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## The 'independent' press and the fight for democracy in Zimbabwe: A critical analysis of the banned *Daily News*

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### **Abstract**

The closure of *The Daily News*, Zimbabwe's only 'independent' newspaper in 2003 attracted both local and worldwide condemnation as the height of the Zimbabwe government's intolerance of diverse viewpoints. This paper critically analyses the circumstances surrounding the closure of *The Daily News* and argues that to a great degree, and in various ways, the paper contributed to its own closure, not least because of the hidden motives and ineptitude of its management. Despite immense contribution to opening up the democratic space in Zimbabwe, *The Daily News* had, right from the beginning, inherent problems that conspired with the political environment leading to its closure in 2003. The paper also argues that foreign ownership and foreign funding of media in developing countries can lead to the erosion of the necessary legitimacy that these media need to compete on the local market. It argues that while the independent press has undoubtedly played a crucial role in the democratisation process, they have failed to temper their newfound freedom with responsibility.

### **Introduction**

On 12 September 2003, police in Harare stormed the offices of *The Daily News* and shut the newspaper down, acting on a Supreme Court ruling issued the previous day declaring that *The Daily News* was operating 'outside the law'. The paper had refused to register with the government appointed Media Information Committee (MIC) as required under the new Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, whose constitutionality it was challenging in the courts. However, the Supreme Court threw out the paper's challenge on the basis that the paper had approached it with 'dirty hands.' As such, the paper was ordered to first register with the MIC before its case could be heard. The MIC in turn refused to register

*The Daily News*, citing among other things the expiry of the deadline and that the paper had operated illegally for eight months. This event sparked both local and worldwide condemnation as the height of the Zimbabwe government's intolerance of diverse viewpoints. Both local and international media made extensive coverage of the closure, with local and global civil society adding voice to the denunciation. Notable in most of these reports, however, was a tendency to ignore both the complexity of the issue and the context of the closure.

Predictably, most international media as well as global civil society framed the issue in such a way that the full blame was laid squarely on the shoulders of the Mugabe Government. For those calling for intervention in the Zimbabwe crisis, this was yet another opportunity to be maximised. This paper looks at the closure of *The Daily News* as not just a matter of a repressive regime suppressing press freedom. Rather, it is important to draw links between the closure of the paper and other related events, including the paper's shaky financial base, its 'foreign funding' and general tone – within the larger context of the changing political climate triggered by the controversial land reform and the resultant international campaign against the country's leadership. I suggest that there is need to move away from the tendency of looking at these as separate cumulative acts of repression but as related events.

The paper argues that while both global media and global civil society have played a major role in adding pressure on the ZANU PF government, they tended to make some significant omissions in their treatment of the closure of *The Daily News*, in the interest of magnifying the crisis to the world. By so doing, they have played into the hands of the ZANU PF government, which deliberately conflated their role with that of the imperialist Western governments that it says seek to re-colonise Zimbabwe.

This paper is based on literature review, analysis of newspaper articles, as well as the author's personal experience as sub-editor at *The Daily News* from January to September in 1999.

### **Theoretical Questions**

It has become widely accepted that the media are central to modern democracy as primary sources of information. This is because democracy as a political system requires an informed citizenry that is capable of participating effectively in public debate and in the overall political process where they have to make informed decisions. Consequently, the exchange and free flow of information and the ability of citizens to have equal access to sources of information as well as equal opportunities to participate in political debates have been considered key elements

of democracy (Keane 1991; Lichtenberg 1995). The subject of the closure of *The Daily News* raises important theoretical questions regarding press freedom and the role of the 'independent' media in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe. It also raises questions about foreign ownership and foreign funding of the media as well as responsible and accountable journalism which have wider implications for the rest of the African continent. The dilemma, as Nerone (2002, 188 ) puts it, is that responsibility must mean accountability; yet accountability requires state intervention; and state intervention, history shows, comes at the expense of liberty as defined by libertarians. How then can we ensure that the media act in a responsible manner? Who should hold the media accountable in cases where they misuse press power and freedom? Should it be a government commission or a self-regulatory body set up by the press themselves? Social responsibility proposes that the media take it upon themselves to elevate their standards, providing the citizens with the sort of raw material and disinterested guidance they need to govern themselves (Nerone 2002, 184).

The closure of *The Daily News*, coming a few years after the collapse of another attempt to set up a daily newspaper in Zimbabwe, also brings up the question about the economics of establishing a viable daily newspaper to compete with the state-controlled dailies in the country. Is Zimbabwe's daily newspaper market already saturated as it currently is? Economic imperatives notwithstanding, the arrival of *The Daily News* proved beyond doubt that there was a voracious appetite for alternative information in a sector dominated by the government-controlled media.

