The Manifestation of Neoliberalism in Digital Migration: An Extension of Hegemony

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Abstract

This article looks at the relationship between digital migration and neoliberalism. Labelled as a dominant hegemonic doctrine, this article argues how neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology that drives the International Telecommunication Union’s (ITU) pursuit of media diversity and pluralism, whilst simultaneously leveraging corporate interests. Using Malawi as a case study, this paper addresses how the neoliberal principles of laissez faire capitalism have travelled across political and economic lines and into communication policy to reveal that digital migration is safeguarding global corporate interests over the publics. Through an critical examination of the ITUs Guidelines for the Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting (2010) and the ICT Regulation Toolkit (2007), the principles of a free-market, deregulation, privatization, unrestricted competition and economic prosperity are employed to advance neoliberalism’s quest for expanding private interests. By theoretically revisiting Antonio Gramsci’s hegemony, this paper generates new analytical judgements that answer the research problem: Has the manifestation of neoliberalism in digital migration policy superseded the public’s interest for a diversified media landscape.

Keywords: digital migration, neoliberalism, ideology, hegemony.

Introduction

The Onslaught of Digital Migration in Malawi

Malawi is a small landlocked country in Southeast Africa, bordering Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia. Divided into three administrative areas; the North, Central and Southern region, Malawi consists of 28 districts and nine major ethnic groups; Tumbuka, Chewa, Tonga, Nkhonde, Ngoni, Mang'anja, Lomwe, Yao and Sena, all of which have their own languages and dialects. These different groups make up a population of around 16 million and a GNI1 of $250 US per capita which categorizes Malawi as a low-income country according to the World Bank (2016). Like many countries that are classified as low-income, Malawi’s economy is aid-dependent and “depends in large part on economic assistance from the IMF, World Bank and

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1 GNI per capita (formerly GNP per capita) is the gross national income.
individual donor nations” (Moyo and Chapota, 2012:4). Originally known as Nyasaland under the colonial administration of the British Empire, Malawi is not unfamiliar with foreign influence and influx of global policies, strategies, reform packages and conflicting ideologies.

And in 2006, Malawi signed the Regional Radio-communication Conference (RRC-06) treaty and the GE06 Agreement under the direction of the ITU to migrate from analogue to digital by 17th July 2015. Unable to achieve this, or the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) agreement, which aimed to migrate on 31st December 2013, Malawi, under the supervision of the parastatal Malawi Digital Network Limited (MDNL) has been unable to fully migrate due to various financial and policy-laden constraints. However, according to the ITU (2016a) Malawi has installed Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), which has only been able to provide 55% coverage to Malawi’s population. But in a country where approximately 10% have access to electricity (AfDB, OECD, UNDP: 2015), raises serious questions as to who benefits from digital migration, and in whose interest it serves.

Television broadcasting has always been a controversial issue for Malawi. During Dr Kamuzu Banda regime (1964 – 1994), television was banned, which made Malawi one of the last countries in the world to have television, so it remains a relatively new phenomenon for the majority of Malawians. Hence the jump from analogue to digital has been striking. With only less than a decade of having more than one television broadcaster, which subsequently was state controlled, Malawi’s television penetration rate also remains low, approximately 7% in 2014 (Dataxis, 2015). And for Pay-TV subscribers the figure is even lower, around 84,000 (ibid).

**Towards a Common Synthesis**

Malawi has been subject to neoliberal ideologies since the end of colonial, and possibly before which were generated by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Developed during the 1970s and 1980s through conditional loans such as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which advocated for the dismantling of state subsidies and control, privatisation and macroeconomic development, their economic itinerary was influenced by the Washington Consensus.

The Washington Consensus was a set of economic prescriptions that included matters of economic reform, privatization, and deregulation, in short, *laissez faire* capitalism. Each prescription favoured macroeconomic approaches that involved countries opening up their markets to both trade and investment, and the expansion of market forces within the domestic economy (Turner, 2008). Such approaches soon became known as neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Popularized in the 1980s during the political era of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who followed the economic prescriptions of American economist Milton Friedman. In the “global south” it was the

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2 This took place in Geneva in 2006.
3 The Regional Radio Conference 2006
4 DStv is a South African digital satellite provider and the largest competitor in Malawi, followed by GOtv which is provided by Multichoice Africa.
5 These included Fiscal discipline; Public expenditure priorities; Privatization - state enterprises; Deregulation; Tax reform; Financial liberalization; Exchange rates; Trade liberalization; Increasing foreign direct investment (FDI); Secure intellectual property rights (IPR); Reduced role for the state. (Adapted from WHO, 2016)
WB and IMF, which became the main executors of this “macro-economic doctrine” (Ferguson, 2010: 170). Although grown out of the same economic orthodoxy, neoliberalism has now grown into other spheres of socio-political and cultural importance. Or what Krikorian and Kapczynski (2010) argue as the injection of market logic to all aspects of life.

