
COMMENTARY

In the Service of Press Freedom or the Imperial Agenda? Negotiating Repression and Coloniality in Zimbabwean Journalism

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Ideological differences relating to the normative expectations of media performance in Zimbabwe have, historically, been at the heart of debates and struggles around press freedom and media activism. On one hand, political leaders, who lean towards nationalist politics, have accused the media and media activists who are mostly part of the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), of undertaking colonial work. In some cases, the private media have been characterised as running dogs of imperialism. On the other hand, media activists and journalists, have accused the government of limiting the space for meaningful engagement in media work through harsh laws and the arrests of journalists. These activists and journalists, ideologically located mostly in the terrain of a free market liberal understanding of media and politics, have also accused the government of using soft strategies such as starving private newspapers of government advertising and the huge revenue that comes with it. Former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has given as good as he has got in this ideological war. He has accused the private media of colluding with the Western media to tarnish the image of the country. In turn, he has been described as a media hangman. Using a combination of archival research and in-depth interviews with journalists, media activists and politicians, this paper gives a historicised account of this ideological struggle and seeks to engage with questions concerning the meaning of press freedom and media activism in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: coloniality; colonial work; decoloniality; postcolonialism; press freedom; responsibility

Introduction

Former Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe's legacy is a mixture of confronting imperialism and neo-colonialism, and at the same time violating the human rights of his own people, including presiding over a genocide between 1983–87. Mugabe has also been regarded as an enemy of the media, Civil Society Organisation (CSOs) and the clergy (church) which he characterised as serving an imperial agenda in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The media, CSOs and the church are generally seen in this view as comprising civil society, that is the space

outside of government and business (Graham, 2001; Hearn, 2001; Makumbe, 1998). In Zimbabwe, civil society organisations – such as the Media Institute in Southern Africa (MISA), the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ), and the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZHLR) – that are engaged in defending the media and fighting for a broader space for media in Zimbabwe have been characterised as being in the service of Western imperialism by the country's leadership. This is despite the fact that these organisations see themselves as engaged in genuine media activism meant to open up the democratic space for media operations in the country. However, what can be regarded as an epistemological struggle between media activists in Zimbabwe and the ruling elites is also precisely the question of what media freedom, and by extension media activism, actually consists of within the historical context of the country.

This paper seeks to offer a critique of different ideas of media freedom and media activism in Zimbabwe. Taking up the challenge to rethink the deployment of theory and methods in African media scholarship, I start by theorising what a decolonial idea of media activism in Zimbabwe today would look like (Mutsvairo, 2018; Moyo and Mutsvairo, 2018, Chasi and Rodny-Gumede, 2018; Chiumbu, 2016). I then make a historical case based on the competing visions of the normative expectations of Zimbabwean media performance, to illustrate what media freedom has meant in Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. I do this by discussing various case studies when the ideological conflict between the country's leaders and the media activists and journalists has surfaced and played out in public. In the third section, I analyse interviews with selected key informants among political leaders, leaders in media organisations and a select number of journalists. In these interviews, the focus is on competing visions of media freedom and media activism.

Towards a decolonial idea of press freedom and media activism in Zimbabwe today

Following Wynter (2003) and Fanon (1963), Maldonado-Torres (2017 and 2007) notes that what limits hegemonic liberal and neoliberal visions of human freedom and liberation is that they are built on conceptions of subjectivity rooted in coloniality. Illustrating this thesis, in the context of human rights discourse, he points out that the idea of the human, as a universal subject or figure, is itself riddled with and limited by coloniality. In the West, the human appears as a figure separated from the divine through a secular-line and through racialised constructs where an 'onto-Manichean colonial line' separates the human and the barbarian (Maldonado-Torres, 2017: 117). In postcolonial countries, like Zimbabwe, to talk of press freedom as a human right outside 'a decolonization of the concept of the human' is to fall into the vampirism of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2017: 117; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 11).

This essay brings together postcolonial and decolonial theories whilst thinking through the problematic of press freedom and media activism in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Decolonial theorists argue, and insist, that decoloniality is not postcolonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, this essay locates its argument in the point of convergence between the two as anti-colonial theoretical postures (Bhambra, 2014; Asher, 2017). Hall defines the postcolonial as the conjectural moment 'in which both the crisis of the uncompleted struggle for "decolonisation" and the crisis of the "post-independence" state are deeply inscribed' (Hall, 1996: 224). While emphasising that coloniality is different from colonialism, Maldonado-Torres defines it as 'long standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (2007: 243). Ndlovu-Gatsheni refers to coloniality as 'a leitmotif of global imperial designs [...] the invisible vampirism of technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power that continue to exist in the

minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 11). The way Hall (1996) thinks about the endurance of colonialism in the postcolonial moment is not different from the emphasis that Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) ascribe to coloniality as something born out of colonialism and modernity.