### **Background**

Until the arrival of the *Daily Gazette* in October 1992, Zimbabwe's daily newspaper market had, since independence, been dominated by the two state-controlled papers, *The Herald*, published in the capital Harare, and its sister paper, *The Chronicle*, published in the second largest city, Bulawayo. Both papers fall under the Zimbabwe Newspapers, known as Zimpapers, which in turn falls under the Zimbabwe Mass media Trust (ZMMT). The ZMMT also owns a number of community newspapers through the Community Newspapers Group (CNG). In principle, the Trust was a unique experiment on the continent in the sense that it was supposed to act as a buffer between the state and the public media under its ambit. But in practice this 'independence' never materialised, as the state began interfering with both the Trust and its newspapers soon after its inception (see Saunders 1991).

This situation had led to the prevalence of a peculiar type of journalism that avoided confronting those in power.<sup>1</sup> These newspapers, though supposedly independent, were co-opted into the state's 'nation-building' project, which

necessitated 'developmental journalism'. To government officials, this developmental journalism has been interpreted to mean that the press is an ally of the state in the nation-building project. As such, the papers were not expected to criticise the government but to celebrate the exploits of the head of state and his ministers. By so doing, the government narrowed the definition of journalism and accorded itself the role of determining what was in the public interest. Over the years, these papers have deteriorated into government propaganda mouthpieces, losing their credibility in the process.

This web of government control of the flow of information extended to broadcasting, which was inherited as a monopoly from the colonial era. While in name a public broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation has served essentially as a propaganda mouthpiece for the government of the day since colonialism. The effect of state dominance in the media has been the narrowing of the public sphere and hence an impoverishment of democracy.

Apart from these government controlled media, the Zimbabwean media scene also boasts a couple of 'independent' newspapers, which included *The Financial Gazette*, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Standard*, *The Mirror* (which has now mutated into *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sunday Mirror*) and a number of monthly magazines. Of these, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Standard* and *The Financial Gazette* have been the most outspoken critics of the Mugabe government, exposing its excesses and providing incisive political commentary. Their major limitation, however, is that these are elite papers in the sense that their target readership is mainly the urban, and mostly middle class people who have disposable income (in a country where the middle class is fast disappearing). *The Daily News* therefore, filled an existing void in terms of providing a popular newspaper that was affordable to the majority of the working population. In a climate where the mainstream daily newspapers had lost credibility, the arrival of an alternative voice was quite welcome.

#### **Impact of *The Daily News* on Zimbabwe's media scene**

When *The Daily News* was launched in March 1999, it transformed the media landscape in Zimbabwe in a number of ways. First, it became the most well resourced media house in the country, with state of the art equipment in its newsrooms, complete with the latest Apple computers, digital cameras and mobile phones at a time when most media houses in the country were still grappling with antiquated technology that had long been forgotten in other parts of the world. Second, for the first time in the history of the country, it elevated the respectability of the profession of journalism by introducing competitive salaries that brought unprecedented rivalry among the media houses over the best journalists. Third, and perhaps most importantly, though it published five days a week, *The Daily*

*News* broke the monopoly of the state-controlled media in the dissemination of news. An interesting consequence of the arrival of *The Daily News* is that it gave the state-controlled media a run for their money; competition somehow nudged *The Herald* and its sister papers to become more professional in their reporting.

It has been suggested that in countries where opposition political parties are weak or non-existent owing to state repression, the 'independent' press can occupy that role of opposition (Ungar 1996; Rønning 1998; Hyden and Okigbo 2002). In Zimbabwe, the 'independent' press have played this role, first by strongly opposing the one-party state during the late 80s and early 90s, and secondly, by acting as the 'voice of the voiceless' throughout the 90s. *The Daily News* came at a time when opposition forces were in disarray, despite growing agitation for reform from the grassroots. Rising inflation, rampant corruption, among other things created a groundswell of a frustrated mass with no centre to coordinate it. Thus it can be argued that in many ways *The Daily News* assumed the role of coordinating those disparate voices. This tacit role of an opposition press rather than a mere alternative to the state-controlled media became apparent right from the beginning.

Within months of its establishment, *The Daily News* had become a persistent pain in the side of the government. It became the most strident critic of the Mugabe government, exposing corruption and holding the government accountable to its actions. Its fearless criticism of government corruption and political intolerance gave hope to many in a country where a culture of silence had become dominant. Its print-run shot up from an initial 60,000 to 120,000 within a few months, surpassing the dominant state controlled *The Herald*, whose circulation stood at 90,000. Market research statistics indicated that by 2000, *The Daily News* was commanding up to 30.6 percent of the total readership (about 2 million), with *The Herald* trailing hard behind with 28.9 percent (about 1.9 million readers).<sup>2</sup> *The Chronicle* readership stood at 13.7 percent. It must be pointed out that the company that owned *The Daily News*, Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) Private Limited, started off with a giant project, and perhaps over-ambitious at that. In 1998 it had launched five provincial newspapers in five urban centres around the country (*The Dispatch* in Bulawayo; *The Express* in Chitungwiza; *The Mercury* in Gweru; *The Tribune* in Masvingo, and *The Eastern Star* in Mutare).<sup>3</sup>

Initially, the company was supposed to be 60 percent owned by Africa Media Investments (Zimbabwe) Ltd (AMI), which was registered in the United Kingdom, with the remaining 40 percent coming from Zimbabwean investors. However, failure to raise the required Z\$26 million from local shareholders resulted in AMI controlling 83 percent of the ownership (Chuma 2003), a situation that attracted heavy criticism from the government of Zimbabwe.<sup>4</sup> This foreign dominance in the ANZ shareholding was made possible by an apparent policy vacuum regarding

investment in the country's newspaper industry. Practically, anybody who had the requisite funds could set up a newspaper in Zimbabwe, the only requirement being that a newspaper should be registered with the Postmaster-General.

