

Press and Politics in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This paper provides a historical background to the development of the press in Zimbabwe and identifies the political, social and economic interventions that have shaped the editorial policies and directions of the press. The development of the press in Zimbabwe press, the paper suggests, can be categorized into three eras: colonial/nationalist (pre-1980); transitional (1980-1990) and post-transitional (1990-present). During each era, the press exhibited editorial policies and practices that reflected the ideological and socio-political environment of the country. In the colonial era, the press mirrored the settler-colonial ideology of the state and social polarization along racial lines. Its successor in the post-colonial transitional era depicted the revolutionary fervor of the emergent black political regime whose stated ideology of socialism regimented Zimbabweans under an authoritarian state. In a dramatic reversal from the nationalist campaign promises for a free press and free expression in an independent Zimbabwe, during this period the press was coerced to support the government. In this environment the message has been: *You are either with us or against us*. However a number of developments in the mid and late-1980s ushered in the post-transitional era. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent abandonment of a socialist rhetoric in favor of (at least on paper) a market economy and free enterprise by the Zimbabwe government, has given rise to a new generation, albeit a minority, of more assertive, independent publications and journalists.

Introduction

As the international community celebrated World Media Day on 3 May 2003, Zimbabweans observed the occasion with a carefully chosen theme: "the media we have is not the media we need." This summed up what Zimbabwean journalists in the independent media have gone through under the Mugabe regime. The theme also described the harsh economic and political realities the media are currently experiencing. The Zimbabwe government's onslaught against the independent press in Zimbabwe reached a new crescendo with the enactment of two laws: The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). The two laws, which are remarkably similar to laws passed by the colonial regime of Ian Smith, lend credence to the characterization of the Zimbabwe Government as a dictatorship, undemocratic and neo-colonialist. This goes against the grain of the spirit, letter, and intent of the independence struggle and the expectations of citizens when Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980. For while the Zimbabwean

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a9.pdf>

Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and assembly as well as a multi-party democracy, both AIPPA (which ironically spells the word for “bad” in the Shona language) and POSA have become the legal smokescreen for undermining both freedom of expression and opposition politics in Zimbabwe. According to AIPPA, “Any published statement, which is intentionally, unreasonably, recklessly, maliciously or fraudulently false and either (1) threatens the interest of defense, public safety, public order, the economic interests of the state, public morality or public health or, (2) is injurious to the reputation, rights and freedoms of other persons, will be punished.” The Media Institute of Southern Africa argues that the law is too vague and gives limitless powers to the government-appointed Media and Information Council a regulatory regime that will act as an information policeman in style Zimbabwe. MISA concludes: “The law still remains dangerous and unacceptable since it calls for the accreditation of journalists and media houses. Restrictions on access to information remains and a great deal of power is granted to public officials and the MIC.”¹ Government appointed members of the Media and Information Commission (MIC) are tasked with licensing media practitioners. The author of this legislation, Minister of Information Jonathan Moyo, has argued that the legislation exists to protect Zimbabweans against western imperialist propaganda as well as to spearhead a new cultural revolution. Under a new broadcasting act, both personnel and content of the broadcast media must rigidly conform to the policies dictated by the Minister.

This blatant control of the press is a defining characteristic of the legacy of colonialism in the post-colonial state in Africa. The government of Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF lend credence to the theories of the post-colonial state in Africa that were developed in the 1970s. The essence of such theories is that nationalist rulers who ascended to power upon independence were not drawn from the masses of the population but came from the elite class, a group whose interests were close to the colonialists whose political power they were assuming. This *nouveau riche* or *petit bourgeoisie* entered into alliances with the former colonial rulers who were now an economic elite composed of commercial farmers, industrialists, bankers, and investors upon whom the nationalist ruling elite depended for their sustenance. This ruling elite class has used the same instruments as their colonial predecessors to protect their interests; namely suppression of free speech, free press, and multi-party democracy. It is within this context that the press in Zimbabwe must be viewed and understood.

THE COLONIAL ERA

During the colonial era two types of press institutions emerged. Newspapers such as the *Rhodesia Herald* and the Bulawayo-based *Chronicle*, their sister weeklies the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday News*, as well as the *Financial Gazette*, were clearly aligned with the ideology and interests of the white ruling elite in Rhodesia. The journalistic ethos of the times was to promote European cultural standards while denigrating African culture and political agitation as the nemesis of western civilization and Christianity. Stories about Africans were largely, if not exclusively, negative and demeaning.

