Chapter Nine

Conclusion

9.0 Introduction

This study has explored, from the perspective of critical political economy of the media, the link between media framing of political contestation during Zimbabwe’s postcolonial transition and the relationship between the media and centres of political and economic power in the country.

In so doing, the study has sought to address two issues. These include the extent to which media framing of a pivotal feature of democracy and democratic transition is consistent with the normative role of the press in relation to the public sphere; and whether that media’s role has been enhanced or constrained by its relationship with the state and capital during the postcolonial transition.

This chapter offers a conclusive discussion of the major issues raised in the study. The first part of the chapter briefly summarises the findings of the study and reflects on theory. The second part discusses ideal conditions which could nurture a press that functions closest to the public sphere in a changing African country like Zimbabwe.

I argue in this chapter that Zimbabwe’s was initially a partially democratic transition in which the state, acting largely in the interests of the ruling party, established a policy and legislative infrastructure whose main purpose was to complement the construction of Zanu PF hegemony through the media. As the ruling party’s legitimacy came under severe battering in the wake of ESAP and numerous other crises during the 1990s and beyond, the already authoritarian state became predatory and militarised. It abandoned the coaxing and limited coercion approaches of the earlier decade, and adopted brute force as an instrument of media policy and control.

Largely as a result of the existing policy regime, the press became visible sites of struggles between the state and sections of civil society and fractions of capital...
opposed to the Zanu PF strategy of retaining state power. The result was that, with the brief exception of the Zimbabwe Mirror’s ‘independent nationalist’ model of journalism in 2000, political contestation was generally mediated through the narrow prisms of ‘opposition’ and ‘patriotic’ journalism by the mainstream press under study. I argue finally that to create a media system that serves the public sphere, Zimbabwe would require radical reforms at the levels of both policy and practice of journalism.

9.1 Media Framing of the Zimbabwean Transition: A Concluding Discussion

As noted earlier in this study, elections were an integral part of Zimbabwe’s postcolonial transition. Sylvester (2003) has argued that throughout the transition, elections served as “moments when a range of contending mythologies about the ‘true’ postcolonial Zimbabwe [could] be heard” (p.30). Given the central role of elections in a functioning democracy, reporting electoral contests is one of the foremost roles of the media in relation to the public sphere (McNair, 2003).

The newspapers under study framed elections in ways which were largely consistent with their editorial policies. The coverage was also partly informed by the broader political economy of the era [for example, the ‘first’ (1980-90), ‘second’ (1990-1997) or ‘third’ (1998-2004) transition]. This study argues that the coverage falls into three categories of ‘patriotic’, ‘oppositional’ and ‘independent nationalist’ journalism. As noted in Chapter Six, with the exception of the ‘independent nationalist’ model, these categories operated as binary opposites, and represented contending centres of power in the electoral battles.

Both ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ journalism models practiced by the press in its framing of political contestation in the transition combined elements of what Street (2001) refers to as “partisan” and “propaganda” bias. Street defines partisan bias thus:

Here a cause is explicitly and deliberately promoted. Examples of this are editorial comments which recommend support for one political party or take sides in a policy controversy. This can take the form of explicit recommendations to vote for one party or another, or it can be identified in the blatant endorsement of a cause (Street, 2001: 20)
He also defines propaganda bias thus:

This is involved where a story is reported with the deliberate intention of making the case for a particular party or policy or point of view, without explicitly stating this…[T]he apparent purpose of the story is to report the details, but disguised within it are thinly veiled attacks (Ibid, p.20).

