
Media games and shifting of spaces for political communication in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Elaborate *media games* have been played to restrain growing political opposition and to maintain ZANU PF supremacy in Zimbabwe. From the dark days of Rhodesia, regime control of public communication remains one of the most enduring sources of ruling party dominance in the country. This history of government containment of a critical media laid the foundation for post-independence control of freedom of expression, something that has proved an effective instrument for blocking envisaged transition to an alternative democracy today. Since 2000 new restrictive laws have shut down four titles and 80 media workers have been arrested or detained for various transgressions. Is the government's recent strengthening of egregious media laws a defence of *communicative sovereignty* as it claims, or it is a manifest reversal into *authoritarian rule* as detractors claim?

Introduction

'Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations' (Joseph Pulitzer 1904).

This paper¹ reviews the government of Zimbabwe's *media response* to its local and external enemies in the five years since 2000. What has come to be known in popular commentary as the 'Zimbabwe crisis', marked by a confrontation between President Robert Mugabe's ZANU PF party and its array of antagonists, has been widely reported, and often misreported, in both the local and international media.

Patterns of media control and the use of regulation to influence what can be reported in Zimbabwe are investigated. The account highlights the specific linkages between media control, politics and elections in the country and it is conjectured that undermining the media weakens democratic practice. In particular the discussion highlights the interrelation between 'public communication' and 'electoral politics', two *arenas* critical for democratic development and consolidation (Levisky and Way 2002).² It is argued that *games*³ and strong-arm tactics to control and regulate the linkage between these two arenas have determined the space available for political communication and, consequently, the health of the country's democracy.

A dynamic model of regulation is used to analyse the games, actors and politics of communication regulation in Zimbabwe. Such a model sees states responding to the complexity of information flows, first, by protecting their own information spaces, and additionally, by attempting to influence or alter media structures and media impacts outside their own borders (Price 2002).⁴ In this framework, national responses to media activity involve the deployment of technology, law, force, and negotiation in order to protect the domestic market of ideas and, where possible, to alter external media markets in response to forces that seem to undercut state autonomy. Domestically, the state can act unilaterally to alter the media market and to shape streams of messages and content that affect political and social life within its boundaries. In such a scenario the media become both a crucial setting and a tool of power struggle, with the boundaries of freedom of expression coming under stress as vulnerable governments attempt to influence public opinion in their favour.

Three structuring and restructuring phases have shaped Zimbabwe's media policy regime and altered the media landscape. The first is the Rhodesian Front phase between 1964 and 1979, which was characterised by very restrictive communication regulations as the government fought numerous internal and external enemies. The second is the phase of post-independence policy redirection that was laid between 1980 and 1983 when a triumphant ZANU PF built on the Rhodesian experience of media control and harnessed broadcasting and the press for its cause. The paper concentrates on the third phase where communication policy redirection has taken place from 2000 to 2004. In this period political and economic challenges facing the current ZANU PF government led to further restriction of spaces or zones of communication as a way to manage challenges to state legitimacy by both internal and external enemies.

Akin to the first two phases in the past five years *media games*, or strategies of communication control in order to limit free expression, have been played so as to manage political space. The first in a three-pronged strategy has been the

centralization of an enhanced Information Ministry in the President's office to lead a new and invigorated project of media control, at the same time articulating a coherent defence of state policy. The second and related measure has been the use of monopoly broadcasting as a tool to legitimize ruling party hegemony. The third and final tactic has been the promulgation of harsh media laws in combination with other extra-legal tactics to control journalists and the private press, while at the same time directing the state owned newspaper oligopoly to serve government propaganda objectives more patriotically. The result has been polarisation of ideas and a clear shrinkage of alternative voices and of political space in the country.

Two Arenas of Democracy: The Playing Field for a Protracted Transition

Zimbabwe is a country undergoing what may be seen as a protracted transition in which democratization, or rather re-democratization, has become a 'war of attrition' mainly between the incumbent ZANU PF and the most important post-independent opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formed in 1999. These two political parties hold seemingly incompatible versions of reality. The result has been an ongoing struggle that has captured the attention of the world. Over the past five years this contest for power has been fought in a prolonged struggle over the formal institutional playing field of transition to a new political order of, either, complete regime turn-over, or, government compromise and accommodation with the opposition (Eisenstadt 2000).

The foundation of this playing field can be seen as consisting of two important and interlinked arenas, both important for the expression of political preferences. One arena is the right of *freedom of association and assembly*, which most usually is reflected in the existence of credible political parties that guarantee some measure of competitive electioneering. The second arena interrelated to the first is the right to *freedom of conscience, expression and communication*, especially the existence of a critical and independent media that provides the possibility to organize political life amongst disparate citizens and contributes to more effective, transparent and accountable governance. Generally, a successful transition to, and consolidation of, a democratic government depends on the institutionalization of these two intermediary organizations – *political parties*, and independent and critical organs of *mass communication* (Sandbrook 1996). Writing on the media's role in African democratization Sandbrook aptly observed that since the two constitute 'bellwethers of democracy', '[i]t is difficult to conceive of any consolidated democracy which does not include a widely valued and efficacious party system and communications media.'

Historically, the extension of democracy has depended on the institutionalization of mediating mechanisms such as electoral systems, representative assemblies, and a free press (Habermas 1989; Keane 1991; Barnett 2003). The meaning of democracy

today is, therefore, directly related to practices of publicity and mediation. Public media, as one of the key mediating mechanism of modern day representation, play a very important role in facilitating political debate and the circulation of ideas and opinions. It has been suggested that at the beginning of transition in countries still travelling the road to establishing a democratic culture, given greater political freedom and a responsive public, the role of the media is crucial in educating people about the different political parties and candidates available for choice (Randall 1993). At this stage the media also act as watchdogs to expose electoral malpractice and play an important role in keeping up the pressure for democratic change. During the consolidation phase after democratic governments have been voted into power, ideally the media is expected to help set the agenda for the democratic project and to sustain democratic discourse, whilst at the same time guarding against backsliding.