Press freedom in Zimbabwe, as in most postcolonial states, is still thought of in the liberal sense. White, firmly locates journalists at the centre of press freedom, referring to press freedom as 'editorial and journalistic freedom' that allows the media to fulfil the normative expectation of setting 'the agenda for debating the national development goals' (2011: 221). Reference to 'national development goals' exposes his liberal locus of enunciation. He notes that there should be the assumption that the media have the editorial capacity and leadership to set the agenda, and that, as part of the civil society, they have 'the vision,' 'the will' and 'the unity' to push for these developmental goals (White, 2011: 221). This conceptualisation of the media and media freedom, and what it can do, is based on liberal normative expectations of the media. These liberal normative expectations of the media include the watchdog role, the informational role, and the entertainment role, amongst others. What is assumed and taken for granted is that the media operate in a 'free market' where there is no connection between it (the media) and politics, and there is minimal government intervention in the market, in general, and in the media, specifically. The liberal tradition in Africa has been characterised by an emphasis on the private ownership of media relying heavily on advertisements and sales (Heath, 1997: 30). In Zimbabwe, even where the print media are owned by the government, they still operate and compete in the (free) market for sales and for advertising.

According to Ræijmaekers and Maesele, the liberal model, 'conceives society as a complex of competing groups and interests, in which power is fragmented and widely diffused' (2015: 1044). In this imagined liberal democratic context, 'the main goals of media are checking on the government and informing and representing the people' (Ræijmaekers and Maesele, 2015: 1044). According to Curran and Seaton, in the liberal perspective, it is argued that the freedom to publish in the context of a free market allows for a diversity of viewpoints making the press a representative institution (Curran and Seaton, 2009: 326). This view is limited in that it focuses only on the government as a possible threat to press freedom and ignores two points. First, it ignores those times when the government becomes the enabler and supporter of the media for the benefit of the wider spectrum of society. At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe faced the challenge that the media were privately owned by foreign (South African) white-owned and controlled- companies. Ronning and Kupe note that during the colonial period 'newspapers and broadcasting mainly served the needs of the colonial administrators' such that these news organisations 'together with other colonial social and cultural institutions, constituted a colonial public sphere' (2000: 138). The colonial public sphere catered for a narrow section of the Zimbabwean population. The Zimbabwean government had to create the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) in January 1981 to buy shares of the South African Argus Company within a newspaper group that dominated print media space in the country. This was ostensibly to ensure that the media served a broader section of society. Ronning and Kupe posit that ZMMT was not only intended to serve as a platform to change ownership and editorial staffing at the newspaper but to ensure that the public print media not only served white interests but the 'interests of the broad section of Zimbabwean society' (2000: 139). Trapped in the debate of whether to nationalise the media group or to keep it private, the government faced the challenge on 'how to decolonize the foreign-owned media while maintaining some national stake in them without the direct intervention of the state' (Ronning and Kupe, 2000: 139). With hindsight, what has happened with 'Zimpapers', must not obscure the challenges faced in the early years of independence concerning the

media, and how government efforts in 1981 were targeted at enlarging the 'public sphere' to encompass the majority black population.

Second, the view that freedom to publish in the context of a free market allows for a diversity of viewpoints making the press a representative institution is a view that ignores those times when the market – that is businesses and other commercial interests – become a threat to media freedom. This can happen in many ways. For example, in Zimbabwe, the mobile giant Econet was in 2015 involved in a fracas that sought to silence *NewsDay*. The situation at the time of Zimbabwe's independence, as described in the previous section, also demonstrates that the market does not necessarily extend media access and freedom to embrace a diversity of opinions. In the years before 1980, the media in Rhodesia operated as part of a racist public sphere that occluded black views and opinions or never took them seriously. As Ronning and Kupe (2000) allude to, the feeling in the new government of the time was that, that should not continue into the independence years. The South African situation is exemplary here. The Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) hearings found that in the pre-1994 period, the media in South Africa colluded with the apartheid system (TRC Report, 1998). A 1999 inquiry into racism in the media by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) concluded that the media in the country, 'reflect a persistent pattern of racist expressions, [...], persistent racist stereotypes, racial insensitivity' and that South African media 'can be characterised as racist institutions' (SAHRC, 2000: 89). This raised a lot of debate in academic circles with some academics arguing that the research was flawed (Berger, 2001; Tomaselli, 2000). However, these academics also pointed out that the shortcomings of the SAHRC research did not mean that the media in South Africa were not racist. Some scholars went further to point out how the media in South Africa have actively deployed elaborate discursive strategies to deny its racism (Durrheim, Quayle, Whitehead and Kriel, 2005; Wasserman, 2010). It is the perpetuation of this history of a racially exclusive 'public sphere' in the setup of the media industry as mostly white and privately owned that has underpinned calls for media transformation in the country (Tomaselli, 2000; Berger, 2001; Boloka and Krabil, 2000). The Zimbabwean government foresaw this and wanted to pre-empt it. To appreciate how the liberal understanding of media freedom is insufficient for a postcolonial country like Zimbabwe, we need to embrace a decolonial approach (Mutsvairo, 2018; Moyo and Mutsvairo, 2018, Chasi and Rodny-Gumede, 2018; Chiumbu, 2016). To imagine a decolonial press freedom is to think beyond the current liberal rooted conceptions of media freedom. This entails, first, challenging the blind universalism and Eurocentrism of liberal theory including the notion of the public sphere. Second, it is to displace the market and put people at the centre of the equation.