Whereas other forms of media bias such as unwitting or ideological bias are usually subtle, the two forms of bias outlined above are easy to detect because they’re manifest, rather than latent, in media content. In this study, ‘patriotic’ journalism is defined as a form of highly partisan and propaganda journalism which is embedded to the ruling party and the state. It shuns critical-rational debate and shuts out voices other than those of the dominant bloc of the ruling party except where the former are up for ridicule. It frames political contestation as a matter of simple struggles between good and evil. Its match, ‘oppositional’ journalism, operates on broadly similar principles except that its principal is opposition politics. In this case the Zanu PF party and the state it controls are the sole targets of journalistic critique. Like ‘patriotic’ journalism, ‘oppositional’ journalism characterises the political contests in terms of irreconcilable binaries. The third category is the ‘independent nationalist’ model of journalism. This model transcends the binaries by providing agency to diverse voices including those marginalised by the two other models. Although its editorials generally latently endorse a political party, news stories are broadly sourced and fairly presented, with events and issues often placed into context, including historical context. As I will argue below, at its best, this model illustrates the closest the media functioned in relation to the ideal of the public sphere.

9.1.1 ‘Patriotic’ and ‘Oppositional’ Journalism at Work

State-controlled newspapers, the Herald and Sunday Mail were the key proponents of ‘patriotic’ journalism. Some aspects of this journalism model stood out in the papers’ coverage of the elections from 1985 to 2002, as well as key political debates such as the one-party state issue. First, the coverage presented the election as a simple contest between traitor and patriot. The opposition was generally depicted as traitors when they featured in the stories and comments. From PF Zapu in 1985 to the MDC in 2002, the opposition ‘other’ was framed as an outsider, unpatriotic and bent on negating the ‘gains’ of the liberation struggle. Readers and citizens were presented
with the picture of stark opposites, and were often implored to make what seemed to be an obvious, simple electoral choice for their votes.

A second aspect of ‘patriotic’ journalism as applied to elections was the one-sided sourcing of election stories and the partisanship of editorial comments. Both papers generally sourced the bulk of their stories from Zanu PF sources to the exclusion of contending views. Even where ruling party officials made damaging and serious allegations against their opponents, the latter were usually not given the opportunity to present their side of the story. The general picture created was that of an electoral contest that featured a magnanimous Zanu PF pitted against an evil coalition of treacherous, unpatriotic and foreign-sponsored opposition parties. Interest groups within civil society rarely featured as sources, and their activities related to the election contest did not make front page news. Neither did they attract much editorial reflection, except when they praised the ruling party or when they were up for editorial criticism. Editorial comments in the papers were generally either extolling the virtues and liberation credentials of the ruling party, or excoriating opposition parties for daring to contest the election. Bigger opposition parties with the potential to beat Zanu PF at the polls were usually the ones reserved for the sharpest editorial criticism.

A third aspect of ‘patriotic’ journalism linked to the other two was generally its shunning of critical discussion of issues outside the dichotomies of Zanu PF/opposition, patriot/traitor. Ranger (2005) has noted that ‘patriotic’ journalism, “with its absolute division of the world into good and evil, makes any rigorous discussion impossible” (p.15). Where issues around which the election was being fought were raised—such as land reform, the state of the economy, the failure of ESAP after 1991 or the escalating poverty—‘patriotic’ journalism reproduced the ruling party line. The poor state of the economy was blamed on drought, sanctions (after 2000), and everything else except the government and its policies. The land reform programme was presented as a correction of a historical wrong, and the chaos and violence surrounding farm acquisition was blamed on third parties. ‘Patriotic’ journalism at election time thrived on labels; citizens were invited to choose the right label and shun the wrong one, but not on the basis of any critical reflection or appraisal of the major political players provided by the newspapers.
Competing for audiences with ‘patriotic’ journalism was ‘oppositional’ journalism, which was practised by sections of the private press under study, in particular the Daily News, the Financial Gazette and the Zimbabwe Independent. As argued earlier in this study, this form of journalism emerged as a counterweight to the public press against a background where the state had usurped editorial autonomy at Zimpapers and other public media such as the ZBC. Although this model of journalism provided a critical terrain for counter-hegemonic mobilisation by groups and social interests marginalised by state policies and decisions during the ‘first’ and part ‘second’ transition, by the end of the 1990s it had become a leading voice of opposition politics and sections of the business elite (see Saunders, 1991, 1999). This happened arguably because of the absence of a vibrant opposition party after the defeat (and subsequent weakening) of ZUM in 1990. In the circumstances, it could be argued that the private press assumed the ‘watchdog’, if adversarial, role normally played by opposition political parties, by default rather than design (Ronning & Kupe, 2000). This role continued right into the ‘third’ transition despite the birth of the MDC in 1999.