Although some may refer to the simplicity of this analysis as a matter an “analytical convenience” (Phelan, 2014: 14), neoliberalism is no longer a political ideology, but also an economic one, more specifically, an ideology of global capitalism (Harvey, 2005). This influence by the IFIs was later described as “the Wall Street–IMF–Treasury complex that came to dominate economic policy [in order to] persuade, cajole, and (thanks to structural adjustment programmes administered by the IMF) coerce many developing countries to take the neoliberal road” (Harvey, 2005: 92).

However, neoliberalism, within the media domain was met with some resistance. The most commonly known, was the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)6, which challenged, among many things, the hegemonic free-flow of information and products coming from Western states (Nordenstreng, 1984). As advocates of the free-market model and laissez faire capitalism, the US and UK under President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, respectively, withdrew from UNESCO to show their commitment to neoliberalism (cf. Cowhey, 1990). This political offensive became one of many US strategies during the Cold War period to maintain its global hegemonic position (cf. Klein, 2007). In addition to this offensive, the US and UK have been influential in introducing communications onto the global markets. For example, whilst Malawi and many countries were adopting SAPs, American Telephone and Telegraph Co (AT&T), followed by British Telecom, embraced privatisation and regulatory liberalization (Winseck, 2002). This steadily spread as more and more countries across the “global south” had less money to support and subsidize their media. This points to the fact that the “impact of international forces on state sovereignty is a long-running theme in the field of international communication” (Morris and Waisbord, 2001: vii).

The Global Shift

The global move towards digital broadcasting, namely television by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has been heralded as a global necessity. And for digital migration optimists, the future of television results in the freeing up of the airwaves via more access to frequencies, clearer visual quality, increased content diversity, and variety of media content in different vernacular (Balancing Act, 2011). In a country which has 11 languages, and one state television broadcaster, which dominated nearly 100% of the broadcast airwaves for over 20 years, the diversification of the airwaves was received as welcomed changes in Malawi (Le Pelley and Titus; 2012). However, the beneficiaries of digital migration have often been complex. Today, the media is no longer split between the distinct dichotomy of consumers vs. producers, but between states and institutions, and consumers and corporations. For consumers, the benefits cited above, better picture and sound quality, more channels in vernacular languages are appealing advantages. For corporations, which mainly consist of media houses and the manufacturers of

6 UNESCO played a major role in fostering the NWICO debate.
technology, the benefits of freeing up spectrum can be sold to communications operators, offers them the opportunity to provide new services and products results in profit gaining advantages (Plum, 2014).

To ensure the swift and most effective transition from analogue to digital, the ITU has written many documents for policy makers to follow, such as the Guidelines for the Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting (2010) and the ICT Regulation Toolkit (2007). In the Guidelines (2010: viii), it explicitly states that the “transition to DTTB” and introduction of MTV\(^8\) will benefit regulators, service providers, network operators and consumer electronics manufacturers”. Adding that “the market will determine the success of the services that are offered” (ibid). The ITU, which is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ITU, 2016) coordinates the international management of the radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits. This coordination process involves overseeing the digital migration transition and the “freeing up” of the airwaves or order to obtain more spectrum. As the “challenge with analogue is that it uses too much bandwidth on the spectrum which will prevent more channels being added” (Mbatha, 2014: 20). Therefore, these standardised guidelines and toolkits have, and continue to, assist their 193 member states to create standardised, or globally prescribed policies.