The media's role in creating public space for modern debate allots to it enormous power, something that attracts the attention of key political and economic interests, governments being paramount, in a desire to either own or to regulate this important instrument that shapes public opinion. The metaphor of 'space' is useful here in defining the social, political, and physical configurations in which positions of power, domination and marginality are negotiated and reproduced (Barnett 2003; Shome 2003). So, ideally a prerequisite for a democratic society will be the existence of 'media spaces' or 'communicative spaces' where people can participate openly and in equal terms in the definition, discussion, negotiation and debate on commonly shared but often controversial and problematic issues. However, contentious politics usually means that conflict is immanent in this creation of space. In democratic, and not-so democratic, societies there will always be an effort by the powerful to adjust communicative spaces in an attempt to paint themselves in the best possible light.

Arena 1 - Party Politics & Elections: Backdrop to Election 2005

On the 31 March 2005, Zimbabwe held its sixth parliamentary election where members of the House of Assembly were elected by popular vote. This was an important milestone for it officially ushered in the country's 25th anniversary year, an occasion of historic importance for one of southern Africa's younger democracies and what has been called, 'Britain's last colony in Africa' (Charlton 1990). But more significantly, most people looked forward to this election as a juncture that would possibly close the circle for the country's most turbulent post-independence electoral cycle that began with the bitterly contested and controversial balloting of 2000. In the February 2000 referendum, Zimbabwean voters rejected a ZANU PF government sponsored draft for a new constitution. In the parliamentary

election of June 2000, the MDC, then a new opposition party, made considerable gains and nearly beat ZANU PF by capturing 57 of the 120 seats.

This was a potentially realigning election for the loosening of the ruling party's twenty-year stranglehold on power represented a shift in voter allegiances and a bold departure from previous patterns of voting since independence from Britain in 1980. Accusations of manipulation of the electoral process and suppression of political dissent in a five-year ZANU PF government backlash, especially the crackdown around the presidential election of 2002, set off a volatile environment characterized by radicalization of politics, polarization of society, international isolation, economic collapse and social deprivation.

The MDC, formed in 1999 as opposition to Mugabe's party grew, in part due to worsening economic conditions, has built its profile by claiming to be the only beacon of hope from the political and economic morass that Zimbabwe has fallen into. At the end of the 1990s the uneasy consensus between ZANU PF hegemony, domestic and multi-national capital, and international financial institutions that had ensured a reasonable level of political and economic stability was beginning to unravel. This was partly because of the difficulty government faced in reconciling International Monetary Fund (IMF) induced austerity measures with the desire to placate weltering discontent to growing poverty and declining social service provision in traditional support bases such as the rural peasantry and the urban working class.

A declining economy and non-materialization of most of the promised benefits from an economic structural adjustment, embarked upon in 1990 at the beckoning of the IMF, undercut ZANU PF's distributive policies and weakened the elaborate patronage system that it had built since independence. The re-ordering of social coalitions led to the vulnerability of Robert Mugabe's government to emerging opposition at home and to growing foreign government influence on domestic issues such as macroeconomic policy, the funding of the land redistribution exercise, participation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) war, governance, and human rights (Bond and Manyanya 2002; Jenkins and Knight 2002; Dashwood 2000). Sensing imminent electoral defeat, due to domestic and external pressures, ZANU PF chose to revive itself along a number of fronts. For a start, the party decided to extricate itself from the increasingly onerous dictates of the international capitalist system on economic policy, and of the Western donor community on political liberalization. One strategy to retain now waning support and to contain growing discontent at home was to appeal to majority voters through populist policies such as the 'fast track' acquisition of large tracts of white farms for redistribution to landless rural peasants living in squalid conditions and the re-imposition of consumer price controls to placate urban voters affected by a sharp economic recession.

Local Confrontations and International Sanctions

Since the disputed parliamentary elections in 2000 and Presidential elections of 2002, hard-liners within the ruling party have stacked the political deck high. The move to neutralize white farmer's support for the opposition cascaded to other areas and over a period of five years there has been a crack down on perceived opposition, leading one local liberal newspaper to comment in a recent editorial that, 'the past four years have not been an electoral Elysium despite the feigned nonchalance about world opinion. It has been four years of shame' (*The Independent*, 7 January 2005). The state has coerced alternative power centres such as the white dominated Commercial Farmer's Union (CFU), the major trade union, opposition supporters, political dissenters, organized groups in civil society, the independent press, and the judiciary.

Two methods have been used to achieve this. Short of a total reconfiguration of state institutions one of ZANU PF's strategies has been the use of its parliamentary majority to pass laws curtailing the individual rights of citizens. Whilst the proclaimed aim has been the need to fulfil some 'common good' some claim that these laws are in fact directed mainly at maiming the opposition. Significant laws passed during this last parliament to empower the state to reorganize society can roughly be classified into the following groups: *land laws*; *citizenship laws*; *electoral laws*; *security legislation*; and *media laws*. Upheavals related to land, political opposition and elections, and the media should be seen as logically interlinked and any discussion of one would merit a reference to the others. For example, government's articulation of its land policy enunciating new principles of entitlement led to a shrill condemnation of the process by the Western media which pointed at 'racist land grabs' and 'property expropriations'. This became a central reason for government's desire to control news and the media. Controversial statutes such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA 2002), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA 2002) and the proposed Non-governmental Organizations Act are at the moment used to enclose opponents. Their controversial nature derives from the fact that while they are legal it has always been debated in and outside parliament and the courts whether they are constitutional and legitimate. They regulate and authorise the number of people who can gather in a group, what can be deliberated at such meetings, who can report, and how the media should cover public officials such as the President.

