaper publishers have political backgrounds, and they fill their pages with parliamentary intrigue.

But because most Malawians are too poor and illiterate to rely on the print media, radio is a far more important source of news for the general public. Independent radio stations are less combative than their print counterparts. The driving force behind radio news is to break the broadcast monopoly held for so many years by state-owned MBC.

Lightning strikes

MIJ launched its own radio station in 2001, primarily as a place for students to

gain practical experience. The station has become a lightning rod for controversy.

"The criticism has mainly come from politicians because in this country nobody was used to balanced information," says Manda. "There was the state machinery that was coming up with its own propaganda, and the current leadership comes from that tradition. We gave critics of the government a voice. That was new in Malawi. The government feels we are biased."

In 2002, the director general of the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority, Evans Namanja, sent a letter to MIJ threatening to withdraw its radio license unless the station "regularized" its operations by ceasing to run what those in power view as anti-government content. So far MIJ is standing its ground.

"MIJ has played a major part in identifying the middle-of-the-road role," Ng'ombe says, noting with some irony that the attacks from government have helped the institute develop. "MIJ has been a kind of embattled child, fighting for survival, gasping for breath. And because the attack on us has been high profile, they have actually done the marketing for us. Our classes are easily double the size of what we've been taking before."

On graduation day for the previous year's students, the ongoing conflict wasn't far from the surface. The graduates were beaming as their parents watched them parade in the MIJ parking lot, each dressed in a blue and white gown, to accept their certificates or diplomas.

"MIJ is not without its critics," Henry Chibwana, chairman of the institute's board of trustees, told the crowd. "But

Graduation day at the Malawi Institute of Journalism (top) and students still working toward receiving that coveted diploma.

just as there is freedom of speech, there is freedom to criticize. Without criticism, MIJ might degenerate into mediocrity.

Ng'ombe warned the graduates that their journalism education wasn't over. He said it lasts a lifetime. "The more you listen, the more you realize how much more there is to learn."

Making a difference

Can MIJ change the face of Malawi journalism?

"I cannot say with scientific certainty whether we have an impact or not," Manda admits. "But if we compare what is available now in the newspapers and radio to what was there before, then I would say we are making some impact."

The institute's students are typically the children of Malawi's elite; nobody else can afford what for Malawians is rather steep tuition. Some students already have jobs at the state-owned MBC, which covers their fees and pays them a salary to attend class. This, despite the fact that many in power feel MIJ is biased against the ruling party. Ng'ombe isn't sure what impact his training will have on MBC or those who come from politicized newspapers.

"The toughest part of the job is to teach and never expect the journalists to carry out the teachings," Ng'ombe notes. "If they are already from the industry, most of them are already entrenched in a political system. And when they go back, it doesn't matter how good or ethical your teaching was, they go back to their old practice just to keep the job. It's very frustrating. Very few that come out of the system end up practicing the skills that we give them."

Still, even if MIJ can't transform state-owned broadcasting or the partisan press, it does seem to be making a difference elsewhere.

"A few students are at independent institutions, and they have done what a journalist should do, in spite of all odds being against them," Ng'ombe says. "When you find that a few people are still willing to carry the torch, and stand up for what's right, even if one-out-of-a-hundred is the best I can get, it's a joy to see them do things right." xxx