Yet alongside the colonial press there emerged a nationalist press exemplified by the *Daily News*, church publications such as *Moto (Fire)* and *Umbowo (Witness)* which provided a platform of expression for nationalist leaders in the sixties and seventies. *Moto* was published by the

Catholic Church and *Umbowo* by the United Methodist Church. The nationalist movements, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) each had its own publications based outside Rhodesia. The growth of the nationalist and church presses were a reaction to the injustice, racism, and exploitation that characterized settler colonialism. Predictably, the nationalist and church press never became part of the mainstream media in colonial Zimbabwe because of constant harassment by a regime that had very little tolerance for dissenting viewpoints.

INDEPENDENCE AND THE TRANSITION ERA

With independence in 1980, the bulk of the surviving nationalist press, especially those published externally, and some of the church publications ironically faded into oblivion while the hitherto colonial press switched its allegiance to a new ruling elite. Economic reasons were a major factor in the demise of the nationalist press. The nationalist press had served its purpose of agitating for independence and as such, there was no further need for it, especially if it could not survive financially on its own. It is also probable that if the nationalist press continued with its strong rhetoric of equal rights, justice, and land for all, the new government would become unpopular if it failed to meet these goals. After all, the era of transition from minority to majority rule was supposed to institutionalize equal protection and justice under the law for all, as well as an equitable distribution of goods and services to all citizens.

The post-colonial Zimbabwean state that emerged after 1980 was superimposed on a neo-colonial economic structure characterized by heavy dependence on South Africa following 15 years of sanctions against the Rhodesia state. This colonial structure had served the white settler community at the expense of the black masses. While white settler-colonialists had lost political power, they were still economically in control, a situation that exists to this day. Thus, the political independence represented in 1980 by the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the new Zimbabwe flag, amounted to symbolism for the masses which disguised an institutionalization of attempts towards a new alliance among the ruling black elite.

The transitional era was a period of new and uneasy alliances in a tripartite social and political formation that included the warring nationalist factions (ZANU and ZAPU) and the established white entrepreneurial elite. Each member of the trinity had resources that could be mobilized into either a protracted military or economic conflict. Each recognized the other's strength and hence the uneasy alliance. The role of the Zimbabwean state was largely to nurture and preserve this fragile alliance without letting any hostilities or quarrels escalate beyond its control. Government policy papers such as *Growth with Equity and Transformation, the Five Year National Development Plan*, as well as the *President's Directive on Black Advancement*, appeared to reflect an attempt by the government to redress the injustices and inequities of the colonial regime. Yet in reality, the state was preoccupied with securing and maintaining this tenuous alliance that over time perpetuated the marginalization of the masses who had borne the brunt of the war. With no nationalist press to express popular viewpoints, the transitional period saw the emergence of a neo-colonial press that contained most of the characteristics of its predecessor.

However, considering that the period immediately after 1980 was transitional, the press and government enjoyed a honeymoon with the public. During this period, it was hoped the press would restructure and reform its editorial policies to reflect the idealism of an independent nation. The same honeymoon was extended to the newly-installed black government. The then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe declared the first year of independence “the year of consolidating people’s power.” During this year, the mainstream press in Zimbabwe was still predominantly staffed by white editors and journalists. This was a legacy of colonialism when Zimbabweans who wanted to train as journalists had to leave the country to enroll at institutions in Zambia , Kenya , Cuba , Europe , the United States and the Soviet Union . Some of them heeded calls to return home.

The Zimbabwean government subsequently bought the majority of shares in Zimbabwe Newspapers, a company that owned all major newspapers in the country. The government then established the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) whose stated role was to promote, through an independent board of non-government individuals, the interests of ordinary Zimbabweans in the national media. Ostensibly, government would not be involved in monitoring and mentoring the press. In reality, ZMMT would be subject to a systemic pattern of government attempts to control and influence the press.

At the end of 1980, the new government replaced all the white editors at Zimbabwe Newspapers. Farayi Munyuki became the first black editor of *The Herald*; Tommy Sithole, *The Chronicle*; the late Willy Musarurwa *The Sunday Mail*; and Bill Saidi *The Sunday News*. A government minister, Enos Nkala, did not mince his words when he said white editors were incapable of articulating and supporting a black government. This was in the aftermath of the artillery battle in Bulawayo between ZAPU’s armed wing, Zimbabwe Peoples’ Liberation Army (ZIPRA) and their ZANU counterparts, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, (ZANLA). In one of the greatest puzzles in government policy, the two fully armed forces had been based in two separate camps in a civilian suburb called Entumbane, pending their integration into the new Zimbabwe national armed forces. Nkala made no secret of government’s suspicion that the white editors may have given favorable coverage to the opposition ZAPU party and its ZIPRA military wing.