Second, when deemed necessary the government has not been hesitant to use physical measures on both the 'irresponsible media' and pro-opposition 'trouble-makers'. Selective persecution of perceived opponents has been achieved through unleashing party vigilantes, marauding gangs of war veterans, and sometimes states security agents, especially at the height of the farm invasions between 1999 and 2002. Although violence declined considerably as the March 2005 elections

approached, a result of the use of these two strategies is that in Zimbabwean politics today one finds what has been described as the co-existence of a strange duality of constitutionalism and legality alongside a complex combination of paralegal, supralegal and brutal political action (Booyesen 2003). Considerable political and economic upheaval has resulted from these tactics and in the past few years, the country's credentials as a functioning democracy have gradually receded. The crushing of opposition-led street protests, together with the killing of some white farmers during the start of the farm invasions in 1999 and 2000 heavily galvanized Western opinion against Zimbabwe leading to the imposition of 'targeted sanctions' on the country's leadership by the United States, the UK, the European Union, the Commonwealth, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Currently, the country is subjected to crippling isolation by most Western capitals that now consider it a pariah state, whose government steals elections, abuses human rights, lacks respect for private property rights, and is constantly sliding back into authoritarianism.

As such, regular reports in the international and local liberal-leaning media, and by and large intended to support an interventionist policy supposedly against an enemy of democracy and human rights, commonly demonize and portray President Robert Mugabe as an incorrigible dictator bent on driving his nation into starvation and economic catastrophe rather than countenance electoral defeat.⁵ This is despite the fact that up until 1997 the same countries and the same media hailed Mugabe as one of the few visionary African leaders who deserved a seat at the high-table. After the allegations of violence and fraud that marred the elections in 2000 and 2002, the 2005 election was therefore, regarded as a test for the Zimbabwean government's commitment to hold free and fair polls.

Pugnacious Mugabe still in control

Yet, a belligerent President Mugabe remains steadfast and scoffs at accusations that he steals elections in order to perpetuate authoritarianism. Instead, he claims that his government is being ostracized for asserting the country's sovereignty and for consolidating the gains of independence. This, he claims, is being achieved through rejection of the neo-liberal economic model; through solving 'the last vestige of colonialism' by redistributing large tracts of land held by white farmers to the landless; and, by containing 'Western sponsored' opposition which is an instrument of sabotage and whose aim is to deliver the country back to erstwhile colonial masters through the back-door.⁶

Mugabe accuses Britain, in particular, of internationalizing a bi-lateral disagreement over the resolution of the land question and of leading a Western-propaganda campaign to aimed at destabilize the country in retaliation for the white farm seizures necessary to correct ownership imbalances created by colonialism. His

government says anti-Zimbabwe hysteria finds its fullest expression in the British media. In an attempt to bring the Zimbabwe situation to the attention of the world, the sometimes superficial coverage of contentious issues by some British newspapers, especially the disproportionate interest shown in the fate of white farmers, has played into the hands of the Zimbabwean government. This, it says, lends credence to the fact that they are a target of an orchestrated international conspiracy to discredit it led by No. 10 Downing Street, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and the Western press more generally who want to 'protect their kith and kin'.

Censure by the former colonial master Britain, and the United States, and Mugabe's furious retorts have led the dispute to increasingly take an international character. Since 2002, when they were confident that he could not survive the political and economic crisis and win the presidential election, the projected foreign policy of Western governments has entirely been based on a post-Mugabe outcome. They see no alternative to regime change, which they hope will transpire because of diplomatic pressure and periodic renewal of sanctions, a policy founded on an initial misreading of the melt-down that had been taking place in the country from around 1997. Meanwhile, they openly express sympathy with the opposition MDC as a government in waiting. The MDC formally grew out of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and is now a polyglot party that includes urban masses and union workers, some students and intellectuals, some white farmers, and several civil society organizations. This has meant that over the past few years all avenues for diplomacy have been closed, leading to the gradual loss by the West of any moderating influence on the Mugabe government and of their ability to break the political impasse between the two political parties (Lee 2003).

In turn, ZANU PF's isolation as an 'illegitimate government' hardened the resolve of hard-liners within its ranks in dealing with opposition elements. With its diplomatic orientation towards European benefactors and its inconsistent stand on critical policy issues such as land and economic policy the opposition has become vulnerable to criticism that it is indeed a front for Western opponents who want to push the government from power and are undermining Zimbabwe's economy as pay-back for land seizures. Highlighting what they see as the open colonial character of recent British intervention in Zimbabwean affairs and the financial and political support given to the country's opposition because it is far more congenial to Western economic interests, ZANU PF therefore dubbed the March 2005 election as the 'anti-Blair' election.

Another important observation is that despite condemnation for his strong-arm tactics and brash rhetoric, Mugabe's message of land, historic injustice, and the need for a pan-African fight against neo-imperialism evidently finds resonance in certain

sections within the country and seems to hold wider emblematic significance beyond the country's borders. A talented public speaker, quite often Mugabe receives standing ovations whenever he gives his now trademark harangues against his 'imperialist enemies' much to the consternation of his critics who accuse him of using demagoguery to cover up autocratic tendencies.⁷ Taking into account that his government has been isolated by travel bans and sustained negative coverage of its actions in the Western press his foreign policy is now oriented mostly towards African support and, in a 'Look East' policy, is seeking stronger ties with Asian countries so as to salvage the countries ruined economy. Many Africans who have been alienated by what they see as double standards and the overweening attitude of most Western countries when dealing with Zimbabwe, now implicitly or explicitly show their solidarity with Mugabe.⁸ At the same time, leftist opinion emphasizes the hidden motivations of Western intervention as based on the lingering presence of colonial history and the character of imperialism and monopoly capital to always selectively evoke concern for democracy and human rights for any nation that displays too much independence.⁹ Because of this rift in international public opinion, any discussion of Zimbabwe today tends to elicit strong but contrasting emotions on diverse issues such as race, democracy, land, or even sport.¹⁰ Over the past five years positions, opinions and prejudices on Zimbabwe seem to have become more entrenched.