Challenging the blind universalism of Eurocentric theory, Allen (2016) focuses on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the later thinkers it inspired including Jurgen Habermas whose concept of the public sphere has become hegemonic in Eurocentric ideas of press freedom. What has been pointed out as the challenge to this brand of critical theory is its silence on colonialism and race and how these are co-constitutive with modernity (Allen, 2016; Ciccariello-Maher, 2016). Although Baum admits that, set against its lofty goals of human emancipation, critical theory fails to acknowledge the history of colonialism, he still believes that in its critique of antisemitism, the Frankfurt School Critical Theory offers analytical resources 'with respect to confronting racism and colonialism' (2015: 420). In response, Ciccariello-Maher (2016) notes that the failures of the Frankfurt school are writ in its Eurocentrism that makes it blind to the fact that the holocaust, was a colonial horror, coming back home. Here Ciccariello-Maher, draws our attention to Aime Cesaire's observation that, in the holocaust, European modernity faced the horror it created in colonisation as 'colonial methods and concepts returned suddenly and unexpectedly to European soil'

(2016: 133). Allen (2016)'s tactic of decolonising theory involves the double play of refusal and inheriting. It is a refusal 'to remain faithful to its core doctrines or central figures' and inheriting it, that is, taking it up 'while simultaneously radically transforming it' (Allen, 2016: xiii). Allen also notes that, contrary to its stated aims to pursue emancipation, critical theory fails to engage 'substantively with one of the most influential branches of critical theory, in the broader sense of that term, to have emerged in recent decades— postcolonial studies and theory' (2016: xiv). According to Allen, the failure for critical theory to engage with post- and decolonial theories, is located in the way it grounds normativity (Allen, 2016: xiv). Normativity is seen as either lying in ideas of historical progress or centred on a foundationalist conception of practical reason (Allen, 2016: xiv). This becomes problematic 'given the deep connections between ideas of historical progress and development and normative foundationalism and the theory and practice of Eurocentric imperialism' (Allen, 2016: xv). In the Global South academy, western critical theory, then appears as entangled in the colonial project. As has been argued above, to argue, in the liberal sense, that freedom to publish in the context of a free market allows for a diversity of viewpoints making the press a representative institution is to ignore colonial history and to ignore the ravages of the 'market' in the postcolony.

In that challenging this centering of the market is to problematize the individualism of Eurocentric conceptions of public life, displacing the market is thus linked to the point previously argued. Displacing the market, as some kind of public sphere, entails not thinking about the journalist, or media workers, as Leviathan figures but as Gramsci's organic intellectuals. To Gramsci, organic intellectuals, are located within the socio-economic structure of their society (Gramsci, 1971). He argues that:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.

Nothing sets these intellectuals apart from their society or community. The journalist, as an organic intellectual, would be expected to be located within his community. A decolonial conceptualisation of press freedom, requires us to think in the Nguni sense: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am because of other people). It is this realisation of interconnectedness and the acceptance by journalists and political leaders alike that their fate is tied to the fate of the broader society that should encourage a new media politics.

Struggles over press freedom: A brief history

In this section, I proffer some examples that illustrate the historical struggle around press freedom in Zimbabwe. The cases that I discuss here include the work of veteran journalist and editor Geoff Nyarota, the struggle around the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), President Mugabe's rhetoric against the media and the civil society, and the White city bombing in 2018 where some journalists were injured. In that it seems like an extraneous incident, the use of the case of the White City bombing needs to be explained here. Journalists work mostly in public spaces and public events. The White City bombing is studied here as the beginning of some examples of the semi-militarisation of politics in Zimbabwe whereby former soldiers became active party political players, and soldiers have been let loose from the barracks to deal with the public as later exemplified in two protests (August 2018 and January 2019). The White City bombing is considered as the beginning of the changing nature of the space within which journalists in Zimbabwe can now operate since November 2017. After the White City bombing, there have been live shootings of

members of the public as happened in August 2018 after protests around election results in Harare. It happened again in January 2019. In retrospect, once the soldiers had marched out of barracks in November 2017, seized power on behalf of a civilian leader, the military had effectively showed their face again in Zimbabwean politics. The bomb at the White City rally, the live ammunition in the streets of Harare in August 2018 and in January 2019 are therefore not aberrant events but centrally situated in the discursive field of Zimbabwean politics post-November 2017. As journalists are always at the front at public events such as rallies and protests, they are always the most unsafe of attendees. Violence might not have been aimed at them, but in this type of context journalists always suffer as collateral damage. In situations of war and violence, violence is not aimed at journalists, but, because of the nature of their work, it is important to consider the threat of any war or violence to journalists. These are some of the few cases that illustrate the evolving media context and the struggle for press freedom in Zimbabwe.