Government also created the Zimbabwe Institute of Mass Communication (ZIMCO) to train black journalists. ZIMCO was headed by a former editor of *Umbovo* and director of the Zambia-based Africa Literature Center , Ezekiel Makunike. White journalists were resigning *en masse*, especially after the replacement of white editors with blacks. This was, in a sense, a blessing in disguise for the government’s policy of indigenisation. However, the spate of resignations by white journalists did not leave much time for their immediate replacement. Zimbabwe did not have a great reservoir of black journalists. As a result, newsrooms were almost empty . The few black reporters had the impossible task of filling the papers’ editorial pages with news. With Zimbabwe ’s independence came an avalanche of events and developments, previously routinely ignored by the colonial press, begging for coverage. It was left to the small group of hastily recruited or trained black journalists, complemented by a few journalists from neighboring African countries, to meet the demands for coverage. Very often these journalists worked almost around the clock including weekends. They were poorly paid, and it took a considerable dedication on their part to stay in the profession.

Journalists based in the western region of Zimbabwe faced additional challenges when the simmering historical rivalries between ZANU and ZAPU exploded into open military conflict during the first year of independence. Rival militia groups for both parties engaged in armed fights in the middle of the city of Bulawayo, causing substantial disruptions to an endangered civilian life. The open conflicts later settled down to protracted guerrilla or dissident activities. The government responded with the deployment of the infamous North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade whose atrocities among the civilian population have been extensively documented by two Zimbabwean non-governmental organizations, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission and the Legal Resources Foundation. The challenge for the journalists was the extent to which they could exercise the freedom of the press to cover, among other things, the military conflicts in the region. The dissident problem, coupled with ongoing political conflict with rival ZAPU, and apartheid South Africa's program of destabilizing neighboring black states, led the ruling ZANU party to consolidate its stranglehold on the press.

What then emerged in the early 1980s was a tame press headed by government-appointed editors. Most of these were committed to serving the interests of the ruling party of which they, with the exception of Willy Musarurwa (ZAPU), were card-carrying members. To his credit, Musarurwa tried to be less partisan and more professional. He had plans for regular coverage and analysis of rural issues and events. His editorial policy was that the greatest service the press could render to the government was to report both the positive and the negative. In reporting the negative and unfavorable stories, the press was merely drawing government's attention to problems that needed to be resolved before they got out of hand. But Musarurwa's editorial policy was a voice in the wilderness. It was quickly becoming apparent that the colonial press had not been transformed from serving the interests of the white colonial elite to those of the masses. Rather, it had merely undergone cosmetic changes and was now subservient to a newly-emergent coalition of black politicians who held political power and the white community who still maintained economic power. It is within the context of the political economy of the state that the Zimbabwean press can best be analyzed and understood.

This legacy of colonialism means the mainstream press in Zimbabwe is not significantly different from its counterparts across Africa. The Zimbabwean press has the same post-colonial institutional characteristics, namely: high urban orientation, predominant or almost exclusive use of a colonial language, very high foreign-oriented content, and an elite or semi-elite cadre of journalists/editors who were either trained in the West or whose local training was steeped in the western models of journalistic practices.

The colonial legacy in the press belies any pontifications of developmental journalism, with its stated focus on the masses as the underlying mission statement of the Zimbabwean press. Developmental journalism in the Zimbabwean context has been interpreted by government officials to mean that the press is a partner to government efforts to develop the nation. According to the ruling ZANU-PF political culture, criticism or opposition to the government or any of its policies must come from within the party. This notion of "democratic centrism," where criticisms are raised at the ruling party's central committee meetings, means that once disagreements have been harmonized and a compromise strategy adopted, there should be no further criticism from outside the party. Newspaper editors can represent the press in their capacity as members of the party, and if they have any complaints or concerns these must be

raised during the party meetings rather than in the editorial columns of papers. The former Zimbabwean Minister of Information, Witness Mangwende, once said:

