

Free for all? The case of Zimbabwe's media

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Issues of regulation and de-regulation in Southern Africa are explored in the following article, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe. It is motivated by the need to analyse why there is such reluctance on the part of Zimbabwean policy makers to liberalise public media when other countries in the sub-region are making great strides towards doing so. The author takes the position that as markets increasingly open up, the need for regulation increases in order to ensure a fair competitive environment for all who want to become players.

In October/November 1999, the Zimbabwean Ministry of Information announced that the Communications Bill would no longer be tabled in Parliament in its current format. New developments demanded the separation of broadcasting from post and telecommunications services. By 2000 a new Posts and Telecommunications Bill was ready and was duly enacted by Parliament. The question is: where does this development leave broadcasting?

Since August 1995, the Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications had been promising the opening up of airwaves. Communications in Zimbabwe is currently governed by four laws: The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Act; The Postal and Telecommunications Services Act; The Posts and Telecommunications Act; The Radio Communications Act. All four were enacted during the colonial period. The Broadcasting Act gives the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) the sole right to broadcast in Zimbabwe.

The aborted 1999 Communications Bill would have allowed for the provision of licensing and regulating postal, telecommunications, radio communication and broadcasting services. The Communications Bill would have established a Communications Authority Board to oversee monitoring of pricing, interconnection agreements, and licensing. The operation of a broadcasting service, postal service, a cellular service, telecommunication service, radio station or a private telecommunication service without a licence issued by the Broadcasting, Postal and Telecommunications Authority would be prohibited. Another important aspect to note is that the activities of the Authority would have been directed by a Board consisting of five members, all appointed by the President in consultation with the Minister of Information.

A new Act would have to make room for the appointment of an Independent Board. This can be done by decentralising the appointment process to include people representing as many stakeholders as possible. For example, there is a need to have people from both government and the private sector to select the Board. In fact, the drafting of such an Act should be exercised by all stakeholders, so that all views are considered. Liberalisation of the airwaves by means of a new Act should be in accordance with the fundamental right to communicate and the right to information.

The above scenario illustrates a sad state of events in Zimbabwe. The state supported ZBC has a monopoly over disseminating information. The aborted 1999 bill proposed the abolition of ZBC's monopoly of the airwaves but effective control of ZBC by the state was to remain. Thus, the principles of popular participation and free access to the market were still going to be undermined. This is not to say that I disagree with the principle of public service broadcasting. In fact, I believe that in Africa where the majority of the population resides in rural areas and are poor, an affordable broadcasting option should exist. That public service broadcaster should have some independence so that it can make its own decisions in order to gain the respect of its audience and be regarded as a credible source. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has made efforts to promote public interest by appointing a relatively independent Board through an independent process. A broadcaster that is regarded as the mouthpiece of the government can never become a respected source of information but will be seen as a propaganda vehicle. ?Propaganda is intended to benefit the maker or the person on whose behalf the propaganda is made. Any benefit to the general public is purely incidental? (Manyarara, 1997:5).

Deregulation of broadcasting in Zimbabwe is long overdue. The ZBC has failed to fulfil its role as public service provider because of lack of autonomy to formulate policies and control its budget. Its pay-television project has failed to take off because of interference from government. The ZBC cannot afford to embark on the project without government funding because it is financially insolvent. At the moment, there is one other broadcaster in Zimbabwe, Joy Television which does not have a licence but buys airtime from ZBC. Joy Television broadcasts from 5pm to 11pm and focuses on international programming with no mandate to provide local content programming. Joy Television does not provide local news broadcasts but runs BBC news reports.