There is no doubt that *The Daily News* made immense contribution to the further opening up of political space in Zimbabwe by bringing to public attention that other side of the story which had, over the years been suppressed by the state-controlled media. Its launch at a time when there was no meaningful opposition to talk about positioned it as the most visible counterpoint to the blatant propaganda churned out in the state-controlled media. The paper, it can be argued, also played midwife to the birth of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party, to which it provided a mouthpiece. It has even been suggested that without *The Daily News*, the opposition forces in the country could not have made the strides they did since 1999. MDC Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube, for example, has argued that the closure of *The Daily News* was direct attack on the MDC and the opposition forces in general:

The attack on *The Daily News* is not an attack on the owners of the paper to prevent them from becoming rich and making money... It is principally an attack on the MDC, for the simple reason that if you remove *The Daily News* as a source of news, you have literally made it impossible for the opposition's voice to be heard by the mass of people.<sup>5</sup>

Led by veteran journalist, Geoffrey Nyarota, who had earned his name through the uncovering in the late 80s of a massive car scam in government, popularly known as the Willowgate scandal, *The Daily News* broke government monopoly in social and political commentary. It stimulated nationwide debate on constitutional reform, and greatly influenced the defeat of the state-sponsored draft constitution in the 2000 referendum. During the 2000 Parliamentary and 2002 Presidential elections, it exposed state-sponsored violence and other forms of abuse of power, including allegations of electoral fraud. In the process, it made it clear which side it supported. As Waldahl (2004, 114-115) writes:

The news coverage of *The Daily News* left little doubt that the paper was strongly in favour of political change in Zimbabwe. This could be seen more clearly, however, from its extensive and systematically negative presentation of (President) Mugabe and ZANU (PF) than from any thorough account of the MDC's political qualities and activities.

This undisguised support for the opposition led to the paper earning the label of 'opposition' press from government officials as well as government controlled media – a label that could have, to some extent, reduced its esteem in the eyes of the public.<sup>6</sup>

### **Challenges of Daily Newspaper Business in Zimbabwe**

The shutting down of *The Daily News* by the MIC, while certainly regrettable, presents a great opportunity for analysing the challenges of establishing a daily newspaper in Zimbabwe. This paper argues that despite its summary closure in 2003, *The Daily News* was already facing problems that are indicative of the challenges of establishing a viable daily newspaper in Zimbabwe. To begin with, the rapid economic decline at the turn of the century had a direct bearing on the success or failure of *The Daily News* as a project. It raises questions as to whether it was prudent, business-wise, to start a newspaper under such circumstances, or whether this was a paper with a mission and not so much about business and profit as conspiracy theorists would like us to believe.<sup>7</sup> The worsening economic conditions in the country by 1999 meant that one needed to have much more than mere profit motives to invest in a newspaper business in Zimbabwe. The rising inflation and eroded incomes also meant that the majority of the paper's readers were affected, leading to reduced spending on newspapers and other goods considered as luxuries.

### **Economic and Managerial Problems**

At the time of its closure, there were already telltale signs that the future of the paper was very much uncertain. Notably, like the *Daily Gazette* before it, the paper failed to make a meaningful breakthrough in the advertising area, where *The Herald* and the *Sunday Mail* have long established a captive market.<sup>8</sup>

*The Daily News* as a project was also beset by its own internal management problems which cast doubts on its chances of future survival. These problems included an ambitious expansion plan mentioned earlier where the company started off by rolling out five provincial papers which necessitated a rapid expansion of the staff. As was observed by Rønning (2000), some three years before the paper's demise, the company faced serious problems relating to poor distribution, insufficient advertising, and unsatisfactory circulation figures which were linked both to the general economic situation in Zimbabwe and internal organisational problems.

Another serious problem was that the company started off grossly undercapitalised. The effects of this shaky capital base were to continue to dog the company until its closure in September 2003. Facing bankruptcy, the company borrowed US\$526,000 from the Botswana-based Southern African Media Development Fund (SAMDEF),<sup>9</sup> a debt it failed to fully service, ostensibly due to acute shortage of foreign currency in the country. This led SAMDEF to take legal action against ANZ in 2000. It was rescued from collapse by the timely intervention of South African-based Zimbabwean entrepreneur Strive Masiyiwa

who took over 60 percent shares in the company, and thus became the majority shareholder. 32 percent remained in the hands of the original British investors, and the remaining 8 percent was taken up by a few Zimbabwean investors (Chuma 2003; Rønning 2000). Although Masiyiwa's investment significantly reduced foreign ownership in the paper, the anti-Mugabe tone of the paper remained unchanged.