There is no such thing as freedom of the press. The press is a structural component of the society whose interest it must reflect, promote and indeed defend. Therefore freedom of the press is only relative to a given social, economic and political circumstances you are in relation to the existence of others..²

Another top government official said government's role during the formative years of Zimbabwe's independence had been to decolonize the press institutions and ownership structure. He said instead of controlling and owning the press, government had opted for the creation of the Mass Media Trust to handle the press on behalf of the masses. Government had also set up institutions for training of media personnel (ZIMCO) and for receiving and disseminating news (Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency - ZIANA). The official said government expected the press to promote national unity, reconciliation, and to mentally decolonize Zimbabwe's people:

For a people who won their independence through sweat and blood it is imperative that they think and act like Africans as a reflection of their hard-won independence from colonial rule. In order for the mass media to play their role effectively it is important that the selection of editors and senior staff be acceptable to government.³

Such policy pronouncements give government the final say in what freedom of the press and developmental journalism mean. While the political posturing repeatedly talks of publishing in the interests of the masses, government's role as the final determinant of what is in the public interest is evident. This type of journalism put reporters under the manipulative control of government officials. With an insatiable preference to be covered by TV, in addition to coverage by the print media, government officials on numerous occasions delayed giving speeches at rallies until the television crew arrived. This coerced support for the government challenged some editors' journalistic consciences. One editor in the mainstream press said he and his colleagues had decided to publish the truth no matter how much it may hurt. "Facts are facts. It is our responsibility to bring those facts to the public light."⁴ This commitment to objective and factual journalism, regardless of what the party dictated, led to some editors and journalists being forced to step down or transferred to non-journalistic jobs.

Notwithstanding efforts by a handful of journalists to assert their independence and professionalism, the press in Zimbabwe has historically developed as institutional partners with a coalition of business and government whose economic and political interests are generally articulated in the editorial columns of the press. This partnership spans colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. To the extent that the press is an instrument of this ruling elite coalition, the question of freedom of the press can only be addressed and assessed in the context of the extent to which the press articulates intra-factional rivalries. Thus, some of the controversial stories or editorials that give the appearance of a free press are in fact symptomatic of struggles among groups *within* the ruling elite. Few of the disputed issues have anything to do with improving the rural or urban masses' quality of life.

THE POST-TRANSITION ERA

By the late 1990s the Zimbabwean press had grown into three categories: the mainstream press owned by Zimbabwe Newspapers, rural newspapers owned by the ZMMT, and the independent press owned by the private sector. The mainstream press included *The Herald*, *The Chronicle*, *Sunday Mail*, *Sunday News* and *Mutare Post*. Rural and small town or peri-urban publications include *Kwayedza*, *People's Voice*, *Midweek News*, *High Density Mirror*, *Chaminuka News*, *Mashonaland Guardian*, *Gweru Times*, *Ilangalindosakusa*, and *Masvingo Provincial Star*. Private sector press included *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *Financial Gazette*, *Daily News*, *Sunday Standard*, *Horizon*, and *Mirror*.

By 1999, the Zimbabwe press had a combined circulation of about 600,000. Based on projections of people sharing newspapers, it is estimated that the total readership is about three million. For a population of 12 million, this readership level is still relatively low, representing only 25 percent of the total population. According to the 2002 Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey (ZAMPS), the *Daily News'* circulation has dropped to less than 70,000 from about 120,000 in 2000. The state-owned *Herald* fell even more. *The Daily News* had the highest readership of 30.6 percent of the total reading population, followed by the *Herald* with 28.9 percent and the state-owned *Chronicle* with 13.7 percent).⁵

The most serious challenge to the monopoly control and ownership of the mainstream press by Zimbabwe Newspapers was the emergence in 1998 of Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, (ANZ) a consortium of local and foreign businesses. ANZ was set up with 60 percent of shareholding under the Africa Media Trust which is owned by British, South African, and New Zealand companies. ANZ launched a number of weeklies and one daily. Some of the weeklies that were launched by 1998 were the *Express*, the *Dispatch* and the *Mercury*. ANZ launched the *Daily News* in 1999. Prior to the emergence of the *Daily News*, Zimbabwe had only two daily newspapers, both state-owned. ANZ subsequently expanded to include two more weeklies: *The Daily News on Sunday* and *The Business Daily News*.