Geoff Nyarota, the Willowvale scandal, Gukurahundi and the Daily News bombing

If there is a journalist in Zimbabwe who could be said to represent the struggle around media freedom in its many textured ways, it would be Geoff Nyarota. Nyarota in the early years of independence worked for the state controlled *Chronicle* newspaper. In what can be regarded as a triumph of press freedom, his newspaper exposed the Willowvale scandal in the early years of independence. The Willowvale scandal is a story of early corruption around the government car plant where ministers are believed to have looted the project. The first lady, Sally Mugabe, is believed to have been involved in the mess. The Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, responded by sacking the ministers linked to the corruption. One minister committed suicide. Nyarota was moved from the editorship of the *Chronicle* in what is referred to as demotion by promotion.

At the same time when Nyarota was editor of the *Chronicle* the government of Zimbabwe engaged in ethnic cleansing in Matabeleland and parts of Midlands provinces. The operation has come to be known as the Gukurahundi and has been classified as a genocide by Genocide Watch (Karimkwenda, 2010). Critics of his argue that Nyarota looked away and never brought to the fore the Mugabe government's excesses in Matabeleland. This is a charge that Nyarota has firmly denied.

In 1999, Nyarota emerged as the founding editor of the *Daily News*. The *Daily News*, an independent newspaper headquartered in Harare, can be regarded as one of the most powerful independent newspapers to be published in Zimbabwe to date. Its commitment to exposing government malfeasance, could certainly have contributed to the government hatred of the private media. The paper was closed in September 2003, but not before it was bombed twice. It was closed because it refused to register with the government's Zimbabwe Media Council (ZMC) set up after the coming into effect of the AIPPA (Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act). The newspaper was reopened after the government commissioning authority allowed it to reopen in May 2010. The paper has had an uneasy relationship with the government and was bombed twice. The owners of the paper, Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) blame the country's security authorities for the bombing. Its founding editor, Nyarota was arrested six times and claims he was the target of a government assassination plot.

Nyarota's bravery in reporting the Willowvale scandal and later working at the *Daily News*, and his prevarication in the face of Gukurahundi, exhibit the complexity of what press freedom means in the country. Considering both his journalism around the Willowvale scandal, the Gukurahundi genocide and Nyarota's reaction to it, provides a fruitful space to think and reflect on the historical development of press freedom in Zimbabwe. How it was that Nyarota

failed to report the Gukurahundi genocide with the same vigour as the Willowvale scandal suggests that press freedom is not universal but can be linked to specific circumstances in a given situation. It can be understood to be related to a combination of political beliefs, political conditions and personal conviction on the part of the journalist. As a state media journalist at the *Chronicle*, prevarication around the Gukurahundi genocide can be explained in terms of the coloniality of both the nation and the state. Ranger (2005) has advanced a thesis of patriotic journalism which explains the failure by state-owned media journalists to condemn government policies. Journalists operating within state media seem to believe they have to comply with government policy, and never critique it, even though it has failed over the years. The Gukurahundi genocide was couched as a government security policy to make Matabeleland safe from dissident menace. The difference in the way Nyarota reacted to the Willowvale scandal and to the Gukurahundi genocide allows us to relate the articulations of media freedom to questions of ethical and personal conscience.

The struggle over the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA)