Arena 2 - Information and the Media: Government-controlled Media and Agenda Setting

News reporting on Zimbabwe and the articulation of issues and standpoints within sections of the local and international audience has played a central role in shaping an understanding of what can be seen as an unfolding 'drama of democratization' (Shelley 2001). In Zimbabwe, itself, state control and regulation of the media has loomed large in ZANU PF's plan to consolidate its slipping power, especially in the remobilization drive after the hotly contested 2000 and 2002 elections. In a well calculated counter-strategy to legitimize its actions, to regain citizen's loyalties, and, not least, to rebut what it increasingly sees as an international onslaught on the country's sovereignty, the ZANU PF government, which has been in power since 1980, has tried to make itself relevant again by deftly constructing an alternative discourse and rhetoric of national solidarity built around the outstanding goals of the 1970s war of liberation from colonialism (Phimister 2004; Ranger 2004).

President Mugabe and his advisers have taken the message of land and economic emancipation as the central election hook, a message that has increasingly become more pronounced in the dominant and official media. The take-over of farms and the fighting-off of both domestic and international opposition to such policies has been subtly named the *Third Chimurenga*, a term that attempts to re-inscript an unfulfilled historical mission into currently unfolding developments in the country.

Chimurenga is a Shona word meaning, 'mass uprising'. Its roots is the *First Chimurenga* of 1896-7, in which Ndebele and Shona people's took up arms against colonial occupation and subjugation by British settlers in. It ended in defeat and 90 years of colonialism. The *Second Chimurenga* was the bush war of the 1970s against colonialism and Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front minority-white regime. It led to a negotiated settlement and the country's political independence in 1980.

Over the past few years, and against all odds, state media has preached a strident message of expectation claiming that the economic dislocation the country is currently experiencing is a temporary result of Western sanctions, and is unavoidable if the gross imbalance imposed by colonial theft is to be rectified. Instead of the bleak scenarios on the future painted in most private and Western newspapers the nation is implored to bear the passing hardships marking this period of the country's history with both fortitude and diligence. Terence Ranger (2004), a historian and commentator described how recently ZANU PF has used the public media to mastermind a complex narrative of patriotic and collective memory that attempts to reorient the whole national mood through broadcast messages, newspaper commentary, and even a special curriculum in schools that emphasize current political developments as a continuum in the process of constructing a remembered national identity. The repossession of national assets from colonial plunder is said to be the ultimate, unfulfilled mission of the two previous *Chimurengas* and the key for unlocking future prosperity.¹¹ This patriotic history as propagated by ZANU PF was captured best in the 2002 election slogan, 'The land is the economy – the economy is the land.'

The government-controlled media, which include Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers) - the biggest newspaper publisher with two dailies and several prominent weeklies, the New Zimbabwe Inter Africa News Agency (ZIANA) - the state news agency, and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH) - the monopoly state broadcaster, have been very instrumental in this mission of agenda setting and agenda control. Ownership and control of the largest share of the media market has allowed the government to dominate spaces of public communication and to control an important instrument of veto. Using strategic timing the overriding aim has been to sidetrack criticisms that allege poor governance and human rights abuses by placing land and economic empowerment as the central issues for national debate. Through the ready platform presented by government controlled media, ruling party political communicators and political persuaders have denied the opposition an opportunity to air contrary views and, not least, painted them as enemies of the state. Quite naturally, controversial public debates on issues facing the country have been framed using rhetorical strategies that emphasize and prioritize policy goals and policy images consistent with the ZANU PF manifesto whilst selectively highlighting the opposition's weaknesses. The use of a dominant

state media to sway political attitudes and influence the importance that Zimbabwean citizens attribute to increasingly competing values has further been made effective by the closing down of private and external avenues of information. Flow of information in the domestic space has been curtailed by the closing down of independent newspapers such as the *Daily News*, *Daily News on Sunday*, *The Tribune*, and the *Weekly Times* that once created room for voices outside government. Simultaneously, the banning of foreign journalists has controlled the flow of news from the country to the international public. Besides the odd mention in the sympathetic international press this has left the opposition with no access to an arena necessary to articulate their position.

Discursive Demolition of 'Enemies of the State'

In what can be termed a *discursive demolition* so-called 'enemies of the state', who are said to be opposed to the nation's collective history as borne out of the 1970s armed struggle for independence, are constantly labelled and daily vilified. State controlled media consistently lampoons prominent political opponents such as the opposition MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai, foreign funded civil society organizations, and the independent or non-government owned media as 'instruments of neo-colonialism' and 'shameless surrogates of Western interests', particularly of Britain and the United States. It is conflated that by contesting the legitimacy of government and its policies these entities are opposed to the country's history and independence.

