

# The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust: An experiment that failed

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Zimbabwe the former British self-governing colony of Rhodesia, is among the last three member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to achieve independence (April 18, 1980).<sup>1</sup> The other two are Namibia (March 1990) and South Africa (April 1994). Independence was achieved after nearly 90 years of colonial and settler rule and a 15-year bloody war in which some 25,000 people, most of them black, died in what turned out to be a racial (black versus white) conflict.

Though a latecomer to the league of independent African states, Zimbabwe had a number of advantages over other countries, which achieved independence much earlier. It was one of Africa's most developed countries, with an economy and infrastructure that was the envy of many – except South Africa.

Unfortunately for President Robert Mugabe and his ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) party colleagues, this also created peculiar problems in changing old institutions and forming new ones in line with 'the new order'. An immediate focus for the new rulers was the 'restructuring and reorientation' of the mass media which had been part and parcel of the oppressive colonial system and was foreign-owned, mainly by business interests in neighbouring then white-ruled, apartheid South Africa.

The media of Rhodesia were a direct offshoot of the South African press, dating back to the days of missionary-explorer Cecil John Rhodes who had a direct financial interest in the Argus Printing and Publishing Company (APPC) which, for a long time, was considered the largest single newspaper-publishing group on the African Continent.<sup>2</sup>

The position had not changed much in Zimbabwe at independence. For all practical purposes, the print media were still owned and controlled from across the Limpopo River. News in papers and on radio and television was gathered and edited (or 'doctored' – some would say) by the South African Press Association (Sapa) and distributed by its Central Africa version, the Inter-Africa News Agency (Iana). Iana put out the Sapa stories with little or no editing, considering that Rhodesia and South Africa had a lot in common, including maintenance of white rule.

During the liberation war the media (print and electronic) played a pivotal role in misleading Rhodesia's white community into believing that their government was on top of the situation against the 'terrorists', as the guerrillas were officially referred to. Such is the politics of information.

Clearly, the new government could not be expected to have allowed the situation outlined above to continue for any longer than was necessary. Therefore, some of the most drastic changes felt in Rhodesia when it became Zimbabwe were in the media as the new people in power embarked on 'restructuring and reorienting' the media of mass communication as part of the new political order.

Broadcasting presented no particular problems as it had always been under the government through a so-called public corporation. The new government simply changed the former Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC) to the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and put its people on the board and in charge of news and programmes. Instead of deriding the 'terrorists', radio and television over-night proudly portrayed former guerrillas as the men and women who had dislodged the illegal white minority regime of Ian Smith, which had rebelled against the British Crown and defied the international community.<sup>3</sup>

The government faced a bit of a dilemma when it came to the print media, which, as already

stated, was predominantly foreign-owned. It did not have the money to buy out the majority shareholders. Also, the government said it did not want to be seen to be controlling the media. Yet the question of big profit-making interests – local or foreign – owning the media could not be entertained either. Could they be expected to be sympathetic to a new, black government that, by the way, was espousing the Marxist creed on which the war was fought?

#### The Mass Media Trust

Thus was mooted the novel idea of press ownership in the developing world: a trust that would ostensibly be neither government nor privately owned. The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) was formed in January 1981 to divest the newspapers and domestic news agency, IANA, from control by South African interests and restructuring and reorganizing their management.

A US\$20 million grant from Nigeria, which had been in the forefront of campaigning for the independence of African countries still under foreign rule, enabled the ZMMT to buy outright the 43% South African-held stock. The Argus group controlled 40% of it while the remainder belonged to various South African interests. The deal did not affect Zimbabwean-held stock but gave ZMMT effective control over Zimbabwe Newspapers (1980) Ltd (or Zimpapers for short), as the RPPC became known.

The ZMMT inherited an infrastructure built over nearly a century of colonial and settler rule that has enabled it convincingly to beat competition for popular newspaper readership. It took over two dailies, two weeklies and a provincial weekly.<sup>4</sup> The domestic news agency, which changed its name to the Zimbabwe Inter African News Agency (ZIANA), also came under ZMMT.