Election reports and comments in the Financial Gazette, Zimbabwe Independent and Daily News (the latter two papers covered only the 2000 and 2002 polls) reflected a deep-seated editorial resentment for Zanu PF and an uncritical endorsement of opposition politics. Where ‘patriotic’ journalism eulogised the ruling party and negated critical debate, the ‘opposition’ press praised the virtues of opposition politics, and cast election debate in a Manichean good-versus-evil mould. Electoral reports attributed the agency of violence, rigging and electoral fraud—anything that could possibly go wrong—to the state. Where the ruling party made front page news, which was not infrequent, the story was generally negative. Where the opposition made front page news, which was most often, coverage was generally positive. As in the case of ‘patriotic’ journalism, the effect of this framing was to present the complex electoral and political contest as a simple matter of irreconcilable opposites of good and evil.

It has emerged in this study that the prevalence of these two extreme models of journalism is traceable largely to the relations between the press and the political and economic centres of power, especially the former. The study has noted that Zimbabwe
never had a ‘free’ press in the liberal Western sense both before and after independence, and that the media’s institutional functions were largely tightly circumscribed by the state and, irregularly, by sections of capital. With regards to the state, the study has noted that throughout the three-phase transition the relationship between the press and the state had more consistencies than variations. It was influenced by the prevailing socio-political and economic situation in the country as well as by the state’s consistent desire to construct and maintain its hegemony over the transforming society.

From its assumption of state power, Zanu PF consistently sought to transform the public media into party propaganda apparatuses. The history of party and state interference with and usurpation of editorial autonomy at Zimpapers is outlined in this study. On its part, the public press largely gave in to state patronage right from the first decade of independence. Interviews with journalists and editors who worked for the public press at different stages of the transition, reports and books published by some of the journalists as well as editorial comments published by the Herald and Sunday Mail during the elections revealed the extent to which the public press bought into the state and ruling party political agenda rather easily. This client-patron relationship between the state and the public press throughout the transition necessitated the adoption of ‘patriotic’ journalism.

As it did with the public press under its direct control, the state sought to keep the private press on a leash throughout the period under study. From the outset of independence, state officials routinely chastised this section of the press for alleged lack of patriotism whenever it carried critical reports about the government. However, this study has noted that during the ‘first’ transition, despite its often loud rhetoric and threats against the private press, the state adopted a tactically indifferent approach to the private press. This was due to a number of reasons, including the fact that at the time the ruling party had relative popular support, the state’s commitment to national reconciliation, as well as the desire to maintain international goodwill, which was seen as vital for foreign direct investment (Saunders, 1991).

There was a correlation between state policy towards the privates press and the latter’s framing of political contests. During the ‘tactical indifference’ era outlined in
Chapter Four, the private press generally did not apply the partisan and propagandistic forms of reportage which became its hallmark in the ‘second’ and ‘third’ transitions. In the 1985 election, for example, the *Financial Gazette* endorsed the candidature of Zanu PF although the paper was also occasionally critical of the same party. However, as the state became weaker, lost legitimacy and began employing coercion as a means of controlling not just the private press but society as well, the latter became more biased against Zanu PF in its coverage of elections. As argued above, the absence of vibrant opposition parties with credible alternative programmes and strategies led the private press to play the role of state ‘watchdog’. The more the state institutions like the police refused to supply information to the private press or withheld advertisements from this same press, the more embedded the latter became to the cause of opposition politics. The private press also became closer to fractions of capital which were not only aligned with the opposition, but also provided the bulk of the advertising to this the press. Further, in a situation where the repressive media laws such as AIPPA and POSA were applied selectively and unevenly to the private press, ‘opposition’ journalism became a form of protest journalism in the same way that ‘patriotic’ journalism remained a manifestation of the public media’s complicity to state patronage. When political life became sharply polarised in the country following the state’s controversial land reform programme and the formation of the MDC during the ‘third’ transition, both ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ models of journalism became logical tribunes for elites on either side of the political spectrum.