They are accused of being used as fronts to disseminate covert anti-Zimbabwe messages in a scheme to instigate regime change so as to take the country back into the yoke of external subjugation. For opposing the ZANU PF government and inviting the imposition of sanctions on the government blame has masterfully been apportioned on the opposition that they are negating the oneness that makes for national identity and are fomenting social strife and instability in a once peaceful and prosperous country. Through editorials and hard-hitting columns falling under by-lines such as 'Nathaniel Manheru' in *The Herald*, 'Tafataona Mahoso' and 'Lowani Ndlovu' in *The Sunday Mail* and 'Mzala Joe' in *The Sunday News* a complex mixture of vitriol and intellectual discourse on pan-Africanism tries to unpack, expose, discredit and smear the opposition, labelling them variously as 'misguided', 'stooges', 'terrorists', 'puppets' and 'sell-outs'.¹² Earlier in Rhodesia Ian Smith's government had led a campaign of hatred directed at all opponents who were labelled as 'quislings', 'seedy liberals', 'traitors', and 'renegades'.

Binary Viewpoints and Media Polarity

However, another view in the coverage of Zimbabwe is found in what the government terms 'oppositional' media. These include the remaining local

independent titles, the hostile 'white South African press', and the Western media. At best they criticize this government for abrogating the constitution and inculcating a culture of violence as an essential component of the political landscape of Zimbabwe. At worst they portray Mugabe as some freak tyrant in spite of the fact that he is quite a rational-maximising tactician. Despite being curtailed by harsh media laws, quite ironically what remains of Zimbabwe's private press continues to be vigorous and outspoken as demonstrated by constant denunciations of the government. An activist journalism still exists and in similarly hard-hitting editorials and columns such as 'Muckraker' in *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 'Woodpecker' in *The Standard*, 'The Scrutator' and 'Behind the Words' in the *The Sunday Mirror* voices and opinions that, to various degrees, are alternative to that of the government still enjoy space with widespread name-calling of government and public officials expressly indulged in. In addition the government of Zimbabwe is at the receiving end of hostile reporting from a large section of South African newspapers such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Star*, and *The Business Day* that, it may be argued, represent the interests of capital and of white middle class readers. And the international media has had a field day when it comes to reporting Zimbabwe with major titles such as the UK's *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor* in the US, for example, often carrying news feature that take satisfaction in describing the bizarre and quirky side of Zimbabwe's decline under an 'increasingly unhinged' Robert Mugabe.

However, it is undeniable that what remains of the independent press in Zimbabwe exists under an increasingly trying environment governed by harsh media legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) that make the practice of journalism in the country today to be likened to walking a minefield. Such a scenario of seemingly permissible criticism of government amidst strict press regulations reveals contradictions between the authoritarian and the democratic impulses in the political development of the country (Rønning 2002). The result has been a contraposition of two almost conflicting viewpoints on the country, binary positions that have spurred rigidly contrasting coverage. The implication is that one story on Zimbabwe today is never the whole story. Or put differently, depending on whom you listen to, Robert Mugabe is the worst African tyrant after Idi Amin, or the most fearless surviving African nationalist. This rift in media coverage of the country has taken on a heightened importance because these two camps, the Zimbabwe government and its antagonists, employ a concerted, strategic mass media discourse to demolish the other. There has been much polarization and crosstalk between the government-aligned media and the independent media and a barely concealed hostility can be noticed in pro-government denunciations of 'enemies of the state' as in international news depictions of 'Mugabe's mayhem'. In

a way the result has been a suppression of the true significance of events that are unfolding in that country.

II Restructuring Games and Patterns of Media Control

First Phase - Rhodesian Legacy

When Ian Smith came to power in early 1965, a new information department together with the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC) shaped government information propaganda to reflect the outlook of the Rhodesian Front (RF). At that time the collision course with both the British government and the nationalists at home led to a conflict of loyalties with almost everyone who disagreed with the RF being branded as 'communist' or 'traitor' (Parker 1972; Windrich 1981). A full-scale propaganda campaign to defend unilateral declaration of independence from Britain (UDI) and to project Rhodesia's new image overseas was launched. Domestically, Africans were supplied with 'suitable propaganda' in order to fill the void left by the banning of their leaders, parties and publications under the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) and the Emergency Powers Act of 1960.

When broadcasting was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Federal Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) to that of Southern Rhodesia at the dissolution of the Central Africa Federation in 1964 the RF government saw this as a great opportunity to use the institution to counter the private 'monopoly press' and also to prevent the expression of competing political views. The corporation's board was packed with RF supporters and the dispensing of news and information shifted from the broadcasting newsroom to the right-wing propagandists in the information department. Following successive resignations and purges between 1965 and 1977, RBC was transformed into a one-party broadcasting propaganda machine. It is reported that all opposition voices ceased to appear on radio and television (Zaffiro 2001).

Some of the victims of the RF campaign of hatred were newspapers, which were accused of distortions, spreading subversion, and a campaign against constitutional government. When official censorship was declared a day before UDI in November 1965, Ivor Benson moved into the offices of the biggest publisher, the Rhodesia Printing and Publishing Company to monitor copy as the first state censor. In 1964 the *African Daily News*, the paper that gave prominence to African issues had been banned under section 18 and 34 of LOMA, which outlawed the 'publishing of a false report likely to cause alarm and despondency'. Many provisions of this law were described as hanging over the head of every editor in Rhodesia 'like the sword of Damocles' (Wason 1975). In fact, when the 61 sections of LOMA were gazetted in 1960 the Chief Justice of the Central African Federation resigned because he said the law outraged almost every basic human right, and turned the country into a police state.

Harassment of journalists became a regular feature of Rhodesia. The Ministry monitored 'local press distortions' and trailed journalists with an anti-Rhodesian outlook and likely to 'spy for the enemy'. The regime organized a system of withholding rewards and meting out punishment ranging from the refusal of routine facilities like government press releases and access to official press conferences to journalists being continuously hauled before parliamentary committees or the courts on trumped up charges arising out of the normal conduct of their personal duties. Foreign journalists were deported. By the mid-1970s most newspapers such as the *African Daily News* edited by Eugene Wason, *Zimbabwe Times*, the liberal *Central African Examiner* edited by Eileen Haddon, church based papers such as *Moto* and *Umbowo*, and African nationalist publications had been banned.