The process of and eventual effecting of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy law carved out a discursive space that essentially became a battlefield over press freedom in Zimbabwe. The then minister of information, Prof. Jonathan Moyo, as the promoter of the bill in parliament came under pressure. The chairperson of the parliamentary legal committee, Dr. Edison Zvobgo, excoriated the minister as desiring Zimbabweans to ask for permission from him to speak and described the bill as 'the most calculated and determined assault on our (constitutional) liberties, in the 20 years I served as Cabinet Minister' (Article 19/Misa-Zimbabwe, 2004: 3). Most people in the private press, have in hindsight, described Moyo as responsible for AIPPA even though the minister has pointed out that there are specialists who draft these laws in the government bureaucracy. In that this charge against may be extended to the excesses of the Zanu PF government as a whole as he was prime minister, the principles related to the critiquing AIPPA, that should be rightly pegged to the question of press freedom, have sometimes been lost. To his credit, the minister rightly pointed out that at that time the media was not regulated leaving it to be exposed to a raft of other laws that were indeed draconian like the then current Law and Order maintenance Act (LOMA) [changed to the Public Order Security Act (POSA)], and the Official Secrets Act (OSA). The media was also doing nothing towards any moves to self-regulation. It was several years after the AIPPA was enacted that the media industry set up VMCZ (Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe), an organisation whose media activism is centred on self-regulation. Evaluating the work of VMCZ could add important insights to the arguments made in this paper, but it deserves a full study of its own. So would be a close study of AIPPA. A useful approach to AIPPA could be one where activists and academics consider what it offers as a starting point to take forward press freedom in Zimbabwe. This is an approach that would have to build on the fact that, before AIPPA, there was no information access law in the country. The focus here should be on the kind of press freedom that the law seeks to promote and how it can be bettered. In that, the Act attempts a balancing act by seeking to protect members of the public from excesses of the media, on one hand, whilst facilitating access to information held by public bodies, on the other hand, is never appreciated. Certainly in cases where the Act has huge loopholes such as the unreasonable time heads of organisations are given to respond to journalists' requests for information, amendments need to be suggested, rather than following suggestions of striking down the law in its entirety. The argument here is that activists must engage in a dialogue, with lawmakers that will ensure that the country can have an information access law in contrast to the pre-AIPPA years.

Mugabe's rhetoric against NGOs and the media

President Robert Mugabe has never hidden his hatred of the conduct of the civil society in Zimbabwe – the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and the Church – who were seen as relying on the West for ideological content and monetary support. In his criticism of this civil society, Mugabe has also been critical of the media. Mugabe has accused local journalists of publishing falsehoods and fabrications in the service of their Western masters. More importantly, playing his politics on the global stage, where he has seen his role as fighting imperialism, Mugabe has focused his rhetoric on Western media. In August 2007, while addressing a high-level conference on poverty reduction in Malaysia, Mugabe took a swipe at journalists for tarnishing the image of Zimbabwe. In what sounds like deep media theory, Mugabe, must be quoted at length:

The press and journalists, are they driven by the sense of honesty and objectivity all the time? [...] Or are they swayed from objectivity and truth by certain notions arising from their own subjective views? [...] I say that in the light of reports quite often deliberately intended to tarnish and deceive. Should the journalists really indulge in what they know to be misleading stories, and therefore stories that go against objectivity and the truth? (Quoted in Studio 7, 2007).

It is important to note that the Zimbabwean president's argument is framed within the liberal normative ideals of media performance. Those are guided by what Zelizer (2004) calls the god-terms of Truth and Objectivity. As a self-confessed enemy of liberalism and an anti-colonial fighter, framing his argument this way, may be rhetorical. Mugabe is aiming at outfoxing the (international) media from within their own arguments. In the same story, the *MISA* director, Rashweat Mukundu, does not respond to such questions around 'truth' and 'objectivity' that Mugabe raises but was dismissive arguing that this was characteristic of the Zimbabwean president reflecting his 'disregard for the important role played by the media' (Studio 7, 2007). However, Mugabe seems to be saying the media plays an important role, which he is aware of, but reportage must be truthful and objective. This is despite the fact that objectivity and truthfulness have long been exposed to be components of the discursive myths of liberal journalism (Kaplan, 2002, 2009; Schudson, 1997).

White City bombing

In the history of Zimbabwe, even at the height of Gukurahundi in Matabeleland in 1985, it had never happened that a bomb or grenade went off in a rally. For the first time, on 23 June 2018, a bomb exploded at the ruling Zanu PF party rally at the White City Stadium in Bulawayo, the country's second largest city. Some critics have described as an inside job undertaken from within the ruling party and others have located the possible cause of such an eventuality in the struggle between President Mnangagwa and his vice president, Constantine Chiwengwa (News24, 2018; Kunambura, 2018). Superficially this would seem like a one-dimensional event that has no reference to the media. Yet according to the Media Institute for Southern Africa Zimbabwe (MISA Zimbabwe), three journalists from the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) were injured when the bomb went off on that day. The injured were identified as cameraman Coster Thole, technician Chipo Five, and producer Forget Tsododo. The report said the three were taken to Mpilo hospital for treatment. Effectively, these journalists were injured in the line of duty covering the president of Zanu PF who was campaigning in Bulawayo ahead of the 30 July 2018 general elections. MISA condemned such acts of violence in general. The organisation then advised the injured journalists to approach it 'for assistance' and signalling that 'members of the public who have any information on other media practitioners injured

in today's blast are kindly requested to get in touch with MISA' (Kubatana.net, 2018). In terms of media freedom, there are several issues to be raised here. The most important point is that, since journalists work as embedded in society and in public spaces, society must be safe (free from possible and unnecessary harm) for everyone before it can itself be safe (free from possible harm) for journalists. This exposes the flaws of a liberal conceptualisation of press freedom that seeks to discursively create a journalist as a privileged high priest of modern day communication therefore worthy of a superior form of freedom of expression beyond that of the rest of society. Journalists' freedom and safety are linked to that of the community that they work in. A rethinking of press freedom must locate it together with the people as a community.