What is more significant about the structure of the ITUs membership is their 700+ non-state members, which consist of the world’s largest technology manufacturers and businesses. As part of the ITUs remit, the ITU is keen to support the development of information and communications technology (ICT) businesses gain access into emerging markets. With the majority of members being businesses they state that “by joining ITU, you have the opportunity to influence the decisions that impact your business and you will play an important role in the development of Standards and Recommendations for ICTs” (ITU, 2016). Therefore, it’s not surprising that the beneficiaries of digital migration will be businesses. This was also picked up by Held and McGrew (2002) who pointed out that the United Nations (UN) “which is at the centre of globalization is surrounded by global conglomerates who seek to influence the direction of international public policy” (ibid: 1). Suddenly, the well-known proverb “he who pays the piper calls the tune” becomes all too familiar.

Another distinctive character used in these documents was how language centred around markets. As illustrated here in the Guidelines (2010); “in striving for a rapid service up-take and development of the DTTB and MTV markets, the regulator will implement such policies by issuing information, funds, rights, licences and permits to (qualified) market parties in compliance with the relevant Legislation” (ibid: v). This emphasis on the rapid development of markets is used in conjunction with the free-market policies advocated by Chicago economist Milton Friedman\(^9\) (1962), who, as an advisor to former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret

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\(^7\) Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcasting
\(^8\) Mobile Television Broadcasting
\(^9\) “Milton Friedman, a Chicago economist who headed the second wave of state-bashers, preferred the word “neoliberal” in a 1951 essay entitled, “Neoliberalism and Its Prospects”. He argued for a “middle way” between the enemy of collectivism and the excesses of 19th-century liberalism. Victorian liberals failed to grasp that laissez-faire could produce over-mighty individuals, Friedman thought. The goal should not be laissez-faire, but market competition: this, he said, would protect men from each other” (Economist, 2012, para 4)
Thatcher, strongly advocated for rapid changes from state owned enterprises towards laissez faire economic policies (Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998; Klein, 2010).

The rhetoric used in the Guidelines (2010) share many similarities to those of Friedman’s who placed greater emphasis on a free-market economic system, which included less state regulations on the economy, and more freedom for businesses. But where does this leave consumers? While businesses are able to find emerging markets and new consumers for their products with support from ITU policy, the onslaught of more channels for the consumer comes at a significant cost. For example, in order for Malawian’s to receive the digital transmission they will either have to buy a set-top box (STB) which currently costs around 20,000 MWK\(^{10}\) ($25 US) or a digital television set. With the average annual income in Malawi at $815 US (Finca, 2015), and half of the population (50.7%) living below the national poverty line (UNDP, 2016), $25 US is 3% of their annual income. Therefore, these Guidelines on digital migration do not take into account the diverse landscapes and complex political-economic factors of countries (Berger, 2010).

For Malawi, and many countries across Africa, television remains an opulent tool of communication. Unlike radio, the cost of television and the scarcity of electricity are drastically reducing people’s access to this mode of information, which the United Nations (UN) considers a basic human right\(^{12}\). The ITU which is a product of the UN system, believes that “expanding access to ICTs globally is in everybody’s interest” (ITU, 2016b: para 3), but its policy, as pointed out above, is aimed at business interests. The ITU shares this rhetoric in its own publically available ICT Regulation Toolkit (2007) which requests member states, of which Malawi is one of them, to open up its media markets. And with Malawi’s lack of preparation, and low-income status, it has no other choice but to import foreign goods in order to migrate on time. Under the Authorization of Services Section it states that; “as of February 2008, 107 WTO members have made commitments to open some or all segments of their telecommunications markets to foreign suppliers”. It goes on to add that “the central theme of these rules is the evolution towards more open competitive markets” (ibid).

Again, the use of the term ‘markets’ connotes the neoliberal principles of a free-market and the shift away from state interference. Through this rule-setting Toolkit (2007), the ITU is indirectly influencing how digital migration policy should be implemented by member states. These rules are secured even further through the ITUs relationship with the WTO;

“The World Trade Organization (WTO) and its predecessors have promoted liberalization of trade in ICT services. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the 1997 WTO Agreement on Basic Telecommunications (ABT) both include specific rules that apply to telecommunication and ICT regulation and authorization. As a result, new signatories to the ABT, as well as countries wishing to join the WTO, must bring their regulatory and

\(^{10}\) Malawian Kwacha – also note that the government has subsidized it to 15,000 MWK (around $15 US) for the rural poor.