### 9.1.2 Approaching the Public Sphere? Reflections on ‘Independent Nationalist’ Journalism.

A third category of the press was the ‘independent nationalist’ press, represented by the *Zimbabwe Mirror* in its reportage of the 2000 elections. The paper attempted, as it were, to bridge the polarities between the ‘oppositional’ and ‘patriotic’ press, claiming to tell the election and transition story from the point of view of what it termed the ‘national interest’. In 2000, ‘independent nationalist’ journalism provided arguably the most nuanced coverage of the election. Although editorials latently endorsed Zanu PF, news stories covered a wide range of activities by political parties, independent candidates, civil society and other interest groups ahead of the polls. The paper gave agency to voices generally ignored by the other mainstream papers on both sides of the divide. At its best, ‘independent nationalist’ journalism approached
something resembling a Habermasian multi-layered, ‘reconstituted’ public sphere through its framing of electoral contestation through multiple prisms representing a diverse range of social voices. As noted earlier in previous chapters, I prefer to characterise the Zimbabwe Mirror’s journalism in 2000 as ‘independent nationalist’ because much as the paper generally identified with the nationalist leadership of Zanu PF, it also maintained critical distance which allowed the paper to frame the election contests from a wide range of voices outside the ruling party.

The brief success of ‘independent nationalist’ journalism in 2000 can be explained in terms of the Zimbabwe Mirror’s positioning in relation to centres of political and economic power at the time in the country. As noted in Chapter Six, the paper was owned by a former senior civil servant and ruling party ‘technocrat’ who had left government to launch a social science research think tank, the Southern Africa Political Economic Series Trust (Sapes-Trust). Although Ibbo Mandaza, the paper’s owner, was in principle aligned to the ruling party, both his think tank and the Mirror enjoyed—at least up to 2000—significant autonomy from direct party influence because they were partly self-sustaining and partly donor-funded. Although the paper was not lucrative, it enjoyed subsidisation by the proprietor’s other business concerns. The Zimbabwe Mirror was shunned by the main advertisers since its launch because, among other things, the paper was a small circulation highbrow weekly; it did not identify with either ‘oppositional’ or ‘patriotic’ journalism, and also partly because of perceptions about its proprietor being close to the ruling party.

In 2000 therefore, the Zimbabwe Mirror enjoyed relative independence from both the state and big business. It could also be argued that the paper’s owners allowed it to be both supportive of and sometimes critical of the ruling party, and to cover the range of opposition party activities at the time because it was a period of political flux. Firstly, it was not clear whether the ruling party would retain state power after 2000, especially after the rejection of the draft constitution in February that year and

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1 Sapes Trust derived most of its funding from donors, but also through its own projects like the SADC regional Masters in Policy Studies programme and SAPEM magazine. The Zimbabwe Mirror also benefited from donor grants and soft loans from, among others, the Gaborone-based Southern African Media Development Fund (Samdef).

2 This issue emerged from a report compiled by Gary Thompson & Associates, a communications research company commissioned to assess the viability of a daily newspaper from the Mirror stable in August 2001.
secondly, the strength of the opposition MDC was yet to be tested in an election. Arguably, it made practical sense for the *Zimbabwe Mirror*’s owners to adopt a wait-and-see attitude ahead of the election, rather than throw their weight behind either an untested opposition party or an increasingly unpopular Zanu PF.