The Media Africa group which has shares in the *Daily News* also launched *The Weekend Tribune* and *The Business Tribune* in 2002. A fourth national daily, *The Daily Mirror*, which was short lived, was launched by the Southern African Printing and Publishing company (SAPPHO) to complement its sister weekly *The Zimbabwe Mirror*, which was renamed *Sunday Mirror*. The weekly *Financial Gazette* was eventually bought from businessman and former politician, Elias Rusike, by a local company, Octadew, led by Gideon Gono who is also the chief executive of the government-owned Jewel Bank.⁶

Another equally outspoken independent paper is the *Zimbabwe Independent*, which largely targeted the business community and other high or middle-income Zimbabweans. The paper's editorial policy is "to avoid thoughtless criticism of the government" but is determined to hold Zimbabwean leadership to account. "For too much has been lost, stolen or squandered in recent years and we are, as a society, immeasurably poor as a result."⁷ The paper's editors noted at its inception that the climate for fearless opposition paper was ideal in light of a public that does not want to see news doctored by editors who are scared of politicians.

Even the mainstream press tried to take advantage of this climate. The editor of *The Herald*, Tommy Sithole, unleashed a fiery editorial criticizing the way police had tear-gassed peaceful

demonstrations against food price increases. Describing the police as trigger happy and overzealous, Sithole's editorial comments took a swipe at misguided government reaction to the demonstrations. He was replaced not long after by self-confessed Stalinist Charles Chikerema, whose editorials in the *Sunday Mail* were an unrelenting campaigns against democratic reforms, human rights groups and the country's white minority. A party loyalist, Chikerema was anything but a journalist. He was then moved to the prestigious position of the editor-in-chief of the *Herald* but died of a heart attack in his office only a few weeks later. Another party stalwart, Bornwell Chakaodza, was appointed to replace him. Whatever efforts some editors of the mainstream press took to be more independent were nipped in the bud. However the situation was very different the *Daily News*, *Financial Gazette* and the *Independent*. The two weekly papers and the daily published exposes of corruption in government and fiscal mismanagement.

The government has tried to stifle this criticism by invoking an arsenal of laws, including Parliamentary Privileges and Immunities Act as well as the Official Secrets Acts, which are intended to make it a crime to receive unauthorized government documents or information. Appeals by the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists to repeal the draconian laws, some of which were inherited from the colonial regime, fell on deaf ears. Justice Minister Emmerson Munangagwa reportedly said "Unrestricted [press] freedom would lead to disorder and anarchy and would harm social and national interests." In another move, government assumed direct control of the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust, effectively removing all the pretense that the Trust was an independent body run by ordinary citizens who were not directly associated with the government or ruling party.

While the bulk of Zimbabwean editors were socialized to be ideological handmaidens of the ruling coalition a good number of well trained journalists tried to exert their professionalism and journalistic independence. They inevitably suffered consequences for their actions. However, the fact that they tried at all to be independent signaled a new era in the growth and development of the press in independent Zimbabwe .

No matter how admirable such efforts towards editorial independence may have been, the Zimbabwean press has historically not been able to articulate, on any sustained basis, issues that are critical to the majority of the population. For instance, it took the Catholic Church and the Legal Resources Foundation to tell from the victims' point of view the story of the massacre of civilians in Matabeleland . The press' coverage of the atrocities was reduced to merely quoting bland Ministry of Information statements that blamed virtually every death, every injury, and every suffering in Matabeleland to dissidents. This in effect absolved the Fifth Brigade, whose notoriety was very much in evidence, from any responsibility for the atrocities. In this respect, the press was a remarkable likeness of its colonial predecessor.

Zimbabweans often do not see the mainstream media articulating dynamically issues that are of relevance to them. The bulk of the "news" in the state press tends to be stories that paint a consistently positive image of the country's leadership. Variations in this type of coverage largely revolve around intra fractional disputes among the ruling and urban elite. Some editors have historically tried to take a more assertive position towards editorial independence with disastrous consequences. A few examples:

- An editor criticized an opposition party, ZAPU that had recently entered into coalition with the ruling party, ZANUPF. He was transferred to a less prestigious position of heading a news agency.
- An editor who published a story about President Mugabe's secret marriage to his secretary was, together with the publisher, charged and convicted of libel (the high court later reversed the conviction)
- The most celebrated case was that of a newspaper, the *Chronicle* that revealed a car buying and selling racket involving government ministers and top officials. The story caused a national uproar, leading to the appointment of a commission of inquiry whose hearings, in a rare exercise of democracy, were held in public. Government officials were, much to their displeasure, subpoenaed and asked to testify in a public hearing.