There is no doubt that liberalisation of broadcasting will offer a diversity of sources of information and entertainment and will promote freedom of expression. There is evidence of diversity in the print media where there are more players. The groundwork has been done by various stakeholders, critics and groups that have written on and debated the way forward in liberalising broadcasting. Even when the airwaves are open, ZBC needs to refocus and look at broadcasting as a vehicle for freedom of expression, a mechanism to achieve a reasonable balance between stability and social change? (Ncube, 1997:34). Perhaps a more competitive atmosphere would be to ZBC's advantage in that the level and scope of broadcasting would improve so that the Corporation does not lose its clientele to newcomers who may produce better programmes. Already, the ZBC faces competition from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and MultiChoice Africa, which provides direct satellite television to most African countries. Most affluent Zimbabweans subscribe to services provided by outside broadcasters.

In terms of radio broadcasting, many organisations and individuals eagerly await a Broadcasting Act that opens airwaves so that they can operate. Some organisations are also planning to launch community radio stations, for example church organisations and non-governmental organisations. The Development Through Radio (DTR) project co-ordinated by the Federation of African Media Women - Zimbabwe (FAMWZ) would be the foundation of a Community Radio Station focusing on women's issues. The DTR project focuses on concerns of women, mainly those in rural areas. The educational sector could benefit tremendously from liberalisation of broadcasting. Radio and television have proven to be good media for education and opening the airwaves would widen access to educational programming.

Private versus State-supported print media

The press plays a vital role as the voice of ordinary citizens and the watchdog that safeguards good governance by exposing abuse of power, violation of people's rights and all other forms of misrule and excess by governments.

The press in Zimbabwe is going through a crisis period because it is failing to define its role in society. It is failing in its role as watchdog and as the voice of the voiceless because the press is watching out for and giving voice to specific interest groups. Two constructed camps have emerged within the newspaper industry: one that is pro-government and one that is anti-government. The camps have extended their differences to fighting each other instead of focusing on their role as defenders of democracy.

Public print media in Zimbabwe are owned by public enterprises through a notarial deed of donation and trust. The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) owns Zimbabwe Newspaper Group (Zimpapers), Zimbabwe Inter Africa News Agency (ZIANA) and the Community Newspaper Group. Zimpapers runs The Herald, The Chronicle, The Sunday Mail, The Sunday News, The Manica Post and Kwayedza. Except for Kwayedza, which is published in Shona and Ndebele, the rest are published in English. The Community Newspaper Group (CNG) publishes five regional papers. CNG was established with the assistance of donor funds.

ZMMT's aim in establishing a network of rural newspapers was to fill a void created by the unwillingness of commercial media to gather and disseminate news in rural areas. The Zimbabwe Information Service (ZIS) and ZIANA also play a significant role in collecting news from rural areas focusing on local issues. The role of the ZMMT is understood to be the promotion of the

use of information for the purposes of national development. ZMMT is not legally owned by the government, although government seeks to control the management and content of public media.

The private print media in Zimbabwe are owned by private individuals or companies. For purposes of this article the focus will be on newspapers because they have a wide circulation. The private media tend to see themselves as independent from government influence, unlike the public press. The major private newspapers are:

• The Financial Gazette owned by Modus Publications. This is a weekly paper with a circulation of 36,000 based in Harare.

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• Clive Wilson and Clive Murphy (sovereign Publishers) own the Zimbabwe Independent. This is a weekly paper based in Harare and has a circulation of 32,000. Its sister paper, The Standard, is a weekly that comes out on Sundays whereas the Independent comes out on Fridays. The Standard has a circulation of 16,000 and is based in Harare.

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• The Daily News is published in Harare by Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ). With a circulation of 100,000 it competes with the Herald (circulation of 87,647). Before the March 2000 Constitutional Referendum, The Herald had a circulation of 119 000.

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• The Mirror is a weekly paper published by Sapes Trust in Harare. It has a circulation of 15,000.