As observed in Chapter Eight, the 2002 election witnessed the demise of ‘independent nationalist’ journalism and its degeneration into ‘patriotic’ journalism. The line between editorials and news stories became blurred and thin, and the paper competed with the *Herald* and *Sunday Mail* in presenting the electoral contest as simply one between ‘new imperialism’ and liberation. The death of ‘independent nationalist’ journalism was necessitated by broader changes in the political economy of both the *Zimbabwe Mirror* and the country. By 2002, it had become clear that the ruling party could win elections against the MDC—the questionable freeness and fairness of such elections notwithstanding. It can be argued that the allure of the ruling party was stronger this time around, forcing the owners of the paper to deploy it into the service of Zanu PF as the party was most likely to retain its control of the state. The worsening financial status of the paper also dealt a blow to its autonomy in 2002, resulting in its eventual, though clandestine, takeover by state security agents. According to media reports which emerged in the wake of the so-called ‘mediagate’ scandal in 2005, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* was already beholden to state-related intelligence institutions for its financial survival prior to the 2002 election. The direct effect of this was to kill the nascent promise of ‘independent nationalist’ journalism.

### 9.2 Reflections on Critical Political Economy of the Media

I argued in Chapter Two that my choice of critical political economy as an approach to studying the Zimbabwean media’s role in relation to the public sphere was informed by a number of reasons. Among others, I noted the approach’s interest in finding out how different ways of financing and organising cultural production,

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3 This writer was the News Editor of the *Zimbabwe Mirror* at the time of the 2002 elections and had to contend with immense pressure from the proprietor to cast the electoral coverage in favour of the ruling party. I reflected in some detail on this experience in a piece published by newzimbabwe.com. in 2005. (see [http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/ciogate19.13284.html](http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/ciogate19.13284.html)).

4 The ‘mediagate’ scandal involving the covert ownership and control of the media by state security agents was first revealed by the *Zimbabwe Independent* on 12/08/2005. The revelations and follow-ups were also published on newzimbabwe.com. (see, for example: [http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/ciogate.12973.html](http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/ciogate.12973.html))
including media production, influence the range of discourses and representations in the public domain (Golding & Murdock, 2000). I also argued that my other attraction to this approach was its ‘holistic’ nature; that is, its capacity to examine “the social whole or the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social and cultural fields” (Boyd-Barrett, 1995: 187). For a study focusing on the role of the press in mediating a postcolonial transition, I found the above two attributes of critical political economy appropriate because they informed my examination of both patterns of media framing of a key issue of democracy, as well as tracing such framing to broader press-state-capital relations. As a result, as much as my primary focus is the media and its role in the transition, this study also makes critical reference to the political economy of Zimbabwe’s transition.

One shortcoming of the approach which I noted is that it puts less emphasis on the undemocratic state as a potential threat to the media’s role in relation to the public sphere, than it does on big business. The general tendency for critical political economists is to argue for public intervention in the media in a context where big business, not the state, has become a powerful threat to media diversity and pluralism (cf. McChesney, 2000; Curran, 2000). Critical works by political economists including Peter Golding & Graham Murdock, Robert McChesney, Nicholas Garnham, Noam Chomsky & Edward Herman, among many others cited in this study, tend to focus predominantly on corporate hierarchies as the primary threats to media’s role in democracy in the 21st Century. Some of these works are undoubtedly meant to be radical responses to liberal pluralism’s preoccupation with the Leviathan state as the ultimate threat, to the exclusion of everything else.