### **Hostile Political Environment**

The political environment was also hostile to the idea of setting up a new private newspaper. Initial warning came when then Minister of Information, Chen Chimutengwende, threatened to impose limits on foreign investment in the media in Zimbabwe, including donor support for media ventures in the country, arguing that such ventures posed a threat to national security and national sovereignty (Rønning 2000). A few weeks prior to the launch of *The Daily News*, two *Standard* journalists, Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto had been arrested and severely tortured by state security agents following publication of a story in which they alleged that some senior army officers had been arrested in connection with a coup attempt. The story cited mismanagement of the economy and the army's involvement in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as causes of the attempted coup.<sup>10</sup> In an address to the nation on Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) on 6 February 1999, President Mugabe supported the heavy-handed response from the army, saying, '... They (the *Standard* journalists) had through their deliberate and treasonable act invited that reaction,' warning that, 'Any media organisation which wilfully suspends truth necessarily forfeits its right to inform and must not cry foul when extraordinary reaction visits them.'<sup>11</sup> As Nyarota recounted,

This frightened people to death, particularly since the government actually justified the torture. The threat to independent journalism was obvious. As a result many of our would-be investors evaporated into thin air and we had to launch the paper in a severely undercapitalised state. For the first nine months that was our overwhelming problem and the paper very nearly crashed around New Year 2000.<sup>12</sup>

It must be stated that changes in the political climate at the turn of the century contributed a lot to the government's intolerance of 'independent' viewpoints. Notably, the maturation of civil society in the 90s which led to the birth of the most serious opposition party since independence (the MDC), the growing civil unrest due to economic decline, and the defeat of the government sponsored draft constitution in the 2000 referendum, among other things, were seen as posing a real threat to the hegemonic position of the ruling ZANU PF.



All these factors combined to create an unfavourable investment climate for *The Daily News*, forcing some would-be investors in the project to withdraw.<sup>13</sup> One of the most effective weapons used by African governments to punish 'hostile' private media is starving them of advertising from government-related institutions. This can have a huge impact on the viability of newspapers, considering that in most of Africa the government and its various departments are the biggest advertisers. *The Daily News* suffered this fate, as the state sought to cripple it.

### **The Dilemma of Foreign Ownership and Funding of the Media**

The question of foreign media ownership is a contentious issue the world over. This is mainly to do with the perceived power of the mass media to influence the political, social and economic behaviour of individuals. That *The Daily News*, being a largely foreign-funded newspaper, made such tremendous contribution to the opening up of political space in Zimbabwe has posed a new dilemma regarding the desirability of foreign media ownership/funding and its possible implications. Rønning (2004), for example, suggests that foreign funding is both justifiable and necessary in particular circumstances. He argues that:

The ANZ initiative suggests that in the interest of media pluralism it is necessary to adopt a pragmatic position to what often may be seen as fundamental doctrines in relation to restrictions on foreign ownership and media concentration. Such principles must be applied in relation to historical circumstances and contexts, and it is to a large degree true that in Africa it is the market media that are independent (Rønning 2004, 210).

This is a very sound argument, though it has its own problems. To begin with, the so-called 'independent press' has tended to discredit itself through sensationalism, inaccurate and biased reporting and other such excesses which have raised questions about their 'independence' (see, for example, Kasoma, 1997). Further, African governments are increasingly becoming wary of the *interests* of the foreign investors in the media sector, and selective foreign funding of certain sections of the media. What guarantees are there that these interests simply end at providing information and making profit? With regards to donor funding of media, how can you support 'independent' media without being accused of foreign interference in domestic politics? How can we guarantee that the financial support will not be made conditional upon a particular editorial slant? These are serious questions that the African governments raise, but which Western governments and donors do not appear keen to address. An interesting case is that of a SIDA grant given to *Horizon* in 1991, which led to diplomatic tension between Harare and Stockholm (Rønning 2003, 212).<sup>14</sup>

The case of *The Daily News* illustrates how the label of ‘foreign funded-’ can erode the legitimacy necessary for a newspaper to effectively compete with locally funded media. *The Daily News* was constantly referred to in the state-controlled media as a British sponsored opposition mouthpiece that was part of the ‘regime change agenda.’ Although the government attacked all independent media, the degree of attack differed sharply between those funded by local white capital and *The Daily News*, which was a largely foreign-funded paper.