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ANZ also owns provincial weekly newspapers: The Dispatch ? Bulawayo, and the Eastern Star ? Mutare. These provincial newspapers have not taken off successfully because of lack of adequate funding. The Express Weekly - Harare, The Mercury - Gweru and The Tribune - Masvingo had to be abandoned due to lack of funding and business support. The above newspapers are well-known in the country and the list is not exhaustive.¹

ANZ relies on external funding for most of its activities. The birth of the Daily News was made possible by foreign funding which made up 60% of funding and 40% owned by Zimbabwean investors. The initial outside funders comprised the Bank of Scotland, Tindle Newspapers, one of Britain's largest publishers, Cross Graphics and Commonwealth Publishing Ltd from New Zealand. In early 1999, these investors withdrew from the project for reasons still not very clear today.

On the verge of closure, six months after commencement of publication, the ANZ's Daily News was saved by the timely injection of funds from a Gaborone-based regional independent media-funding organisation, the Southern African Media Development Fund (Samdef). The rest of its funds come from sales. During the run up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections and after the election, The Daily News experience very high sales and the circulation of the paper rose

dramatically to become the most popular daily paper, surpassing the State-aligned 100-year old, Herald. The popularity of The Daily News has been due to its balanced coverage of the pre and post election period. However, the ruling government and the ruling party maintain that The Daily News is aligned with opposition parties and minority interests. The Daily News was very critical of what it presumed was State-sponsored violence against supporters of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, on white owned farms and in high-density suburbs (former townships).

Impact of ownership and control

The print media in Zimbabwe are relatively free from government control in terms of entering the market. As long as material is not offensive and the paper is registered, practically anyone can produce a publication. National newspapers tend to be monitored by the government and the Board of Censors. However, there is no proper regulatory body or policy that controls the number of publications in Zimbabwe.

The print media must strive to be independent. An independent press is independent of governmental, political or economic control, or from control of materials and infrastructure essential to the production and dissemination of newspapers (Southern Africa Media Directory 1999: 70). Most media organisations in Africa owe allegiance to either government or to private sector concerns. This is because in most cases, the funder determines the stance taken by a newspaper group. In Zimbabwe, newspapers controlled by Zimpapers often come under fire for being pro-government and thus blind to the faults of government. On the other hand, the private media have come under fire for taking an uncompromising stance against the government.

There tends to be a hostile relationship between public media and private media. This stems from ideological differences. There is no tolerance for each other's views among media groups. This is ironic since the media are supposed to advance principles of press freedom, diversity and pluralism. For the media to play the important role of watchdog, they need to work together, not think alike but advance different views freely.

The Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications has increasingly been criticised for having a negative attitude towards the private media while supporting the public media. The Ministry is the architect of the proposed Media Law that seeks to regulate the press. Other than restricting the operations of the local media, the law would limit and control the operations of foreign media in Zimbabwe. 'The law would also examine criteria under which foreign investors would be allowed in the local print or electronic media and no foreigner would be allowed on editorial boards,' said Willard Chiwewe, Senior Secretary for Information, Posts and Telecommunications (Chimhete, 1999: 2). Chiwewe insists that the government is best placed to regulate and safeguard the interests of the people. Referring to the private press, Chiwewe said: 'You are employees of privately motivated organisations whose interests are profit or the declaration of dividends rather than people's interests' (Chimhete, 1999:12). Dwindling government funding has a negative effect on public media. Hence the operation of media organisations as a business becomes essential as a way of ensuring continual survival.

Laws that do not safeguard freedom of the press have the effect of oppressing the media. The proposed regulations on media ownership (concerning foreign ownership) would impact negatively on some private media organisations. ANZ announced in November 1999 that it would launch The Express on Sunday on 12 December 1999. By February 2000 the paper still had not hit the streets. It was a sign that ANZ was having funding problems. Foreign ownership has always been looked upon with suspicion. The main reason is that foreigners are regarded as being only interested in news that sells and makes money, even at the expense of local development. In Zimbabwe, the private print media has been criticised for perhaps destroying the good image of the country by focussing on negative aspects. The latest 'victim' has been the Draft Constitution, roundly criticised by the private media. The private media has given voice mainly to those who oppose the proposed new constitution. This led the spokesperson for the Commission to retaliate by accusing the private media of serving capital interests.