As the bush war with the African liberation army worsened in the 1970s a massive propaganda campaign run by a Psychological Operations Unit led by the ministry of information together with the defence forces was launched in order to assuage white fears whilst at the same time terrorizing the black population in an attempt to isolate the guerrillas, referred to as the 'mad-dog communist terrorists' (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Rhodesia 1977). Rhodesia's propaganda machinery remained in place for 16 years until 1980 and was even used by the Zimbabwe-Rhodesia government in 1979 and early 1980 in an attempt to destabilize the first elections of independence by conferring legitimacy on the Muzorewa-Smith Zimbabwe-Rhodesia regime whilst discrediting the candidature of Robert Mugabe.

Second Phase – Post-Independence Restructuring

After independence in 1980 the government recognized the potency of the Ministry of Information and decided to retain it so as to reorient information policy towards the new goal of building a new imagined community of the nation called Zimbabwe. Under the tenure of Nathan Shamuyarira, the Ministry accomplished a number of important achievements. Through an Africanisation process it restructured broadcasting both in terms of new staff composition and new content so as to reflect the new reality. Another major change was the complete take-over of public newspapers through purchase of the controlling share of the Rhodesia Printing and Publishing Company from the Argus group of South Africa. The government set up a public trust called the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) that was able to buy out the controlling share of the Rhodesia Printing and Publishing Company from the Argus group of South Africa. The new government found it unacceptable for the major newspaper publisher in the country to be controlled by foreign, white interest based in apartheid South Africa. The Trust was also instrumental in setting up a chain of small regional newspapers in the country's provinces and setting up a journalism training school in Harare (Zaffiro 2002).

Steeped in the spirit of national building and development a culture of development journalism was encouraged where both the print and electronic media had to highlight the problems the nation faced whilst showcasing the achievements that were recorded in fighting poverty and uplifting the standards of the people. It was a period of rupture from the old times of Rhodesia but it was also a period of continuity since broadcasting remained firmly under the control of the ZANU PF government. The Rhodesia Front's policy had been able to consolidate its hold over state broadcasting understanding that total press control could alienate potential supporters and also damage Rhodesia's image abroad. Instead, in addition to control of broadcasting ZANU PF also took over ownership of the largest chunk of the newspaper market and kept most of the punitive Rhodesian press laws in place so as to manage errant journalists.

The Third Phase – ZANU PF Reorganization

So was Karl Marx right when in his celebrated dictum he said that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce? It would not strike most long-term observers of the country that there is a certain historic irony in old policies being followed by the government of Zimbabwe today, with clear events and personages of the past occurring once again. Parallels can be drawn between Rhodesian and current press and broadcasting regulation. This question arises if one observes that similarly, the government today is driven by the belief that there is a world conspiracy against Zimbabwe's chosen development path and the re-assertion of its independence.

Despite the existence of unfriendly press and defamation laws that were occasionally used a fairly peaceful co-existence between the government and private newspapers was the norm from 1980 and well into the 1990s. The situation began to change in the late 1990s when a number of new independent titles such as *The Independent* and *The Standard* began to criticize growing corruption by public office bearers. The more strident they became the more confrontation with the government became inevitable, something that led to the shelving of the media liberalization agenda that the government had come to warm up to due to regional and international developments. Growing opposition to government policies from various quarters started to find expression in independent titles. Yet, government saw things differently. So, addressing journalists at a Commonwealth Press Union event in Harare in 1999 the then Secretary of Information, Willard Chiwewe had this to say:

One of the dominant social phenomena in Zimbabwe today is the existence of a well orchestrated private media campaign to discredit the Government of the day by the most virulent means at their disposal...An honest respect for Zimbabwe's sovereignty within the community of nations will mean that the local media personnel would not report on

matters in a manner and at a time that would subvert the sovereignty of the state, weaken the nation's resolve to govern itself, nor expose the nation to attack or disparagement by other nations.¹³

He then went on to chronicle the sins that the press was guilty of and government's desire to regulate the media by statute. 1999 was an eventful year because a new strident anti-government daily paper called *The Daily News* had just been launched with the opposition MDC being formed some months after. The coincidental emergence of an opposition party strongly believed to be foreign sponsored and a new daily paper with substantial British shareholding rang alarm bells in government corridors and a link between the two was often imputed, especially when relations with Britain had started to deteriorate when the new Labour government of Tony Blair renounced responsibility for meeting the obligations of land compensation. The 2000 constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections, and the ensuing political confrontation presented the government with its most serious challenge in two decades with the private newspapers playing a central role in giving a boosted opposition space. As a result when a new cabinet was announced after the bruising election in June 2000 the mercurial Jonathan Moyo who had innovatively led the publicizing of the government's recently rejected constitutional position was appointed as Minister heading a Department of Information and Publicity in the President's office. His brief was to re-gear media control to avoid further electoral down-sliding. The Department was separated from the telecommunications portfolio now focusing exclusively on fighting the government's propaganda wars.

A former university professor, astute political observer, and at one time Mugabe's most celebrated critic the maverick Jonathan Moyo's tenure was marked by the attempt to revamp the control of information flow into and from Zimbabwe. He retired the old guard in the Ministry so as to build a leaner and meaner machine. The department became responsible for the public relations build-up of the President and all government ministries. Moyo dissolved the Mass Media Trust and public shares in public newspapers now fall directly under government control. A battery of laws has been used to reorganise the various media such as the press and broadcasting. Zimpapers titles were restructured with company boards being reshuffled and independent minded editors being shown the door. Business caution was thrown out of the window as state titles were excessively used as government attack dogs on 'enemies of the state'. Outdone in popularity and sales by the private *The Daily News* sales of the flag bearers *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* initially plummeted with circulation only recovering when the biggest daily competitor, *The Daily News* was closed down in 2003.