The case studies discussed in this section are meant to show the environment which which journalists perform their duties in Zimbabwe. The last case study of the bombing at the White City rally shows the changing patterns of that terrain. The next section will interrogate journalists, activists and political figures about their views on press freedom in the context of the media terrain sketched in this section.

Competing visions of media freedom

In speaking to journalists, politicians and media activists, it is clear that most of them think of or conceptualise press freedom within the normative liberal frame. It is easy to see how the normative liberal idea of press freedom has come to be hegemonic. Zimbabwe inherited its media, the industry itself and with it its media culture, from Rhodesia. As with business, politics, education, and other facets of public life, Zimbabwe, like an obedient colony, still follows the liberal British heritage bequeathed to it at independence in 1980. As shall be seen in the discussions of the interviews that follow, the ideological implications of holding on to a liberal version of press freedom is that most journalists, activists and politicians refuse to engage with a counter-narrative that calls for responsibility from media practitioners, especially when it comes from political leaders on the left like Robert Mugabe, despite his prevarications at times. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) discusses the challenges of making sense of the politics of a leader like Mugabe, who stands up to the West with his leftist pan-African rhetoric, but doles out violence for his own citizens. The point raised here is that beyond the personalities of the leaders and the journalists, debates around press freedom in Zimbabwe are ideological and contested. Liberal notions of press freedom are upheld as the common-sense, yet they are as equally ideological as the leftist pan-Africanism of Mugabe. At the end of the day, what must be emphasised is the desirability of press freedom in Zimbabwe – what form it takes is what can always be debated.

Before discussing the interviews, I must give a short explanation of the methodology. In-depth interviews were undertaken as an old way of gathering systematic qualitative data that is literally an inter-view, that is, an exchange of views between the researcher and the researched (Kvale, 2007: 5). They are meant to gain more information on the views and understandings of people that are being researched. In this paper, I wanted to understand journalists, politicians and activists' understandings of media freedom. As pointed in the previous paragraph, media freedom among journalists is still largely thought of in the discourse of liberal politics. In selecting the interviewees, the researcher used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Journalists were approached as interviewees based on their work and their visibility as media practitioners in different spaces of the media. Some of the journalists were approached on the advice of some of the interviewees. The goal was not to achieve tribal or regional balancing, rather the balancing out in terms of gender and differences in a variety of types of media in the country. Some of the journalists worked for big newspaper companies that are regarded as mainstream. However, others worked for what can

be regarded as alternative media organisations whose work is mainly based online. Most of the female journalists interviewed work in such alternative spaces. Faith Ndlovu, who works for the voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ) is based in Harare. There was an option to interview her or her boss, Mr Loughy Dube. Considering issues of gender, I decided on her. Dr. Mphathisi Ndlovu, interviewed here as a key informant, is an academic, researching and teaching at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Bulawayo, and has been researching and publishing on Zimbabwean media for many years now. Tapfuma Machakaire is a journalist who has worked for a long time in Bulawayo, but would not consider himself as a Matabeleland person. In fact, he views himself as a Zimbabwean journalist; his self-understanding is that he is a national reporter and he refuses to be tribalised or regionalised. In that the journalists, media activists and politicians that I interviewed work within the context of Zimbabwean nationalism, I believe their views and opinions are valid in a national context. Considering that journalism, as a public good, is thought of in national terms in Zimbabwe, I believe their opinions and views are reputable as a source of knowledge on Zimbabwean journalism. In terms of ethical issues, I had to clear with all the interviewees the use of their names and in terms of what they had said they needed for protection. All of them were comfortable being identified with their views. However, one interviewee, for professional reasons, requested that they should not be identified with a certain opinion or observation that they had made. I respected that request.

What does press freedom mean to you in Zimbabwe today?