The Daily News has been perceived as a threat to government because of its uncompromising stance towards the government. According to Geoff Nyarota, the Editor-in Chief of the paper, Daily News has sought to build a reputation for credibility, "through fearless journalism and a strict adherence to high standards of professional and ethical journalism". The Daily News would espouse truly independent journalism, always seeking to be consistent in its delivery of well-researched factual and, therefore, credible information? (The Daily News, 31 March 2000: 2).

The Herald, on the other hand, has positioned itself as the defender of the government. The private media often refer to The Herald as the official print media. The Herald also maintains that it is independent of any political, commercial or sectional obligations. It has a stable following, having served the print media's daily needs for over 100 years. It has established a firm advertising base and seems more economically (and politically) stable than the Daily News which, had a turbulent financial life its first year.

Concluding Remarks

Much as newspaper groups in Zimbabwe like to monopolise the market, the days of monopoly are numbered. Not only is society becoming increasingly intolerant of censorship, the pace at which developments in media are taking place is phenomenal. There is greater choice for readers and there is no need to rely on only a few sources. The growth of the electronic media especially in terms of e-mail and the internet has boosted the media industry. The newspaper industry has found a home on the "net". Not only that, readers have access to many publications that are circulated on the internet. In Zimbabwe, The Herald, The Independent and the Financial Gazette all appear on the world-wide web. Elsewhere web-based papers have been developed. For example, the online newspaper, Tomorrow Times was launched recently in China. Tomorrow Times has hired 200 journalists, and provides hourly updates 18 times a day. The paper gives readers world-wide the opportunity to see breaking news on the day it happens, instead of the following day.

This scenario must be seen as a challenge by conservative organisations and governments because what may happen is that these institutions may find themselves without an audience. The global nature of communication has challenged traditional beliefs in a defined market or audience. This is because advancements in technology have rendered borders obsolete, because the Internet and the satellite age transcend such physical barriers. Evidently, technological progress is opening up new economic vistas. However, new technologies are also creating a digital divide that risks fuelling a backlash from the poor and unemployed. Developing countries are battling with basic issues of providing water, shelter, employment and basic education. Unless developing countries see that new technologies and free markets are delivering jobs and social progress, the assumption that closer global economic integration is inevitable will be called into question.

There are more than 200 laws in Southern Africa alone that infringe people's rights of free expression and media freedom. The Region's governments also maintain arsenals of repressive laws that infringe fundamental rights guaranteed by their constitutions. The media must advocate for the reform and improvement of these laws, as well as for legislation that guarantees genuine diversity and independence of broadcasting and telecommunication (Mwape, 1998:41).

In Zimbabwe, there is increased resistance from journalists concerning infringement of fundamental rights. From January to February 2000, during the run up to the Constitutional Referendum, the press was critical of the constitutional process. Most of the comments and articles came from the private press. In fact, the media went further by lobbying for the rejection of the draft constitution because section 214 of the draft calls for the establishment of a Media Commission whose duty would be to discipline journalists. The Commission would be given powers by parliament to conduct investigations and inquiries into any conduct or circumstances that appeared to threaten freedom of the press (Daily News, 11 February 2000: 7). It would also have power to take disciplinary action against journalists who are found to have breached any law or any code of conduct. The draft constitution does not say who would draft the code of conduct

to punish media practitioners.

Key media representative organisations, including the Federation of African Media Women, the Media Institute of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe chapter, the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists and the National Association of Freelance Journalists, have advocated a process that is transparent when it comes to the appointment of a Media Commission. Perhaps that is the starting point for the promotion of a relatively free press.

Note

1. Circulation figures were taken from the Southern African Media Directory (1999) Namibia, Media Institute of Southern Africa.

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