Until 1999 when The Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe – a group of local and foreign private investors – launched The Daily News, ZMMT published the only two dailies in the country. An earlier attempt to publish an independent daily was unsuccessful – mainly due to failure to attract advertising.<sup>5</sup>

The original ZMMT board consisted of seven leading Zimbabweans from different walks of life – all appointed by the government – and a full-time executive secretary. A company leaflet describes the ZMMT as ‘a unique experiment and a wholly Zimbabwean solution to a Zimbabwean problem’.<sup>6</sup> It was established ‘with the idea of facilitating the development of the media in a free and independent manner [own emphasis] and of altering its orientation to bring it into line with the democratic political system brought about by Zimbabwe’s independence.’ On funding, the pamphlet describes the Nigerian donation as ‘a practical demonstration of pan-African solidarity in the struggle to free Africa’s media from external control’.

#### Government assurances

The first Minister of Information, Posts and Telecommunications, Dr Nathan Shamuyarira, a former journalist, made the announcement of the take-over of the newspaper-publishing group. In a statement, he declared: ‘Government remains committed to the freedom of the press as stated in its election manifesto. We will neither publish nor edit any of the newspapers.’<sup>7</sup>

One of the trustees, Mrs. Grace Todd, wife of a former prime minister of Rhodesia, Sir Garfield Todd, who was restricted by Ian Smith’s government, dismissed what she called ‘the fallacy that the ZMMT is a tool, or arm, of government.’ In a letter to the main daily paper, Mrs Todd wrote: ‘As a trustee I have been impressed by the manner in which the government has distanced itself from the trust and from the press and by the sensitivity on this matter shown by my fellow trustees.’<sup>8</sup>

Most commentators and observers, however, took these statements with a pinch of salt, contending that the newspapers would be under the thumbs of the government or the ruling party. The Star (Johannesburg) commented editorially that, ‘there are better ways of containing ownership (of the media) than placing it in the hands of a government trust.’<sup>9</sup>

Opposition politicians and critics complained that the newspapers would be or were now being used for propaganda purposes, contrary to what they were meant to do after the take-over, namely, to serve ordinary, apolitical citizens of Zimbabwe, including those who were not necessarily supporters of the government or ruling party. On the other hand, government politicians were soon to complain that the newspapers were not supporting the government enough. A senior cabinet minister once labelled the editors 'pseudo-editorial professors', who were still under 'bourgeois domination', and noted that they had not been in the liberation war.<sup>10</sup>

Despite its weaknesses, the ZMMT was a noble idea, what with repeated government assurances that it would leave the newspapers alone. Of course it did – but only in the initial stages. This writer must confess that he was among many well-meaning people who were naive enough to believe the politicians and pleaded for the idea to be given a chance. The views are found in the writer's 'Media Training in Zimbabwe: The first six years', a thesis for the Degree of Master of Education of the University of Wales, Cardiff, UK.

Now 20 years down the line, the fears of sceptics have been proven justified. There is abundant evidence that the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust experiment has gone very wrong. The blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the politicians whose rhetoric has not been matched by events: the ZMMT papers, just like radio and television, have progressively become part and parcel of the government and ruling party's propaganda machinery. Incidentally, it is sometimes difficult in Zimbabwe to draw a line between the government and 'the party'. They are really different sides of the same coin, as Zimbabwe has basically been a de facto one-party state - regular parliamentary elections notwithstanding.<sup>11</sup>

To facilitate the emasculation of the Zimpapers publications, the government has through the years changed the ZMMT deed of trust several times. In August 1996, the government gave itself more authority to oversee the operations of the state-run print media. The appointment of editors is now subject to approval of the Head of State and of the Minister responsible for Information.

The current editor of the group's flagship, The Herald, Bornwell Chakaodza, was formerly the government's director of information. His deputy was also previously with the department. Interestingly, Chakaodza was in 1998 elevated to the post of director responsible for the group's newspapers (two dailies, two Sunday papers and a provincial weekly). The editors have expressed unhappiness over the move, first introduced some years back under Chakaodza's predecessor, Tommy Sithole, who was removed. He retired in 1999. In August 2000 the government, through the ZMMT, ordered the resignation of all but one of the eight members of the Zimpapers Board of Directors, citing poor financial performance of the group. Ironically, the new board is led by Sithole, as chairman.