\(^{11}\) Between 2007-2011 61.6% of the population were living below the international poverty line of US$1.25 per day (UNICEF, 2013)

\(^{12}\) According to Article 21 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948)
authorization practices into compliance with WTO trade rules” (Section – ‘Authorization of Services’)

This view that countries “must bring their regulatory and authorization practices into compliance with WTO trade rules” is an imperative statement that indicates what countries should and shouldn’t do in accordance to the rules set by these influential global institutions. By setting the rules, the ITU is creating a hegemonic position that has monopolized the direction of digital migration.

As seen in Figure 1, commercial communications makes up the largest percentage of satellite operations globally (38%), and digital migration requires adequate spectrum, which is provided by these satellites (cf. Allison, 2014). Therefore, satellite and terrestrial infrastructure comes at a cost, a cost that is initially bore by the ICT businesses and manufacturers, but eventually imparted onto consumers, governments and broadcasters.

Figure 1


It has already been identified that the arrival of digital terrestrial television (DTT) in Africa will require major investments (Balancing Act, 2015). Given Malawi’s dependency on foreign aid, low economic status and television penetration, it is surprising that digital migration businesses and manufacturers see Malawi as a lucrative market for foreign goods. As this expansion of commercial communications relies on demand, and the ITU policies are clearly endorsing a free-market model to broaden this demand, even in countries with a low demand.

In a Panos Report titled Challenges and Perspectives of Digital Migration for African Media, author Guy Berger (2010) makes it abundantly clear that “the key driver of digital migration in developed countries is economic in nature” (ibid: 46). This observation reflects the intention and interests of digital migration toward neoliberal principles and away from public interest. Based on the report, Africa does not need to free up airwave spectrum because the market is still relatively small, and with a weak broadcast and consumer electronics industry, Africa has been targeted as a new market for foreign content and electronic goods. Therefore, raising the concern that “public interest is rarely at the core of national digital switch-over policies” (Dragomir and Thompson, 2014: 13). Berger (2010) also stresses the fact that “digital migration
does not end entirely with viewers having a set-top box (or digital-receiver TV set). It is likely that the boxes (or sets) themselves will need to be switched for more advanced ones at least within a decade of their dissemination” (ibid: 39). Therefore, turning many African states into consumers and furthering the free market agenda. By creating a supply driven market, that focuses on economic prosperity, rather than demand led, the ITU’s business members are controlling the interests that digital migration is serving. Another point of contention that Berger raises is content. Similar to the NWICO debates in the 1980s, “there is a scarcity of local content in most television programming in Africa” (ibid: 138) which makes the importation of foreign content all the more easy to legitimise. He argues that content is another product that can be sold in a free-market economy to the benefit of the producer. Knowing that many African states do not produce enough high quality and internationally sellable programmes, the playing field for imports and exports is highly uneven.

The Extension of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism as a “macroeconomic doctrine” (Ferguson, 2010: 170) and “the defining political economic paradigm of our time” (Chomsky, 1999: 7) has, since its inception, manifested itself into all aspects of life (Krikorian and Kapczynski, 2010) and has arguably become “the most successful ideology in world history” (Anderson, 2000: 17). Therefore, it is understandable why economists, politicians, scholars and now media practitioners are trying to critically understand it as a global phenomenon. Scholars who have attempted to synthesize media and neoliberalism have done so in a variety of ways. Although some argue that compared to other “prominent social science concepts such as democracy, the meaning and proper usage of neoliberalism [has] elicited little scholarly debate” (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009: 137), research has been dedicated to understanding neoliberal policies and the deregulation of the media (Brown 1991; Blevins 2007), the commercialization of the global media market (McChesney, 2001), its relationship to journalism (Fenton, 2011), and the emergence of transnational corporations using the free-market rhetoric to justify their actions (Herman and McChesney (1997). In all of these approaches take a normative critique which questions the relationship between democracy and the media, alongside the growing market-driven economy that has expanded rapidly since the 1970s (cf. Garnham, 2011). Little has been written to understanding before the advent of neoliberalism within the media domain and predicting the future of this macroeconomic ideology.