### **Political Threats and the Declining Fortunes of *The Daily News***

The appointment of Jonathan Moyo, a former Political Science Professor, as new Minister of Information in 2000 further compounded the misfortunes of *The Daily News*. The new Minister launched a sustained attack on the paper, issuing threats and suing the paper from all directions. In his presentation of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Bill for Second Reading in Parliament, Moyo singled out *The Daily News* as a threat to national security and national sovereignty, arguing that the paper served to protect British interests in Zimbabwe:

Clearly the foreign ownership and white patronage arrangements have had a direct bearing on the editorial outlook and control of the ANZ. For how else can we explain the editorial behaviour of peasant-born African playing a willing host to such racial stereotypes, while denying the immediate interest of his own people defined by land? (Moyo 2002).

During its lifetime, the newspaper was the target of two bombing attacks, which had a crippling effect on its operation. In April 2000, a bomb explosion shattered a shop that was directly below the offices of *The Daily News*, an incident that was widely interpreted as an attempt to intimidate the outspoken paper. No arrests were made in connection with this attack, although police claimed to be investigating. In January 2001, a massive explosion destroyed the company’s printing press, barely 48 hours after Jonathan Moyo, then a ‘Minister of Information and Publicity in the Office of the President and Cabinet’, had threatened to silence *The Daily News*, saying that ‘it was only a matter of time before Zimbabweans put a stop to the newspaper’s madness’ (BBC Africa News, cited in Waldahl 2004, 137). A few days before, a group of war veterans had staged a demonstration in front of the paper’s offices protesting what they called its ‘unpatriotic’ reporting – in particular the paper’s treatment of the death of the DRC President, Laurent Kabila.<sup>15</sup> The second bomb attack forced the newspaper to scale down its print-run to 70,000. The destruction of the printing press also forced the ANZ to immediately discontinue some of its titles, starting with *The Tribune* and *The Mercury*.

At the height of the 2002 Presidential elections, *The Daily News* also faced serious politically-related distribution problems, particularly in ZANU PF rural strongholds of Mashonaland and Manicaland, where party supporters declared these zones no-go-areas for both the opposition MDC and *The Daily News*.

One of the early signals of government's intention to do away with *The Daily News* was the setting up of a Committee to look into the growing polarisation of the media in the country. The report by the Media Ethics Committee (MEC) spelt doom for the private media. It called for the development of a 'patriotic media,' in light of the current crisis. It also called for restriction of media ownership to nationals, and pointed out that, 'white-owned and white sponsored media remains anti-African, anti-Government and Euro-centric' (Department of Information, 2002, 225). It can therefore be argued that the MEC Report laid the groundwork for the introduction of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, under which *The Daily News* was closed down.

### **Legal Niceties and Containment of *The Daily News***

One thing that has fascinated both critics and admirers of the Mugabe government alike is its penchant for 'legal niceties'. From land reform, electoral reform, to media reform, the government deliberately starts by creating the necessary legal instruments that serve its purpose – noble or otherwise – to give legitimacy to its actions. The law, in this regard, is seen as carrying moral authority, and hence capable of sanitising whatever negative policy the state comes up with. It is, to the Mugabe government, the genie in the bottle. It is summoned now and again to give the veneer of legitimacy to everything controversial that it seeks to carry out.

The land issue presented a serious challenge to Zimbabwean journalists – both those working in the 'independent' media and government media alike – in terms of how it should be covered. Was it a 'land reform,' a 'revolution,' a 'land grab,' 'land theft' or what? It became clear to the government that winning the battle for 'the minds and hearts of man' over the land crisis, to borrow a phrase from Ian Smith, required a single voice. *The Daily News* was undoubtedly the only alternative voice that reached a wide section of the population on a daily basis, rivalling the state controlled ZBC and *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*. It refused to historicise and contextualise the land issue, preferring to treat it within the narrow framework of 'property rights' and 'rule of law.' As such, it used a language that drew anger from the government and war veterans: referring to the process as 'land grab' and 'theft', calling farm occupiers 'squatters' and 'invaders' and casting doubt on the authenticity of the war veterans whom it referred as 'the so-called war veterans.' *The Daily News* gave the impression, through its framing of local news, that its main audiences were outside the country – the so-called 'the international community.' The other independent newspapers, though they were equally critical of the new

land policy, did not really pose much of a threat, given their limited circulation: the *Zimbabwe Independent*, the *Standard* and the *Zimbabwe Mirror* only reach 4-7 percent of the population, while the *Financial Gazette* reaches 9 percent (Waldahl 2004, 41).<sup>16</sup> This left *The Daily News* as the major 'spoilsport'. Therefore, a way had to be found to deal with *The Daily News*.

The crafting of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) should be seen in this light. AIPPA, believed to be the brainchild of then Information Minister, Jonathan Moyo, provides for the registration of all media houses and accreditation of all journalists with the MIC. This means that the government-appointed Commission can exercise its discretion to decide who may or may not work as a journalist in Zimbabwe. Under this law, several foreign correspondents, including those reporting for CNN and BBC were expelled from the country. AIPPA is a legal instrument created in order to control the private press in general, and not, as suggested by its misleading name, to provide access to information held by public authorities. Another restrictive law, the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) of 2001, had also been passed to deal with broadcasting; hence this was a way of completing the tightly knit web of control. The partiality of the MIC Board has also been questioned, since the Minister of Information appoints it. Its first chairman, Tafataona Mahoso, a former head of the journalism school at the Harare Polytechnic, is a known sympathiser of the government, and he had also served as chairman of the Media Ethics Committee that produced a harsh report on the private media in Zimbabwe.