#### Culture of fear

There are numerous examples to prove the contention that the government has not kept its word and that the vision of a free and independent media many looked forward to after independence has vanished over the years. Incidentally, there is no official censorship of news (unlike during the time of the settler government's illegal declaration of independence) but freedom of the press is not guaranteed in the constitution either.<sup>12</sup>

Official censorship there might not be but in its place an effective system of self-censorship has developed among practitioners, especially those in the government media. It must be said in all fairness, however, that a lot depends upon how 'daring' an individual editor is prepared to be. The exposure by The Chronicle of a motor vehicle selling scandal [mentioned below] is a case in point even though the editor suffered for this type of impudence and 'lack of patriotism'.

The point is that the 'culture of fear' that characterized life in Zimbabwe during the first decade of independence, when any dissension or the mildest criticism of officialdom was tantamount to being anti-establishment and lack of patriotism, became deeply ingrained in the journalists. The country was under a state of emergency and opponents and critics were hounded or blacklisted.

Numerous claims have been made about certain individuals and organizations alike being 'black-listed' at both Zimpapers and ZBC. There have been abrupt and unexplained cancellations of radio and television programmes after they have been recorded and the airing announced in advance. The government-controlled newspapers and the electronic media often simply ignore stories or report them merely as official reaction. Cases of biased and propagandistic reporting, deliberate distortion or one-sided presentation are the order of the day.

Those working for ZMMT publications who tried to exercise freedom of the press have been casualties of the institutionalized press control system under discussion. A few examples will illustrate the point:

¶ In September 1981 (that is, eight months after establishment of ZMMT), Jean-Maitland Stuart resigned as editor of the Umtali Post (now Manica Post), after President Mugabe and Information Minister Shamuyarira reprimanded her for an article criticizing the use of North Koreans to train the Zimbabwe National Army's crack 'Fifth Brigade'.<sup>13</sup>

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¶ Willie Musarurwa, a former top official of Dr Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (Zapu) party before it merged with Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) party in 1987 left his job at about the same time Nkomo and other Zapu ministers were fired from the government of national unity.<sup>14</sup>

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¶ Henry Muradzikwa, who succeeded Musarurwa at the Sunday Mail, was removed from his job over a story which claimed that 60 Zimbabwean students had been deported from Cuba for unspecified 'health reasons', which many associated with AIDS or some STD. He was 'promoted' to Assistant General Manager (Projects) in the group but later returned to active journalism as editor-in-chief of Ziana, the domestic news agency, which is part of the ZMMT.

¶

¶ More widely known is the case of Geoffrey Nyarota, editor of the Bulawayo-based Chronicle. He also lost his job 'at the insistence, it was said, of the Information Minister' after the paper exposed a motor vehicle scandal involving cabinet ministers and senior civil servants.<sup>15</sup> An official enquiry vindicated Nyarota; several ministers were prosecuted or fired from cabinet and another committed suicide.

¶

For the record, in his book *The Politics of Mass Media*, Elias T. Rusike states that he resigned as Zimpapers Group Managing Director and Chief Executive because of 'too much interference' from the Information Ministry.<sup>16</sup> He is now the publisher of a thriving financial and business weekly, *The Financial Gazette*.

Is it any wonder, then, that critics and commentators refer to the Trust's papers as 'the official or semi-official press', lumping them together with the monopolistic national broadcaster which makes no bones about its allegiance to the government and ruling party from whom it takes

orders and instructions on a regular basis?

In retrospect, one can say that the problems the press in Zimbabwe is facing today can be traced to the pre-occupation, during the first decade of independence, with helping in building and integrating the new, fragile nation. The belief in a command economy and a one-party state ideology adopted during the war of independence, was probably the foundation of the thinking of what the authorities still expect of present-day journalism in Zimbabwe.<sup>17</sup> This applies to government-controlled and private media alike.

#### Arsenal of laws

The trials and tribulations of media practitioners in Zimbabwe are not confined to those working in state-controlled or state-owned institutions. Their counterparts in the independent or private press, which is often referred to as the 'opposition press' by government politicians, have not been spared intimidation, harassment or pressure when they publish stories perceived to be hostile, offensive, embarrassing or 'unpatriotic'.