In Daniel R. Headrick’s (1995) book The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945, Headrick takes a historical look at the relationship between technology and international relations. Focusing on a period long before the emergence of digital migration, Headrick provides the foundations as to how Western Governments (namely, the UK and US) have monopolized the communications industry and policy-making arena since the 1900s. Arguing that “telecommunications have been controlled, twisted, and distorted by politics in order to separate and alienate peoples” (ibid: v) raises the question, how have modern communication systems have been structured along geopolitical lines. Covering a period that includes two World Wars, Headrick provides a strong case that the communication industry has always been used strategically and that global communication policy as intrinsically political. Scholars, such as Mattelart (1979) and Nyamnjoh (2005), pre and post Headrick’s
writings have also argued how the UK only developed radio systems in Africa so they could influence their military needs in the struggle against Germany and Italy during World War II, and their ideological warfare over communism.

Headrick (1995) analysis dates back to 1851 when the first undersea cable linked Britain with France to illustrate the strategic use of communications. Guided by the interests of being a global imperialist, Britain gained great political and economic strength within the communication sector through the production of cables for telegraphy. It was during this early period that Headrick’s archival findings revealed that free trade systems and the role of private owners started long before the onslaught of neoliberalism. Similar to today, the spread of telegraphy was characterized by amity, minimal state control, and greater private investment. Although British domination gathered momentum when telegraphy became a global commodity, Headrick explains how competition surfaced when the main global powers fought for colonial markets, both for selling and extracting materials needed for the development of telegraphy. This rise in self-interest made communications a politically contentious issue, but the British maintained their hegemonic position because they controlled the territories where global cables were being laid. During a period when the international system was bipolar, having a monopoly over such strategic assets continues to be used as a means of controlling the direction of the media and communication sector. Although Headrick’s research finishes in 1945 when the emergence of other powerful states come into play, his analysis brings to our attention, who and how certain states have gained control over media and communication. From spectrum allocation to modern communication policy, powerful states such as UK and US have dominated communication-related negotiations (cf. Mansell and Raboy, 2011), which have not only given them a huge political advantage, but also economic advantages. And not only have such negotiations given the UK and the US considerable advantage in global communications, but also the manufacturing of communication products (Smythe, 1977).

The ITU, which was founded in 1865, then known as the International Telegraph Union, has been instrumental in this shift from government control to private enterprise (Winseck, 2002). In conjunction with the WB, IMF, UN bodies and media conglomerates, the ITU has been promoting privatization and competition within the communication sector (Wallsten, 1999). Such changes have resulted in reducing state intervention, and allowing these global institutions to become global players seeking economic advantage. Resulting in them superseding former powerful governments to control the course of the communication industry, as well as, policy and the global communications agenda. Leading media scholars, McChesney and Schiller (2003) have raised these concerns previously to understand who is influencing the course of the media and communication industry. They have argued that large corporations “resort to corrupt relationship with policy makers in an attempt to determine policy direction” (ibid: 5). While they stress that communication policies should preserve and promote democratic values, they are acutely aware that the commercial exploitation of media by big businesses and corporations are superseding these democratic ideals. This “crisis in communications” (ibid: 3) as they called it, signifies the growth of neoliberal policies and ideologies. In their assessment of the dominant actors in the communication industry, they explicitly argue how in “the age of neoliberalism, or corporate globalization, […] national and international policies are highly supportive of business domination” (ibid: 5).
Using examples from Viacom and Vivendi, McChesney and Schiller (2003) expose how these large media companies “pressed for policies to facilitate their domination of markets throughout the world” (ibid: 7). In order for private companies to secure economic prosperity, the basic principles of neoliberal must be established. The same principles that guide the ITU and embedded in their digital migration guidelines. Therefore, it cannot be ignored that such parallelisms exist between the ITU and the businesses written about by McChesney and Schiller. What’s more is how both illustrate how neoliberalism has been “carefully orchestrated” (ibid: 6). By this they mean how conglomerates, as well as IFIs, are leveraging their economic advantages to strategically ensure media and communication policies are supportive of business needs. As a result, the basic trend that McChesney and Schiller foresee is “clearly in the direction of opening markets ever further to corporate-commercial exploitation” (ibid: 7). They see this trend as progressively evolving, as profit-making opportunities occur, states become increasingly sidelined, and neoliberalism develops into the dominant ideology behind many of the world’s global policies.