On being asked what press freedom would mean in the Zimbabwean context, considering the long history of the struggle over press freedom in the country, Methuseli Moyo, a veteran journalist, former politician, and now a media academic and farmer, is quick to point out that freedom of the media is 'more than the absence of prohibitive laws and threats'. He emphasises that it should include 'written constitutional guarantees of freedom and safety. Such freedom is not conditional but given' (Methuseli Moyo, *interview with the writer*). Taking the form of a benevolent dictator, Robert Mugabe has been known to use courts and laws to muzzle the media. This explains why Moyo believes that an overemphasis on repealing laws, which has become the rhetoric of the Emmerson Mnangagwa regime that replaced Robert Mugabe in November 2017, is not enough. Lungile Tshuma, a media academic and former journalist, sees press freedom as 'a right and not a privilege'. He seeks to link this to the country's constitution's section 61, which affirms freedom of expression and freedom of the media, and section 62, which affirms access to information. Mindful of the importance of the broader society, Tshuma, notes that at times people are victimised for reading certain newspapers and characterises that as a violation of press freedom. This is important in a country that three of the interviewees said has recently been 'militarised'. Faith Ndlovu, a journalist and a media activist campaigning for self-regulation, also links journalists to the broader society when she argues that press freedom 'means that the media's right to inform and the public's right to know is not curtailed or unnecessarily restricted'. She emphasises that in enjoying their press freedom, journalists should be 'professional and accountable for the work they do'. However, and importantly, Faith Ndlovu brings an important dimension to the debate when she makes reference to self-regulation. She argues that self-regulation demands a certain level of ethical commitment.

Loveness Nyathi, a journalist with an alternative women's media organisation, also said freedom of the press implies that sources are able to tell their stories to the media without any hindrance or fear. There are times when people are victimised at work and find it hard to speak out. In Matabeleland, there is the running story of Gukurahundi where some people are still afraid to come out and tell their story for fear of victimisation by the government. In

her thinking about press freedom, Blondie Ndebele, a NGO communications manager and former journalist, emphasises 'media independence from state control or any other third force which seeks to control how journalists view and report on issues that matter'. Her conceptualisation does not address the idea that journalists are always 'positioned' in different contexts in society. However, it is understandable that from a myriad of forces that can influence journalists, Blondie Ndebele seems to raise a red flag against more powerful forces like politicians, businesses and even organised NGOs. Lulu Brenda Harris, a journalist and media activist, points out how 'press freedom comes with responsibility to provide credible information and allow for feedback from audiences'. It would seem 'allowing for feedback from audiences' is a way of trying to say press freedom is about the broader society.

Mphathisi Ndlovu, a media academic, sees press freedom as straddling the divide between negative forces that threaten journalists in their work and the journalist's agency in what they can proactively do. In carefully chosen words, he argues that press freedom is:

The right of the media and/or journalists to express themselves freely without any coercion or any other forms of impediments from the state and business community. It also includes the right to publish and disseminate content without any censorship, or fear of victimisation in the aftermath. As a citizen I have a right to access information that would enable me to effectively participate in the governance of my country. This requires a conducive media environment (Mphathisi Ndlovu, interview with the writer).

In recent years, the corporate world has joined governments (politicians) in the top rungs of the lists of the threats to press freedom around the world. This does not mean that corporate threats to press freedom are anything new, but somehow, it has always evaded being named (and shamed) as such. Mphathisi Ndlovu makes an important point that press freedom must not be only emphasised in the process of reporting, but must be seen to be observed even in the aftermath of publishing.

Tapfuma Machakaire, a veteran journalist and a member of the VMCZ ethics board, links the agency of journalists with a balance of ethics to conceptualise press freedom as, 'the ability by journalists in media institutions to disseminate information in accordance with a universal code of ethics; and that is information which is true, fair, balanced, accurate and without bias'. Machakaire emphasises the 'international and agreed ethics by media organisations in the world'. In a sense, he does not want to provincialise press freedom but gestures to its universality. To him what is press freedom in the U.S. should be press freedom in Zimbabwe. He concludes by noting that press freedom, like journalism, is a common good as it 'allows society to enjoy free flow of information: professionally accurate information.'

The table below picks phrases from the interviews to sum up the way the interviewees think about press freedom as a dialectic of 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'. The interviewees believe strongly that freedom of the press is a right, but it is a qualified right, where journalists have to balance freedom with responsibility. Importantly, the table also contains phrases from the same interviews that sum up how the interviewees think about press freedom as a human right.

What do you think of the government's accusation of media as running dogs of imperialism?

In terms of the struggle between the government, on one hand, and mostly the private media and the NGOs, on the other hand, Edwin Ndlovu dismisses the concerns by Robert Mugabe that some media organisations were 'running dogs for imperialism' by describing

Thinking of press freedom as 'freedom to'	Thinking of press freedom as 'freedom from'
'freedom to publish any information' 'safe and able to conduct my duties as a journalist' 'freedom to inform, educate the public' 'free space' 'report freely' 'reporting what is true, real and verified' 'editorial independence' 'media independence from state control and other third forces' 'protection of media practitioners and sources' 'right to express themselves freely' 'right to publish and disseminate content'	'no censorship' 'no regulatory (laws) hindrance' 'without fear of statutory, economic and other impediments' 'absence of any laws or threats to the media' 'not curtailed or unnecessarily restricted' 'without undue hindrance from and interference' 'without hindrance from the government or any governing board' 'absence of repressive legislation that regulates how the media should behave' 'inhibitive laws that impede press freedom to be repealed' 'impediments from the state and business community' 'without any coercion' 'without censorship' 'fear of victimisation' 'fear of being victimised or arrested'
Qualifiers	Press freedom in the discourse of human rights
'responsibility' 'as long as it is true' 'all the media needs to do is to be ethical and truthful' 'professional accountable and for the work they do' 'press freedom comes with responsibility to provide credible information and allow for feedback from audiences'	'constitutionally protected rights' 'constitutionally protected' 'right to inform' 'information is a basic human right' '... within the laws of Zimbabwe, and the international laws that govern the operations of journalism'