Government officials, unfortunately not excluding the Head of State himself, regularly engage in press bashing, which is bound to instil fear and timidity into journalists. The latter are now used to hearing ministers and officials of the government threatening to impose harsh laws against the independent media, which they accuse of seeking to topple government in collaboration with 'foreign interests'. Among proposed laws, is one that would restrict foreign ownership in the media.

There is already an arsenal of laws inhibiting the operations of the press that can be invoked at any time. Some of these laws were inherited from the previous regimes and have been kept for convenience to be used should the need arise. Among such laws are those on official secrets, taxation, magistrates, contempt of parliament, defence, prisons, civil and criminal defamation, and the draconian Law and Order (Maintenance) Act that the British colonialists adopted in 1960. For the first time in the country's history, four journalists working for independent media were in 1999 arrested and charged under this law, which prohibits publishing 'false news'.<sup>18</sup>

Two of them complained of having been severely tortured by the military police that arrested them before handing them over to the police. The Defence Ministry and the Home Affairs Minister (the latter is in charge of police) defied three high court orders to release the journalists. The newspaper had published a story about an alleged coup attempt that had been foiled. The two successfully challenged the constitutionality of the law under which they were charged in the Supreme Court.

#### Propaganda rejected

In February 2000, despite a concerted multi-million dollar campaign via its massive propaganda machinery, President Mugabe and his party suffered their biggest and most humiliating defeat so far when Zimbabweans voted 55-45% against a draft constitution written by a government-appointed commission. Government media, particularly radio and television, refused campaign material from civic and opposition groups under the umbrella of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA).

The Herald came out openly to declare in an editorial comment that it was supporting the government and ruling party in the campaign. The business community reacted swiftly and cancelled or drastically reduced advertising in The Herald - a lot of which found its way to the then struggling Daily News. Could this have been what caused the 'poor financial performance' given as reason for removal of the Zimpapers Board of Directors?

The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, which has two TV and four radio channels, would not air most of the material, claiming it was unbalanced. ZBC only screened two half-hour NCA documentaries after the High Court ordered it to do so. Coverage of the voting itself gave free

reign to the slanted information of government representatives and the spokesperson of the Constitutional Commission, Professor Jonathan Moyo, who was nominated to parliament and appointed Minister of State for Information and Publicity in the Office of the President.<sup>19</sup> By the time the national broadcaster finally accepted the adverts (which were heavily edited) it was almost voting time! The opposition had to depend solely on the private press, particularly The Daily News, to publish its campaign materials.

The rejected draft constitution proposed five 'independent commissions', including one on the media - ostensibly to ensure fair play in matters of information dissemination. The proposed commission was to be created through an Act of parliament but had been totally rejected by media practitioners who argued, among other aspects, that commissioners would not be appointed in a transparent manner.

A petition presented to the Constitutional Commission by the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) on behalf of the media fraternity, read in part: 'A media commission appointed through an Act of Parliament and subject to the whims and caprices of any political party with a parliamentary majority at any given time will suffocate the media and is thus unnecessary.'<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the 'public trust' concept of media ownership, which Zimbabwe adopted in 1981 after achieving independence the previous year. It has argued that the idea has failed dismally, all because the authorities - the politicians - have not kept their word about letting the trust operate independently. The government and the ruling party, which are one and the same thing in Zimbabwe, turned the ZMMT papers into propaganda organs, contrary to promises to facilitate 'the development of the media in a free and independent manner', as claimed in the ZMMT pamphlet.

Passing reference was also made to the electronic media, which is even more effectively controlled by the government. The article also pointed out that despite acceptance in principle of the need to change the law and open up the airwaves to allow independent or community operators, the government is dragging its feet, to the extent that it is one of the two 'odd ones out' in the sub-region.

The result and effect of all this is that despite a small, vibrant (though urban-based and specialist) independent press, the dissemination of information, through both print and electronic media, is virtually still dominated by the government. One cannot help concluding, therefore, that the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust idea is, indeed, 'an experiment that failed'. Which confirms the contention that the media in any country tend to represent the interests - social, political and economic - of the dominant class. In the Zimbabwean case since independence, the only difference is that blacks are now the dominant group.