German sociologist Thomas Lemke (2001) also argues that this trend has been created through the fact that all global relationships, decisions, and actions are both political and economic in nature. No longer are countries such as Britain seeking political dominance, as in Headrick’s (1995) case, but companies, global institutions and the alike, are pursuing economic benefits through politically supported tactics. Lemke’s central idea mirrors that of Berger’s (2010), in that the key driver of digital migration is economic. Borrowing heavily from Michael Foucault, Lemke (2001) argues that neoliberalism has radically expanded into all political, cultural and social spheres. Using Foucault’s most infamous concepts, governmentality and biopolitics which have come to symbolizes the complex power relations between state, institutions and the populace, Lemke argues that the theoretical strength of governmentality “consists of the fact that it construes neo-liberalism not just as ideological rhetoric or as a political-economic reality, but above all as a political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (ibid: 203).

By this, Lemke suggests two points. Firstly, that there is a plurality of approaches to how neoliberalism manifests itself, namely, how this ‘political project’ tries to render other domains economic. Secondly, subjecting and making others believe neoliberalism as already existing, which as Headrick (1995) points out, does. Although the first point reflects Marxism’s notion of economic determinism, Lemke (2001) is clear that neoliberalism is a matter of politics and economics, which has the ability to construct alternative models of power that are structural, relational and productive. The ITU as an institution which exerts these alternative models of power operates through the support of governmental, as well as, the profit-making business community.

Although Lemke relies on Foucault’s theoretical framing of power, how power and ideology are operationalised reflects the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1972). According to Gramsci ideologies are spread through the intellectual and moral leadership of the ruling class to create a worldview that articulates their view of reality whilst rejecting or suppressing others. The ITU, which has hundreds of intellectual and moral leaders, more contemporarily known as members, use their structural, relational and productive power to influence media and communication policy or produce a version of reality that they wish to disseminate. Dominated by the business community, the larger majority of the ITU’s membership can use this power to
convince subordinated groups into adopting neoliberal principles, which they believe is in their own interests.

This version of Gramsci’s hegemony lies in the art of persuasion, whereby those with less political and economic influence, or negotiation powers, accept the dominant view of reality which has been filtered through a series of consciousness that Gramsci (1971) calls “common sense”. This concept of common sense is a “form of ‘everyday thinking’, which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world” (Hall and O’Shea, 2013: 8). The usefulness of understanding this concept in relation to neoliberalism is through the idea that common sense “is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself” (Gramsci, 1971: 326). For digital migration to take root, neoliberalism, in its most simplistic form as a free-market ideology, has secured the agreement by states, policy-makers, business, corporations and the general public as common sense. The success of neoliberalism within digital migration is that it conflates conflicting narratives, such as commercialisation and public service, or journalist professionalism and profit orientated objectives (see Fenton 2010)\(^\text{13}\), so that populace don’t question or know of alternative perspectives.

The strength of neoliberalism, similar to Lemke’s assessment of Foucault’s framing of power, is that its heterogeneity. For example, neoliberalism has been placed on the international agenda with little to no counter narratives attacking its place in the global economy. Therefore, neoliberalism has been able to become “a new common sense, and with it a new culture and a new philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs” (Gramsci, 1971: 424). To help legitimise neoliberalism even further, the ITU proclaims a common worldview that digital migration is mutually beneficial for everyone in order to form a unified ideological system. The persuasive rhetoric used in neoliberalism and digital migration, such as, the freeing up the airwaves, freedom of expression, free-markets, and the free-flow of information and products, creates a dominant worldview that is shared in media and communication policies and accepted as the best worldview or reality for everyone.

**Analyses and Major Findings**

The paper so far has provided a broad historical take on who neoliberalism has manifested itself within the media and communication domain. Through the principles of privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation, free-markets, competition, and economic prosperity in all political, economic and cultural spheres, it is hard to ignore that neoliberalism as an ideology and ‘political project’ has also impacted the process of digital migration. As pointed out by one local media practitioner, “it’s everywhere, we can’t escape from it’ (05/04/2015). This idea that we can’t escape it, implies the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism has become common sense.