This new law achieved what other repressive measures had failed to achieve, namely to silence *The Daily News*. It is no wonder that Jonathan Moyo included in his CV submitted to ZANU PF for standing as the party's candidate for Tsholotsho the passing of legislation such as AIPPA, BSA and ZBC Commercialisation Act as some of his outstanding achievements, stating that, 'The first two (laws) have gone through a series of amendments that have left them as much sought after pieces of legislation by jurisdictions in Africa and other countries elsewhere facing the sort of regime change challenges our country has faced between 2000 and now.'<sup>17</sup>

### **But what really led to the closure of *The Daily News*?**

'The Daily News was doomed to perish from the day of its celebrated launch',  
Geoff Nyarota (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 October 2003).

The question of what or who really led to the closure of *The Daily News* may never be adequately answered. The most popular view in the media (both local and

international) is that the paper was closed for defying a law whose constitutionality it was challenging in the courts. This view presents the paper as having heroically taken a principled stand against a repressive law. As such, it is an innocent victim of a repressive government. Nyarota, the founding editor of the paper, cites two events as directly responsible for the collapse of *The Daily News*: the passing of AIPPA and the appointment of Sam Sipepa Nkomo as CEO at the ANZ.<sup>18</sup> Sipepa Nkomo, as a director of the Mining Industry Pension Fund (MIPF) had been exposed in a story in *The Daily News* relating to fraud, and, in Nyarota's opinion, he had scores to settle when he was appointed CEO of the paper that had led to his downfall at the MIPF. A brother to ZANU PF Chairman and Special Affairs Minister responsible for Land, John Nkomo, there is also a conspiracy theory that Sipepa Nkomo was brought in as a man with the mission of destroying *The Daily News* from within. A third factor that Nyarota also presents is the mysterious reaction from majority shareholder Strive Masiyiwa, who suggested to him that the collapse of *The Daily News* would be 'good riddance' to him.<sup>19</sup>

What further complicates the question is that while the paper was taking its 'principled stand,' three other papers that had been equally critical of the government obliged to register with the MIC and continued publishing. As Trevor Ncube, the Publisher of *The Zimbabwe Independent* remarked, 'I believe this could have been avoided had Nkomo agreed to join (then publisher of *The Financial Gazette*, Elias) Rusike and myself in our decision to register our newspaper and then launch a constitutional challenge against this Act.'<sup>20</sup>

In written responses to Nyarota, Trevor Ncube further said, '*The Daily News* has basically given the government a 'legitimate reason' to shut the paper down. The decision not to register when it was obvious that the government hated *The Daily News* with a passion and wanted to close down the newspaper was tactless and played right into the hands of (Jonathan) Moyo and (Tafataona) Mahoso.'<sup>21</sup>

Nyarota argues that the failure by Nkomo to register the paper 'was less to do with the claimed defiance of an unjust law than it was to do with a genuine failure to present MIC with details of the ANZ's finances, as requested.' Though some could argue that this is coming from a bitter man who had been unceremoniously removed from a paper he had founded, it is highly probable that *The Daily News* could not provide a financial statement because this would expose their 'foreign' sources of funding, when such funding was no longer permissible under the new law. Nyarota notes that Nkomo had indicated in an article published in *The Financial Gazette* three days before the original deadline that *The Daily News* was going to register, though it felt that there were some objectionable sections in the Act that needed to be looked at. He further argues that:

At the time of the deadline for registration the financial records of ANZ were in total shambles. The company's financial manager had just been forced to resign for that reason and his successor was still trying to come to terms with the major task of reconciling the books.<sup>22</sup>

Thus basing on Nyarota's account, it can be argued that the publishers of the paper, through their own ineptitude, were largely to blame for its closure, given that they had been sufficiently advised to register and make a joint challenge of the constitutionality of the AIPPA along with other private newspapers. All this detail is not reflected in the international reports on the closure of *The Daily News*. Rather, the story provided the necessary opportunity to further vilify the Mugabe government. Nyarota's 'theory' therefore coincides with the claim by Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa that the government did not close *The Daily News*, but that the paper closed itself by not registering with the MIC as required by law.<sup>23</sup> This has led the government to argue that *The Daily News* sought martyrdom (and perhaps got it) as a way of appealing to 'the international community.'