## Notes

1 A grouping of 14 Southern and Central African states initially aimed at reducing dependency on then apartheid-ruled South Africa.

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3 For a detailed history of the Argus newspapers in Rhodesia, see Gale, W.D., The Rhodesian Press (Salisbury, 1962)

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5 On November 11, 1964 Rhodesia, under Ian Smith, declared unilateral independence (UDI) against Britain which ended after talks between the whites and the nationalist leaders in London

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7 The newspapers were: The Herald, established in 1891 and The Chronicle (dailies); The Sunday Mail and The Sunday News (weeklies); and another weekly, The Manica Post

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9 The Daily Gazette was launched by Modus Publications, publishers of The Financial Gazette, in December 1994 and folded up eight months later due to financial problems because it could not attract advertising revenue. It was said business people were not keen to be seen to be supporting what the authorities considered 'an opposition newspaper'. Government-controlled companies, themselves large advertisers, were banned from buying space in The Daily Gazette.

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11 This pamphlet outlines the functions of the ZMMT, its structure and activities - which include stationery and book selling and (at that time) media training. The latter is now under government because ZMMT could not continue funding it.

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13 See 'Message from Minister' on the front page of a laboratory newspaper for trainee journalists, The Sharpener No. 1 1983.

14

15 Letters to the Editor, The Herald June 9 1981. Mrs. Todd was responding to a critical editorial comment in the newspaper.

16

17 Comment in The Star January 5 1981.

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19 Dr Eddison Zvobgo, Publicity Secretary of ZANU PF, as quoted in The Sunday Mail December 13 1981 under a story headed 'ZANU (PF) must set up its own press' Zvobgo?

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21 Until the June 2000 elections (which gave the opposition 57 of the 120 elected seats), there were only three opposition members in the 150-strong national assembly (30 are appointed by President Mugabe). His party has had an overwhelming majority in successive elections held under the 'winner-take-all' rule and other conditions that made it virtually impossible for the opposition to campaign and win any reasonable number of seats.

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23 When Rhodesia declared unilateral independence in November 1964, it imposed strict press censorship and declared a state of emergency that lasted until the ceasefire and end of the guerilla war in 1979. Newspapers at first came out with blank spaces in protest but this was stopped.

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25 The Fifth Brigade was deployed in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces to quell the 'dissident activities' following the sacking of Joshua Nkomo and his ZAPU colleagues from the short-lived government of national unity. The brigade was accused of committing atrocities against civilians but the government has so far refused to publish two reports on the alleged brutalities.

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27 This was after the government discovered arms caches on ZAPU-owned farms. ZAPU leaders and guerrillas were rounded up and detained, some of them until the 'Unity Accord' of December 1987 which ended the atrocities.

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29 It appropriately became known as 'The Willowgate' scandal, after the motor assembly plant's name (Willowvale) and Richard Nixon's Watergate.

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31 The Politics of Mass Media, A personal experience, Rusike, E. T, Harare. Rublaw Publishers 1990.

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33 Under IMF, World Bank and international donor pressure and after another 'experiment', Zimbabwe changed from the Marxist-socialist principles to a capitalist-driven economy in 1990.

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35 Sunday Standard editor Mark Chavunduka, and reporter Ray Choto were arrested by military police in January 1999 and tortured before being handed over to the police. Police arrested chief editor of the Zimbabwe Mirror, Ibbo Mandaza, and reporter Grace Kwinjeh. All the journalists were charged under the Law and Order (Maintenance) Act.

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37 For an analysis of ZBC and Zimpapers coverage of the referendum campaign, see 'Media Watch' on page 12 The Daily News, Friday February 18 2000. This is a summary of a report prepared by the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe which monitored coverage of the referendum, initially in public-funded media but now all media. A full report on coverage of the referendum and the constitution making process can be found in the MMPZ booklet, A Question of Balance, Harare March 2000

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20 The petition was endorsed by: the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Zimbabwe Chapter), the Federation of African Media Women-Zimbabwe (FAWM-Z) and the National Association of Freelance Journalists (NAFJ). Other individual organizations whose representatives attended a joint meeting and appended their signatures to the petition are The Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, Parade Magazine, The Sunday Standard, The Zimbabwe Independent and The Financial Gazette, among others.

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