Since the liberalization of television in Malawi in 1994, and then the signing of the digital migration agreements in 2006, there has been a rush to catch up with the rest of the world in developing its media. In so doing, Malawi’s regulatory body MACRA, has hastily accepted many of the global trends, or as another local broadcaster called it brainwashing;

“What the imperialists do is that they will get the best of our brains and brainwash them and use them to oppress us, and those are the issue of

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\(^\text{13}\) Gramsci referred to as ‘stratified deposits’
capitalists. I have spoken to the Director General of MACRA [...] its looks like he would rather listen to the guys sitting Geneva...there most of the decisions make at international level that have very little, if any, regards of the repercussion that will be created” (Local television broadcaster: 20/07/2015)

It should be pointed out that this tactic of “brainwashing” is not new. In the 1970s the United Nations Institute for Development and Economic Planning (IDEP) sent planning officers to train local policymakers in “development economics” which had considerable influence over the direction of the country’s socio-economic planning (Hirschman, 1999). Just as the US and UK have dominated the communication agenda since the advent of the telegraph, and the ITU’s Toolkit (2007) and Guidelines (2010) in instructing governments how to migrate under neoliberal conditions, illustrates the scale of “brainwashing” methods. Whether through “brainwashing” or what Gramsci refers to as “common sense” the shaping and dissemination of neoliberal principles within digital migration has impacted the type of reality Malawi wants to construct for itself.

However, upon signing the RRC-06 treaty and the GE06 Agreement, as well as the WTO commitments, it became clear, as another local television broadcaster put it, that Malawi “cannot run away from the international obligations, we have to follow a similar practice” (15/06/2015). This idea that “we have to follow” is significant for two reasons. First, it indicates that there is someone leading or guiding the process which reduces state sovereignty. Secondly, this response implies that Malawi had no choice but to migrate. Being able to persuade states that digital migration is beneficial to the cultural and economic growth of a country helps the ITU and its business members legitimize their actions.

By signing these agreements, the RRC-06 treaty and the GE06 Agreement, Malawi, like many other countries, are consenting to the economic principles of the free-market. As confirmed by the same local television broadcaster, “now that we have migrated, we have to open-up” (15/06/2015). This key principle of neoliberalism cannot be seen as accidental. The ITU’s Toolkit (2007) and Guidelines (2010) which both stress the importance of opening up, is determining, both indirectly and directly, the formula used for the successful application of digital migration. Similar to the economic prescriptions laid out by the Washington Consensus, imposing ideas that Malawi must open its domestic market to foreign suppliers leaves Malawi in a vulnerable position. Not only does it have an effect on who benefits from digital migration, but it allows others to maintain control over such benefits. As pointed out by one local NGO:

“Institutions like the World Bank, the International Telecommunications Union and the other institutions have certain interests in this country, but Malawi will only be party to certain benefits, and if it gives in and says ok this is

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14 In a recent article by The Maravi Post (2015) Fredrick Ndala, the Technical Advisor in the Ministry of information, Tourism and Culture said “We know all the concerns put across to government on digital migration but Malawi don't have a choice on matter as we are complying with Geneva 2006 ITU resolutions which we signed”
what we need to do, it’s possible that others will still be driving the game" (12/05/2015).

Similar to the arguments made by Berger (2010: 46) who made it abundantly clear that “the key driver of digital migration in developed countries is economic” those who stand to benefit from digital migration will be large competitive businesses and corporations rather than the general public. And this has not gone unnoticed by those interviewed. When asked about their views on digital migration, the response was overwhelming sceptical in regards to the free market approach that digital migration brings;

“It’s there to create a market for their products, their content, their gadgets...all viewers will have to buy this little gadget for them to watch TV, and what does that mean, its money for these manufacturers and those who can produce content. America will benefit for the selling on content and China for manufacturing, the two superpowers” (Local NGO: 22/03/2015)

As already mentioned, for Malawian’s to receive the digital transmission they will either have to buy a set-top box (STB) which currently costs around 20,000 MWK ($25 US). This can only be possible if Malawi opens up its markets to foreign companies, as there is no domestic manufactures of set-top boxes at present. One interviewee went as far as to say; “they have a commercial self-interest, as these multi-nationals operate like FIFA, they are just multinational companies looking for space for expansion […], if anything it’s going to create a big audience for other outside material” (University Lecturer: 29/03/2015). Therefore, the role of business and corporations, unlike the states which Headrick (1995) described, are monopolizing the communications industry and policy-making arena for their own strategic and economic interests. Operating under the banner of decentralisation, liberalisation and privatization, both states and businesses are promoting the neoliberal worldview. By relying on the market to determine the success of their digital migration services and products, these businesses and corporations are strategically placing themselves in policy-making arenas, such as those created by the ITU, in order to spread their worldview.