### **Closure of *The Daily News* and Narrowing of Democratic Space**

The story of the closure of *The Daily News* presents two important aspects that have implications for the theoretical questions raised at the beginning. The first one relates to the fact that the Zimbabwe government has remained uneasy about the existence of any kind of private media that have the potential of reaching the masses on a large scale. This is evidenced by the stifling mechanisms that it has used to cripple first *The Daily Gazette*, and now *The Daily News*. This is also reflected in the government's reluctance to allow private broadcasting despite the nullification of state monopoly broadcasting in 2000. Instead of democratising the media, the recently enacted media laws (particularly the AIPPA and the Broadcasting Services Act) have further limited the space by putting stringent conditions for entry into the two sectors. Yet it is accepted that effective democracy requires channels of communication that enable citizens to communicate independently of both the state and commercial interests (Lichtenberg, 1995). The initial successes of both *The Daily Gazette* and *The Daily News* point to a market that is hungry for alternative viewpoints in a media environment dominated by government newspapers and radio and television broadcasting.

The second aspect pertains to responsible reporting, which is a problem common to most of the so-called 'independent' press in Africa as well as the government-owned press itself. It is notable that the 'independent' press in Africa often get carried away in their criticism of hitherto sacred ruling authorities to the point of discarding ethical standards. As Kasoma (1997) writes:

The degree of truth reported in African newspapers, particularly those acting as political opposition, is extremely low. The opposition newspapers are full of exaggerations; base their reports on hearsay; make their headlines 'cry wolf'; quote sources out of context; deny 'the accused' a fair hearing; print downright biased reporting; publish smear campaign columns based more on the writer's emotions than on reasoned opinion; run illogically written editorials and so forth.

In Zimbabwe, the issue of ethical conduct cuts across all publications, both private and public, although there is a tendency to put the spotlight on the latter.<sup>24</sup> *The Daily News*, to add to its misfortunes, also suffered an ethical deficit that threatened its credibility. It published a number of stories that contained gross factual errors, leading to successive retractions. Partly, this can be explained by the fact that in a society where access to information is hampered by such laws as the Official Secrets Act and the misnamed AIPPA, newspapers end up publishing speculative stories. Because of its tough criticism of the government, it is also highly probable that the paper was deliberately misinformed in order to be discredited. Yet for the reason that the paper was critically aware of the environment in which they were operating, they should have exercised extra caution in verifying and crosschecking their stories before rushing to press. That they could be easily hoodwinked points to the degree of laxity in adhering to ethical standards.

The paper's obsession with negativity and sensational stories can be identified as the flaw that led to publication of some of these reports. The most glaring of these stories was one in which the paper in April 2002 alleged that a woman from Magunje village had been beheaded by ruling ZANU PF supporters while her children were forced to watch. The story horrified the nation. It later turned out that the whole story was a hoax, and the paper was forced to painfully retract. When the paper published in December 2002 another story alleging that President Mugabe had gone to South Africa to attend an African National Congress conference when he was actually in the country, then Information Minister fumed and threatened:

This is just getting out of hand, is this freedom of the press? Is this democracy? Are these human rights? Do the British, Americans and Australians tolerate this? Is this the kind of journalism that should win Geoff Nyarota and his reporters international awards for courage? Does it require courage to lie so blatantly and recklessly when you are in the best position to know and have the means to verify? Is there anyone out there who will raise a finger if action is taken against *The Daily News*?<sup>25</sup>

Another problem that the paper suffered from is what *The Sunday Mirror* columnist, 'Behind the Words,' called 'an acute persecution complex' which has led to

publication of self-serving stories on its front pages.<sup>26</sup> This is also supported by Charles Rukuni, a media commentator:

Political repression by the government also turned the paper into the voice of the 'voiceless', but having gone through the burner, *The Daily News* went overboard. It turned more into an activist paper, pandering more to the whims of the international community than to its readers. The paper started carrying more stories about itself and its staff. It ushered a new era of 'persecuted journalists', and the more the awards the editor-in-chief won, because he too was being 'persecuted', the more journalists joined the fray.<sup>27</sup>

I argue that part of the problem regarding responsible journalism not only in Zimbabwe but also in other African countries is that of international civil society organisations that give 'bravery' and some such awards to journalists for challenging their governments without fully understanding the situation on the ground.

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, it can be argued that *The Daily News* did a lot to contribute towards its own closure, not least through the hidden motives and ineptitude of its management. It is possible that had the management obliged to register with the MIC, the paper could have continued publishing, its own internal problems discussed above notwithstanding. Yet it is also undoubted that *The Daily News* made immense contribution towards the opening up of democratic space in Zimbabwe. While international media and civil society tended to look at one aspect of the paper's closure, namely the increasing authoritarian nature of the Mugabe government – this paper has illustrated that apart from the complexity of issues surrounding this closure, other important lessons can be drawn from *The Daily News* as a project. Notably, it has raised important questions about foreign media ownership, media regulation, responsible journalism, as well as the democratising role of the media. The four-year career of *The Daily News* has also demonstrated that while African governments are often to blame for their over-reaction to press shortcomings, it must continue to be highlighted that the press in Africa, including the donor-favoured 'independent' press, also suffer from an ethical deficit that makes it vulnerable to attacks from governments. The independent press in most African countries, for example, has the mistaken tendency of equating press freedom with unrelenting criticism of the government, muckraking or promoting political change – or the flip side of it, being servile supporters of the ruling party (see, for example Kasoma 1997; Mukasa 2000).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This trend was, however, broken in 1988 when *The Chronicle* broke the Willowgate car scandal where top government officials profiteered from illegal buying and selling of cars from the government-owned Willowvale assembly plant. A few editors, among them Geoff Nyarota and Willie Musarurwa, have dared to transform the state media from propaganda mouthpieces into critical voices, but not without paying a price.