But this tinkering with democracy was short lived. The well-known Sandura Commission of Inquiry, named after the judge who chaired it, was halted as it prepared another wave of public hearings. The editor of the paper that exposed the scandal was removed and transferred to a job that had been specifically created for him - public relations officer for the company's newspapers! President Mugabe has repeatedly attacked the press, singling out the independent press for "thriving on selling manufactured lies to the people in the name of freedom of the press." But the independent press was quick to respond, generally scoffing at such attacks as coming from a "press hater."⁸

Perhaps what in some ways distinguishes the Zimbabwean press in the 1990s from that of the early 1980s was the emergence of more assertive newspapers which are not part of the Zimbabwe Newspapers group. However, almost all folded for largely economic reasons. The *Daily News* had, until recently, weathered both economic and political storms, thanks to a major investment from a self-made Zimbabwean businessman, Strive Masiyiwa. Another surviving paper, the *Zimbabwe Independent*, and its sister paper *The Standard* stood out, like the *Daily News*, as a beacon of hope for a free press in Zimbabwe. By tackling major issues which other mainstream papers had only superficially handled, the *Daily News* and the *Independent* have blazed the way in the struggle for a free press. The *Financial Gazette*, while essentially business oriented, has found space in its editorial columns to publish articles and analyses of the country's socio-political and economic life. However, there is the possibility that in the long-term an independent press owned by businessmen will be unlikely to have a philanthropic agenda on behalf of the masses of Zimbabwe.

So while these papers have emerged as the leading independently owned press in Zimbabwe, they are still a far cry from the press that will articulate, on a sustained basis, issues of interest for the majority of the country's population. Currently, their opposition to Mugabe's dictatorship puts the independent press on the side of the oppressed masses. But history has shown that once this factor has been removed, the common purpose between the independent press and the masses is likely to be broken. Their orientation towards the business community means that while these papers sometimes have a no-holds-barred attitude in the way they criticize government, they tend to be more restrained in advocating workers' rights at the expense of business. The notion of freedom of the press is often confused with being consistently critical of the government, exposing corruption in government, or promoting

multiparty politics, etc. Freedom of the press is more dynamic than playing the role of a critic (or enthusiastic supporter) of the ruling party or government.

The cultural basis for a free press in Zimbabwe is that the press should be a *padare* or *enkundleni*, Shona and Ndebele terms which mean a gathering or forum for discussion and debates. A free press is a privilege extended to members of the journalistic community by the public in exchange for the public's right to know, to be informed and to be educated. The press has, first and foremost, an obligation to act as a disinterested gatherer and disseminator of information in the public interest. Disinterested means journalists represent society rather than an interest group or a political party. In that capacity, the journalist is tasked with supplying members of the public with the information and knowledge the public needs to make critical decisions about their lives. If, in the process of researching and gathering such information, the journalist sometimes ends up offending rulers or party officials, he must always be guided by what he perceives to be in the public interest. Public interest means both rural and urban-based citizens must have equitable access to and use of information. In the post-transitional era, Zimbabwe's press appears still very far from the notion of a free press that is determined and guided by the public's right to know. The Zimbabwean press has yet to define the term "public interest" and "the public's right to know."

While there is a steady dosage of rural information in the Zimbabwean press, this information does not amount to a substantive coverage of life in rural communities. There is no structure or pattern to the coverage of rural areas in a way that describes the impact of national development planning and strategies on the rural people. Rural stories still typically focus on isolated and fragmented narratives of drought, famine, or lack of basic services without the in-depth analyses that would place rural masses at the center of development policies. The present press reports tend to reduce rural masses to objects of pity requiring handouts from the urban elites. Rural masses are portrayed as victims of natural disasters, unable or unwilling to do more to help themselves, lacking in business skills to develop local industries, not savvy enough to take advantage of government programs aimed at uplifting their lot.

An issue-oriented strategy should provide a framework for the Zimbabwean press and its editorial policies. This demands that the press should not hedge on taking to task government bureaucrats on controversial issues, and should also not hesitate to publish positive stories like a major irrigation programs, or wildlife conservation efforts where proceeds are ploughed back into local development efforts.