Critical political economy’s tendency to focus largely on big business rather than the state also has to do with its ancestry, which is rooted in liberal democracies with strong civil societies and dispersal of power. However, in a different context such as Zimbabwe which, during the period under study, had a relatively weak civil society and private sector, the state has to feature more prominently in the analysis because of its key role in media policy and practice. This illustrates the limited universality of Western-centric approaches to the role of media in society, which is discussed briefly in the first chapter of this study. As noted in Chapter Two, I also applied Gramsci’s concept of hegemony mostly in relation to the emerging Zimbabwean state rather than
the bourgeois state controlled by players in big capital. Again this was necessitated by
the nature of the state in postcolonial Zimbabwe. In short, this study adapted critical
political economy to an African context because, despite some shortcomings
identified above and elsewhere in this dissertation, many of its tenets are relevant and
applicable to the context of this study.

The study found that while fractions of both local and foreign capital did influence
media performance during the transition, this influence was significantly minor when
compared with the state’s influence. Through its ownership of the major media in the
country, its allocative powers in relation to scarce resources such as foreign currency
and its central role in shaping business practice, as well as its monopoly of coercion
and the legal arsenal, the state emerged in this study as a single most influential centre
of power in relation to media practice. To understand both the structure and
performance of the press in Zimbabwe since 1980, one would necessarily have to
examine the role of the state in shaping media practice. To complement critical
political economy’s lack of strong emphasis on the state, this study therefore applied
Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as a way of explaining the Zanu PF-controlled state’s
media policies throughout the transition.

I would argue, on a final note, that the critical political economy of the media
approach—its shortcomings notwithstanding—provided a fitting analytical
framework, which in turn provided an invaluable insight into press-state-capital
relations and the their influence on the mediation of Zimbabwe’s political transition.
Although relations between civil society groups and both the state and fractions of
capital were not the primary focus of this study, critical political economy informed
my occasional references to shifts in civil society-state-capital alliances and their
influence on press activity. This was done with a view to providing a historical and
contextual setting, including constraints and opportunities informing media practice.

9.3 How Can the Media Serve Democracy? Reflections on the Zimbabwe Case
The press’s relations with political and economic centres of power had tremendous
influence on its framing of political contests in the transition. As Mano (2005) has
observed, the journalistic agency did not hold up much against the overwhelming
pressures of structural constraints in the case of Zimbabwe, especially with regards to
constraints posed by the state as it increasingly lost legitimacy and assumed authoritarian and predatory tendencies. As noted in the study, the inability of most of the mainstream media to provide multiple discursive realms beyond just the ruling party and the political opposition was partly a result of undemocratic and authoritarian state media policy, as well as the institutional vulnerability of the press to the vagaries of both the state and fractions of capital. This vulnerability arguably contributed to the framing of political contestation in narrow terms consistent with the main categories of ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ journalism. It was a vulnerability the postcolonial media inherited in 1980, and carried over after independence despite the ostentatious claims of change and democratic media reform that the state made during the ‘first’ transition. Mukasa (2000) has noted that, thanks to its alignment with and vulnerability to the influences of the state and capital, “the Zimbabwean press has historically not been able to tell the full Zimbabwean story by articulating on a sustained basis issues that are critical to the majority of the population” (p. 299). This study concurs with the above assertion on the count of the majority of the press’s failure to ‘mediate the transition’ in broader rather than narrow terms of ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ journalism; but explains this on the one hand as largely an outcome of bad and authoritarian state policy. As noted above, this becomes even clearer if one considers that in practice, the media in Zimbabwe never enjoyed substantive press freedom either before or after independence.