<sup>2</sup> The total adult population is estimated to be 6.7 million (ZAMPS 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Of the five regional papers, it was only *The Eastern Star* and *The Dispatch* which had a promising start. In fact *The Eastern Star* was a celebrated success, attracting enough advertising to sustain itself. The rest of the publications were struggling right from the start, perhaps because of poor market research at the beginning.

<sup>4</sup> Various shareholders made up the original AMI group, including the Bank of Scotland; Tindle Newspapers, one of Britain's largest publishers of local and regional papers; Cross Graphics, a British supplier of printing and associated equipment; Allied Press, New Zealand's largest private media group; Commonwealth Publishing Ltd, which supplies a range of publications in several Commonwealth nations, and Michael Stent, who had wide experience in journalism and media management in South Africa and internationally (Rønning, 2000: 7).

<sup>5</sup> *The Herald*, 13 October 2003 'Daily News MDC mouthpiece: Ncube'

<sup>6</sup> It must be mentioned here that contrary to the European norm of a highly partisan press in which newspapers can openly declare their preferences for their respective parties, newspaper in Zimbabwe and most other African countries do not state their partisan preferences. The motto of *The Daily News*, for instance, was 'Telling it Like it is,' which implied that its owners meant it to be an 'objective' paper that does not take sides.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gregory Elich, 2002, 'Zimbabwe Under Siege', available at: <http://www.swans.com/library/art8/elich004.html>, (Last accessed: 31 March 2005).

<sup>8</sup> For most people, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* are particularly indispensable when it comes to searching for accommodation, jobs, automobiles and other services.

<sup>9</sup> SAMDEF was established in 1998 by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) for the purpose of providing financial, technical and training support to the region's independent media to enable them to become self-sustaining enterprises. SAMDEF provides soft loans to such enterprises in conformity with the goals of the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on promotion of an independent and pluralistic African press.

<sup>10</sup> When the DRC was invaded by Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, Zimbabwe, together with Namibia, Angola sent troops in 1998 to shore up the government of Laurent Kabila. President Mugabe's extra-parliamentary decision to take the

country into this war at a time when Zimbabwe was experiencing serious economic problems drew sustained criticism from the independent press. *The Daily News* in particular advocated the complete pull-out of Zimbabwean forces as the war continued to be a heavy drain on the economy.

<sup>11</sup> ZTV, 6 November 1999, Broadcast to the Nation.

<sup>12</sup> *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 October 2003, 'Death of Daily News: Telling it like it is.'

<sup>13</sup> The South African newspaper group, Independent Newspapers, controlled by Tony O'Riley is among the prospective investors that withdrew at the last minute (Rønning, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> According to Rønning, 'The SIDA grant of Z\$450,000 attracted the ire of the party and the government, questions were asked in Parliament, the Swedish Ambassador was called to explain the matter to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Nathan Shamuyarira, and the issue may have cost Sweden a place on the Security Council because it lost the support of Zimbabwe in its campaign' (Rønning, 2003: 212).

<sup>15</sup> *The Daily News* had consistently argued against the participation of Zimbabwean troops in the DRC, and hence published a sarcastic piece following the death of Kabila.

<sup>16</sup> The only other daily newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*, which was established in 2002 leans heavily towards the establishment. Though the ownership is shrouded in mystery, it is believed that the Southern African Publishing House (SAPHO), which, according to the newspaper's website is 'a company owned by various Zimbabwean business people, among them Ibbo Mandaza' is in fact owned by ZANU-PF-related politicians, see source available at:

<http://www.dailymirror.co.zw/index.cfm?name=aboutus>

<sup>17</sup> *Financial Gazette*, 27 January 2005: 'Gukurahundi Killed My Father'

<sup>18</sup> *Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 October 2003, 'Death of *Daily News*: Telling it like it is'

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *The Herald*, 9 October 2003, 'Government did not ban *Daily News*: Chinamasa'

<sup>24</sup> For example when the Media Monitoring Project – Zimbabwe (MMPZ) started operating in 1998, its main focus was the public media, giving the impression that the 'independent' press were above scrutiny.

<sup>25</sup> *The Herald*, 18 December 2002.

<sup>26</sup> *Sunday Mirror*, 24 November 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Rukuni, 4 January 2003, 'Will Nyarota's departure bring sanity to journalism?' in *The Insider* available at: <http://www.insiderzim.com/jan03media.html>, (last accessed: 31 March 2005).

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