Moyo was the author of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) a law under which newspapers were closed down and many journalists arrested. Making his second reading of the Bill in parliament in January 2001, Moyo elaborately explained that the law was meant to deal with 'media led threats to freedom of expression' since the private media represents 'a whole white global network and front that has been formed against landless blacks and their struggle.' He went on to state that the law takes into account 'permissible derogation from the fundamental right of freedom of speech' and is aimed at plugging the serious ethical lapses in the media industry that had led to 'crusading journalism', 'campaign journalism' and 'advocacy journalism'. The law built on recommendations from a Media Ethics Committee set up by the department 'to investigate the rating of media products and practitioners by the public' and which observed that private newspapers in the country were alienated from the people and were more inclined to represent Western interests. Under the law, whose name is just a misnomer, journalists in so-called independent papers, foreign journalists and all independent titles are all required to register with a government appointed Media and Information Commission (MIC). Licensing of media houses is only after an audit of their source of capital, shareholding structure and business plans.

The Daily News became a victim of its own success and easily fell into trouble with the authorities when it carelessly published unverified stories, which turned out to be false. Since its launch, in official circles the paper had always been associated with both local and international opposition. Its editor, Geoff Nyarota, on being asked by a journalist on state TV why the paper was riding on the electoral success of the MDC with its anti-government slant responded that many expressed the belief that the MDC was in fact riding on the success of *The Daily News* in providing a contrary opinion. After having been pressured to shake-off the British shareholding, it did not help that its new proprietor, Strive Masiyiwa, a telecommunications mogul who, a few years ago, had dragged the state to the Supreme Court to get a mobile phone license and was now still considered one of ZANU PF's arch enemies. By refusing to register under AIPPA, *The Daily News* eventually lost the right to publish altogether and was closed down in 2003. This law together with extra-legal tactics like regular ministerial threats, the bombing of presses, deportation of foreign journalists and arrests of local ones have shrunk the media space in the country.

One outcome of the unfavourable operating environment and the stringent registration requirements for media houses has been the mushrooming of internet only newspapers such as *ZimOnline* which is hosted in South Africa, *NewZimbabwe.com* based in the UK, and *ZWNews*. In early 2005, Wilf Mbanga, one of the founders of the defunct *The Daily News* began publishing *The Zimbabwean* from the United Kingdom. The paper is sold in Zimbabwe and in South Africa but is based in the United Kingdom, from where it attempts to tap into the estimated 25

percent of the Zimbabwean population now based outside the country. It is, however, questionable whether the newspaper's business model is in the long run economically sustainable because it is sold on the streets of Harare at a heavily discounted price even after being flown all the way from England. The government has cited this as evidence that the paper is a front of Western interests and official threats have already been issued on the basis that it is funded from a secret, offshore 'slush fund' in contravention of AIPPA. The other Internet-only papers are likely to have a longer life-span and are a major source of non-official news regardless that the majority of Zimbabweans do not have access to the Internet.

Broadcasting has also been reorganized. In November 2001, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation launched its new mission under what it called 'Vision 30'. This vision formalized the 75 percent local content policy that has driven what the Department of Information calls, 'a philosophical intellectual and cultural revolution.' The revolution has involved the extensive use of locally produced jingles or the so-called 'melodic press releases', a central part of the patriotic history project described before. It has also involved the promotion of local music and television productions, a notable development being the mushrooming of 'urban grooves', that is, youth music outfits that previously had been denied airtime by the conservative broadcaster. Between 2001 and 2003 the public broadcaster was commercialized and unbundled during a three-phased process. An attempt by the new, wholly-government owned, holding company to raise capital on the domestic market through a bond issue was under-subscribed. However, some technical support has been sourced from Iran and Egypt who have provided grants to revamp the state broadcaster's aging equipment.

Other re-regulation laws masterminded by Moyo, the *Broadcasting Services Act* and the *ZBC Commercialization Act*, have essentially achieved the aim of delaying the opening up of the sector to independent players despite the fact that in 2001 the Supreme Court declared state monopoly on the airwaves as unconstitutional. They simply tinker with the status quo leading to re-regulation without liberalization. *Capital Radio*, an upstart, which had brought the constitutional challenge to the state's monopoly, was one of the first victims of broadcast reorganization and was closed down in October 2000, and so were *MABC TV*, *Radio Dialogue* and *Freedom Radio*. It was probably naive for *Capital Radio* to mention in its court papers that one of the reasons it wanted to go on air was to give the MDC a voice to air its views. Following forced closure it has proceeded to broadcast from London. In addition, the Voice of America (VOA) in Washington DC hosts *Studio 7* run by broadcast journalists purged in Jonathan Moyo's crusade. These two stations broadcast news, current affairs and music into Zimbabwe on the short wave frequency. *Capital* has, however, complained that its frequency is being jammed by the government using technology imported from China, something reminiscent of 1970s Rhodesia when

the RF government was accused of using a transmitter called *Big Bertha* to jam BBC transmissions beamed into the country from neighbouring Botswana.