On the other hand, however, this study notes that the press’s inability to effectively exert its agency powers also partly had to do with the media’s own failure to transcend the limitations of its heritage, in the interest of the public sphere. Although there is little doubt as to its vulnerability (outlined above) in relation to centres of political and economic power in an increasingly undemocratic political context, it is plausible to argue that both the public and private press could have deepened and professionalized political reportage without necessarily drawing the ire of the restrictive structures all the time. Better organised as professional workers across the public/private media divide, journalists could arguably have posed a potent force which neither the undemocratic state nor capital would simply ignore or take for granted. This point is linked to the issue of the absence of a culture of professional media activism which I discuss later in this chapter.
But even as one generalises about the role of the mainstream press in relation to political contestation in the transition, it is important to reflect on the brief exception of ‘independent nationalist’ journalism because it can form the basis for imagining ‘ideal’ media and media systems which can serve the public sphere better. This study has attributed the brief success of the *Zimbabwe Mirror’s* journalistic model in 2000 to the paper’s relative autonomy from overt political and economic pressures. Further, one could add that the paper’s relatively small size and upmarket readership (an average 15-20 000 per week) as well as its non-commercial model made it possible to maintain an ‘independent nationalist’ editorial perspective in 2000. However, it was foreseeable that this could not be sustainable in the long term, barring significant reforms to the state, media policy and the economy. The escalating state authoritarianism and the rapidly failing economy became the midwives for ‘independent nationalist’ journalism’s degeneration into ‘patriotic’ journalism.

In light of the foregoing, it is important to reflect on how a media system which approximates the public sphere in the context of a developing African country such as Zimbabwe can be nurtured. It can be argued that, based on the shortcomings identified in the Zimbabwean case, an ideal media system needs to be nurtured at the level of both policy and practice. What follows below is a discussion of both policy and practical possibilities in relation to the Zimbabwean case.

### 9.3.1 The Challenge of Media Policy

Curran (2000) has argued that an ideal media system could consist of a multi-tier system comprising both specialist and general media sectors. At the core of such a system would be a public service broadcasting system, encircled by private enterprise, social market, professional, civic and other sectoral media. At its best, such a media system with constituent parts organised in different ways can “create spaces for the communication of opposed viewpoints, and a common space for their mediation” (Curran, 2000:143).

According to Curran’s architecture, the specialist media tier serves “differentiated audiences, which enables different social groups to debate issues of social identity, group interest, political strategy and normative understanding on their own terms” (2000: 140). Serving both specialised and non-specialised audiences is the general
media tier, at the core of which is public service broadcasting. Ideally, according to Curran, this tier should be able to reach and speak to heterogeneous publics in society. Further, this should be universally accessible to everyone, with content that both encourages and enables debate at all levels of society. Because of the reality of diversity in society, the specialised tiers of civic (civil society groups including non-governmental organisations), professional (media controlled by and largely addressing specific professions including the media profession), private (market-based commercial) and social (minority media, operating within the market but supported by the state), all contribute to address the range of information and entertainment needs of the heterogeneous publics. The underlying assumption in Curran’s model is that the state itself is democratic and that, because it has the media needs of citizens at heart, it will adopt policy strategies (such the model outlined above) which can sufficiently address these needs.

Taking note of Curran’s invaluable argument and model, and drawing briefly on the South African media policy scenario, I contend that a media system that serves the public sphere in Zimbabwe would be possible only after a dismantling of an authoritarian legal and policy infrastructure, and its replacement by a comprehensive policy authored by a cross-section of social interests and which creates conditions for professional media practice. Such a policy dispensation would have to provide for express media freedom, liberate the public media from state control by creating a genuinely publicly-owned media accountable to the public through parliament, and create enabling conditions for commercial, community and non-profit media to thrive. In addition, the broader political context in Zimbabwe—in particular the current political tensions that have polarised the country along the lines of Zanu PF and the MDC—and the poor state of the economy would need to change for the better to create these enabling conditions for the media.

Zaffiro (2000) has argued that South Africa’s “ongoing experience with simultaneous political and media democratisation offers some useful lessons for Zimbabwe” (p. 117). Among others, he identified South Africa’s legal protection of free expression, it’s shunning of state domination of the media and the country’s creation of conditions where it is possible (although not always the case in practice) for media to be
independent from economic, editorial and legal interference, as noteworthy factors which Zimbabwean policy reformers may need to consider.