However, there was one interviewee, a TV broadcaster, who was more optimist; “television stations are going to improve in terms of how programming is delivered and it will entice people to have television sets in the rural areas” (Media practitioner: 10/04/2015). This idea of “enticing people” into buying a television, in a country where the average annual income is $815, is a capitalist approach of shifting citizens into consumers. Based on the fundamental principles of the free-market economy, this media practitioner, whether consciously or not, is driving the principles of neoliberalism by maintaining the dominance of business and corporate interests.

In Malawi, since the opening up of their domestic markets, competition among the business community has grown exponentially. As raised by one local journalist after Malawi made a tender for digital migration equipment; “there were Japanese companies trying to win the contract […] they were fighting China, they were fighting Singapore and they were fighting the UK companies, they were about four companies, and it all depended on who pays more” (19/04/2015). Such competition is contributing to the manifestation of neoliberalism in Malawi, by showing how the logic of competition drives economic prosperity. This reproduction of the dominant ideology is
what Gramsci refers to as the subtle and pervasive power of ideology. As revealed to earlier, the power of neoliberalism exists because it conflates conflicting narratives, so that populace don’t question or know of alternative perspectives are. This was picked up by one local digital migration expert;

“If you really look at digital migration it has been forced on countries like Malawi, I know in the region, Malawi is among four countries doing better [...] but look at what we have done on the ground, very minimal, people still don't know what it will means, the demands on them, the type of content available to them, and I know that even local outlets are worried, what does this really mean” (20/04/2015)

If the majority of Malawian's, especially those in the rural areas, do not know what digital migration is, and only sold the narrative that the future of television results in clearer visual quality, increased content diversity, and vernacular languages, the dominant worldview of neoliberalism has triumphed. The economic strategies of the ITUs business community are hidden behind this narrative which projects a highly beneficial camouflage over their own highly profitable objectives. As pointed out by one University Lecturer who is against the hidden ideologies behind digital migration, “what the owners of capital are trying to do with this Africa rising discourse is they are thinking that we are a huge market for their products and their making sure that whatever was available for free should now be channelled towards platforms that will make us pay” (23/04/2015). Although the shift from analogue to paid digital broadcasting will take some years in Malawi to take root, the projection is clear, digital migration and the opening up of markets will only result in furthering the interests of foreign businesses and corporations;

“Fifteen years down the line you find that we have a very limited capacity to produce movies and to produce films to produce programs at the end we will just have these we will be forced to watch the internationally produced movies” (Local Media Expert: 03/05/2015).

Therefore, the economic interests of foreign businesses and corporations rest on Malawi maintaining its open door policy. Unlike former attempts to open and privatise Malawi’s media, digital migration has become the foot in the door that many foreign states and businesses need in order to maintain their own strategic and economic interest. And from the data provided, there is a fear that those who already have a large stake in dominating the Malawian market will only further their international prestige and strategically position themselves as leaders within the global market, thus squeezing out local companies and production. Clearly, digital migration is situated within an economic system where the principles of a free-market, unrestricted competition and economic prosperity take centre stage, and “if your there and not speaking the same language, you're not going to be heard” (Local broadcaster: 20/07/2015). In other words, if Malawi tries to deviate from the dominant neoliberal narrative, it could be excluded from the international negotiation table altogether, or have its alternatives views constrained by the hegemonic forces of global businesses and corporations who have a larger stake in the ITUs policies.
Concluding thoughts

The paper is an attempt to begin thinking about how neoliberalism, as a dominant macroeconomic ideology, has manifested itself through the digital migration processes. Using a case study of Malawi which adopted the digital migration mandate set by the ITU, notions of a free-market, privatization, deregulation have begun taking root in Malawi’s domestic media market. And from the interviews conducted, it is clear that neoliberalism supports and legitimises the (re)production of business and corporate interests over public. While this paper is acutely aware that neoliberalism in such cases can often be stretched to fit into such claims (Venugopal, 2015), the ITUs policy-making toolkit and guidelines reflect the methods to which neoliberal principles are spread. Therefore, it is hoped that being critical of neoliberalism’s ideological foundations warrants further analysis, to explore the growth of this free-market logic.
REFERENCES