The Zimbabwean government's attempt to influence or alter media structures outside its own borders has been at two levels. One has been at the policy level. In 2000 Jonathan Moyo was central in campaigning for the watering down of some liberal sections of the 14-member Southern African Development Community (SADC)'s protocol on culture, information and sport signed in 2000 and that was destined to usher in a more liberalized media environment in the region. This protocol aims at harmonizing information and media laws and related regulatory instruments in the Southern African region. At a more bilateral level the Department of Information has signed technical and cooperation protocols with a number of countries such as Namibia, Angola, and Tanzania to harness production content, regimes of investments and the national strategies of media organs so as to collectively face the challenges faced in an environment of globalization. It has also established a joint project with Namibia and Tanzania to launch a regional satellite station and together with Namibia a state-run regional newspaper called *The Southern Times*. Moreover, Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) which is a South African direct-to-home satellite television service held by a local franchisee was asked to include the state broadcast channel on its bouquet of channels as a condition for licensing under new laws.

The fourth phase: Consequences and Possibilities

Media institutions are important in political processes because they mobilize bias. It is beyond doubt that media games and control of the media has played a crucial role in maintaining ZANU PF in power in Zimbabwe. The continuing decline in the opposition MDC's image is partly linked to unfavourable rules of access to the media and the party's failure to find an alternative outlet. At the same time it seems ZANU PF's endeavour to legitimize itself by hemming in the media has had mixed outcomes. For one, arguments put forward for the current political order to be recognized as right and just and thus deserving legitimacy and recognition have been difficult to grasp in an environment characterized by coercion. After the March 2005 elections Jonathan Moyo, the chief architect of current information policy, was ousted from government after five years of far-reaching restructuring of the media sector that has seen Zimbabweans enjoy less of the former. Although his shadow will remain for a long time to come, it is now important that the recently sworn in government review restrictive laws that were enacted at a time of ZANU PF's fight for survival so that media can flourish once again. One way to do this would be to revisit the whole communications policy environment from print, broadcasting, to new media and information and communication technologies. This calls for a Fourth Restructuring phase. In this phase some positive spin-offs of Moyo's media policy, such as the mini-boom in locally produced music should be

encouraged and further extended to other cultural areas such as film and local language literature. The journalism fraternity has also to put its house in order by instituting measures for self-regulation rather than waiting to scurry for cover when the government pulls out the dagger. A number of illustrative lessons can be learnt from the Mass Media Trust (MMT) era of the 1980s and early 1990s and the concern for social justice and nation building should be nurtured side-by-side with a commercially viable private media sector. The days of total government control of the media are entering their twilight zone due to technological and market changes. In the new dawn managed liberalization of the sector and introduction of responsible competition in all segments of the media value chain is unavoidable and could in fact reap much more benefits than the current government realizes. However, this can only happen if the current political deadlock gripping the country is first unlocked.

Notes

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² Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way (2002) identify *the electoral system, the legislature, the judiciary* and *the media* as the four major arenas of contestation in the periodic challenge of incumbents. In his paper we interest ourselves in two of these – elections and the media.

³ Use of the metaphor of 'games' follows media scholar Tamas Szecsko's (1994) interesting analysis of the fundamental changes that took place in post-Communist Hungarian media and the battles over control of media policy that took place between journalists and the Kadar regime. Political scientists use the term more broadly as a 'lens' to capture the complex transaction costs and intertemporal cooperations that characterize policymaking processes in political environments.

⁴ In his work, particularly *Media Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and its Challenge to State Power* (2002), Monroe E. Price elaborates a framework for studying media regulation that is based on how states actively remap the media landscape in response to challenges to their sovereignty.

⁵ Richard Dowden 'Zimbabwe - Time for Mugabe to Go?' *The Economist* 24 January, 1999; 'Zimbabwe's Hitler Wages War of Land' *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) 8 April, 2000; Alice Thompson 'Murderous Mugabe should be treated like bin Laden' *The Daily Telegraph* (UK) 1 December 2001; Mathilde Soyer, 'Don't Forget Zimbabwe's Tragedy' *The Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel*, 9 February 2005.

⁶ 'Mugabe Says Zimbabwe Won't Bow', *New York Times*, 14 December 2001; 'Mugabe Slams Blair Over Land, Dismisses Sanctions' *New York Times*, 12 January 2002.

⁷ Mugabe gets ovation at SA's democracy party' IOL (South Africa) 27 April 2004; Lester Holloway, 'Freedom fighter' Mugabe scores hit in greatest ever African poll', *Black Information Link* (London), Friday, 24 September 2004.

⁸ Nicholas Watt and Rory Carroll 'West sidelined as Africa walks hand in hand with Mugabe' *The Guardian (UK)* 26 April 2003; 'SADC backs Mugabe, asks West to lift sanctions' *The New Zealand Herald* 26 August, 2003; Michael Holman 'Africans Deride Western Engagement', *Institute for War & Peace Reporting* (London), 26 January 2005.

⁹ G. Elich *ibid*; J. Martorell (2002) 'Zimbabwe: The failure of 20 years of capitalism'; Tyrone Savage (2004), 'Zimbabwe: A Hundred Years War'

¹⁰ Take, for example, the ongoing focus on Zimbabwe's cricket test status, which is one of the longest running stories in cricket reporting in recent years.

¹¹ *Chave Chimurenga* (It's now war time), *Hondo yeminda* (The war for land), and *Rambai makashinga* (Remain resilient) were a constant din in the ears of Zimbabweans. From 2001 to 2004 these jingles played every half-hour on radio and television without fail; 'Mugabe party woos voters with 'bright future' 'SABC News/ Reuters (SA) 12 February 2005

¹² Recently, at the launch of ZANU PF 2005 election campaign on 12 February a new book entitled, *Traitors do much Damage to National goals*, was launched. It was prepared by the government's department of information and publicity and takes shot at all perceived enemies of the state such as known opposition personalities and newspaper editors.

¹³ 'Secretary of Information, Willard Chiwewe, talks to the Zimbabwe Chapter of the Commonwealth Press Union on the Media in Zimbabwe', Harare, 1 March 1999.

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