the former president of Zimbabwe as 'the worst media hangman'. He adds that, 'it is not surprising because dictators are the ones who are afraid of their misdeeds being publicised' (Edwin Ndlovu, *interview with writer*). The discourse of dictatorship has been effectively used to shut down dialogue in many African countries. When they express unfavourable sentiments, leaders are always silenced as dictators, and hence their right to be listened to is withdrawn. Ndlovu, however, admits that the US funded some NGOs, involved in media activism, and even hosted a Radio station that was anti-Zimbabwean government. He justifies this by arguing that the US was trying to help Zimbabwean citizens who were facing abuses of their freedom of expression by the Mugabe regime. Makhosi Sibanda, a veteran journalist, points to how President Mugabe always spun counter narratives to justify himself arguing that 'to say the media was or are an extension of the West is just another counter narrative to justify his repression when it comes to the media'. The rise of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), formed at the end of 1999, to influence a vote against the government's constitutional draft in 2000, and later win almost half of the seats in parliament, intensified the struggle between Robert Mugabe and what he termed imperialist forces like the opposition itself, the private media, the Church and NGOs. It marked the rise of his narrative of opposition forces as Western puppets.

Methuseli Moyo, however, gives Mugabe the benefit of the doubt arguing that he (Mugabe) 'thinks, rightly at times, that the non-government owned or controlled media is controlled and funded by hostile Western powers'. Moyo explains at length that:

To some extent he is right because prior to the diplomatic tiff between Zimbabwe and the West, the local free press, and their international counterparts, were not as critical until Mugabe seized white land and gave it to blacks and his supporters meted violence on farmers and opposition members. In a way, the private media follows the thinking of the West. When the West was quiet during atrocities in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, the media was also quiet. So one would be right to say they collude.

Here, Methuseli Moyo seeks to think about the struggle around press freedom in a historical context. It links to the question of what press freedom is; thinking about press freedom and the actually existing struggles for press freedom in this way; then decolonise it and prove that it is not globally uniform. A historicised approach to press freedom reveals that it is not universal.

Without addressing President Mugabe's assertions directly, Faith Ndlovu acknowledges that the media and the media activism space is a 'contested terrain'. She points out how the government has used legal statutes from the colonial era to today 'to repress the media'. Her historical and nuanced account, importantly brings forth, current history, or history as it is unfolding before our eyes. The emergence of factions within the ruling Zanu PF in the years leading to the coup in November 2017 brought forth a kind of 'media capture' where factions grappled to control the media, be it state or private media, in some cases through bribes. In that the politics of the country are linked to the organisation and performance of the media, this factionalism became a threat to press freedom. Tapfuma Machakaire locates the struggle over press freedom in the envisaged power of the media. He notes that it is because 'liberation movements were aware of the power that the media wields, in ensuring the success of the liberation struggle that is why they had external radio stations (Tapfuma Machakaire, *interview with writer*). Machakaire notes that, once in power, Mugabe knew that he was now a target of the media, 'he became aware of the power of the media to get support and understanding of the people'.

Conclusion

On one hand, the serious points raised by the ruling elite in Africa, specifically in Zimbabwe, that some CSOs, including the private media are used by Western countries to undermine the countries that they lead, has been undermined by their own excesses against their people. On the other hand, media activism around freedom of expression and the right to report without hindrance, has been limited by its ideological underpinnings that overrely on Western liberal normative values, exposing them to an easy dismissal as lapdogs of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Importantly, this struggle between political leaders, most of whom have nationalist backgrounds, and media activists and journalists who want unfettered freedom of expression is primarily an ideological struggle concerning the normative conceptualisation of the role of the media in these relatively young nations. This essay argues for a decolonial imperative to challenge the Eurocentrism of the ideas of progress in liberal theoretical resources – such as the concept of the public sphere – that for a long time have been deployed in thinking about press freedom in postcolonial Africa. Tied to this, it is equally important to challenge the centrality of the market in thinking about press freedom and replace its emphasis on the journalist as an individual with the idea of the people as a bloc, and as a subject of media freedom and freedom of expression. This could close down the ideological battles between the ruling elite and the media. This is because likewise as politicians ideally serve the people, a media that serves the people, and not markets, would be beyond reproach.

Competing Interests

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