Journalism in Zimbabwe has yet to be weaned from the western model to an authentic storytelling journalism. According to Father Traber, stories in Africa have a variety of social, cultural and political roles. They are part of the reality which people experience and about which people feel deeply. Storytelling represents the symbolic constitution of a community and its *raison d'être*. In such stories, the past is invoked to make sense of the present and provide a prospect for the future:

The mass media, on the other hand, contain fake stories, which is no story at all but parades as one. It is the pictorial or verbal story of cutting a ribbon (with a pair of scissors presented on a special cushion or tray); or of pressing a button, or of taking a salute, or of opening a seminar, or of climbing up the stairs of an

airplane and turning around and waving from the top. Nor is descending from the aircraft, let alone a genuine story. And the same is true of (a head of state) inspecting a guard of honor...Nothing really happens in these so-called news reports. And the same holds true for most politicians' speeches. Nothing at all happens after the minister says, 'thank you, ladies and gentlemen,' and everybody claps hands'...These are fake stories...and serve a certain purpose."⁹

That purpose, according to Noam Chomsky (1989), is to create 'necessary illusions.'¹⁰ People are told that everything, be it bus disasters, famine, floods, budget deficit, corruption, is being investigated by government; that government is on top of the situation and will take appropriate action at the appropriate time. Nothing happens despite all the assurances. Nothing happens after government ministers' promise in the glare of media publicity that government will give more land, agricultural inputs, jobs, education and an improved quality of life to all the citizens. Ultimately the press in Zimbabwe falls victim to being a propaganda machinery in the creation of necessary illusions necessary because ruling party elites need to create such illusions in order to stay in power. Yet in all fairness it must be stated that the new breed of independent journalists in Zimbabwe are blazing a trail towards press freedom. But they are doing so under very heavy and draconian legislation. These courageous journalists have taken more than their fair share of victimization and vilification. MISA reports that over 60 journalists were arrested in the past one year alone.¹¹ The printing press of the *Daily News* was bombed in an obvious bid to silence it. Copies of the *Daily News* are banned in rural areas. Some people found reading the *Daily News* have been beaten or tortured. Stacks of the *Daily News* papers have been burned by government militia thugs. The highpoint of this harassment was the eventual banning of the *Daily News*.

For the bulk of the Zimbabwean population living in rural areas, the national mainstream press has little, if any, influence on their lives. Even a constellation of peri-urban community newspapers have not had any demonstrable impact on the rural masses. This raises the question of whether Zimbabwe, and indeed the rest of Africa, can be said to have any mass media at all, considering the fact that most media circulation is largely confined to urban areas. Another potential problem has to do with the newspapers' circulation. The purchasing power of Zimbabweans has been on a steady decline. In 1997, then Minister of Local Government, John Nkomo, said 70 percent of Zimbabwe's urban population earn less than Z\$2,000 a month (about US\$50) and cannot afford a standard four-roomed house.¹² The situation in rural areas where people hardly have any disposable income is relatively worse. It seems unlikely that the press will have a significant increase in circulation any time soon. The rural press has only a slim chance of survival.

Conclusion

The post-transition era is steadily bringing new challenges for the press and politics in Zimbabwe. In an authoritarian environment where the state seeks control of information, the Internet and satellite broadcasting will slowly have a liberalizing effect. Zimbabwe is now networked to the world. The culture of democracy, a free press and freedom of expression

practiced elsewhere will continue to permeate mostly through the urban populations who can access this information. As the Internet generation grows in Zimbabwe there will be less reliance on the press as the sole source of information and knowledge. Yet there is often more reported information and knowledge about Zimbabwe outside than inside the country. Just as the European public in the 15th Century empowered themselves politically through access to mass produced literature (thanks to Gutenberg's printing press), the Zimbabwean public will gain empowering knowledge and information that will have the strong potential to force political reforms and information liberalization. In this post transition era, there are already signs of an empowered public, expressed through anti government demonstrations, open criticism of the government by the populace as well as an emboldened independent press. In the future, any new leadership will take over in a highly liberalized political and information environment and face a more empowered populace than ever before.

Notes:

1. AllAfrica News, 2003b
2. Mukasa 1990, 221
3. Mukasa 1990, 219-220
4. Mukasa 1990, 220
5. AllAfrica, 2003a
6. AllAfrica News, 2003a
7. *Mail and Guardian*, May 1, 1996
8. MISA, July 23, 1998
9. Traber 1988,121
10. Chomsky 1989
11. MISA, 2003
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