Like Zimbabwe, South Africa went through a negotiated transition which saw the demise of apartheid and the establishment of non-racial democracy as a result of protracted negotiations between the liberation movements and the minority government. Within the arena of communication policy reform, Horwitz (2001) has argued that the process of media reform from apartheid-aligned apparatuses to accountable democratic institutions “took place via a complex political process in which civil society activism…largely won out over the powerful forces of formal market capitalism and older models of state control” (p. 20). The active role of civil society in the South African negotiated transition therefore ensured that a media system created out of a democratic South Africa would in principle serve a range of social interests rather than just political and corporate hierarchies.

Whereas in Zimbabwe the policy formulation process was the prerogative of the emerging ruling elite, the South African communications policy reform process “constructed a genuine public sphere in which nearly all relevant parties had access and the ability to participate in ongoing discussions and negotiations in substantive rather than merely symbolic ways” (Horwitz, 2001:22). Premised on a constitution often cited as one of the most liberal in the world, South African media policy created a three-tier system in broadcasting and a multi-tier system for the press to increase both media density and in principle to broaden access to the mediated public sphere5. The broadcasting sector tiers include public service, commercial and community broadcasting. While community and commercial broadcasters generally target specific constituencies (defined by geography and interests) the public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) carries the constitutional mandate of targeting the entire country in its diversity and in the 11

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5 The discussion of the South African policy process is not meant to be extensive, but to highlight its key aspects for comparative purposes. It is important to mention that there is ongoing debate about whether the practice of South African media reflects the intentions of policy, especially in the wake of increasing commercial pressures on both the print and broadcast media. There’s also debate around the relationship between the state and the public broadcaster, amid allegations of undue ANC influence on the functions of the SABC. University academics Guy Berger, Tawana Kupe and Anton Harber, Human rights activist Rhoda Kadalie, South African National Editors’ Forum Chairman Joe Thloloe, among others have been key participants in this debate.
local languages. The South African print media sector is not statutorily regulated, and consists of a multi-tier system including mainstream national, regional, local and community newspapers and magazines. With a few exceptions, the print media sector is predominantly commercially-owned.

With regard to Zimbabwe, however, the emerging ruling political elite took sole charge of the policy process right from the inception of independence. In fact, even during the Lancaster House ceasefire and constitutional negotiations leading to the first democratic elections, media freedom was not given sufficient attention as a critical issue, hence its scant provision in the country’s constitution. As noted elsewhere in this study, Zanu PF inherited a highly centralised state in which media policy formulation, among others, was the sole responsibility of the state to the exclusion of all other social interests. This resulted in the continuance of authoritarian underpinnings in the new policies, notwithstanding their presentation to the public as democratic and transformative.

A democratic media and communication policy for a developing African country such as Zimbabwe would have to be a product of massive engagement between the state and social interests in civil society (including journalists’ unions) and capital, among others. Such a policy should be supported by legislation and constitutional provisions which guarantee media freedom and freedom of expression. Rather than being bent on constraining media density through tough restrictions on foreign ownership of the press and compulsory licensing and registration of practising journalists and media houses, a democratic media policy should aim at increasing media plurality and diversity. As in the South African case, policy should deliberately provide for the creation of different media outlets to serve the communication and information needs of different constituencies, including the poor and marginalised whose information needs cannot be sufficiently addressed by market-based media.

In the case of Zimbabwe, a policy trajectory would also be required which provides for a genuinely publicly-owned public press which should be accountable not just to one set of political interests, as has been the case with Zimpapers publications since

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6 See discussion in Chapter Four.
1980. The idea of an autonomous Trust remains an attractive option, but should be operationalised when buttressed by strong and unequivocal policy and legislation, and driven by a truly representative and autonomous board of directors. Given that so far the public press is the most pervasive print medium in the country, its decoupling from the state can in principle enhance its contribution to the public sphere. Ideally the Trust would have to be accountable to, and receive its (public) funding through Parliament. A legislative provision guaranteeing both its funding and independence would ensure that the Trust maintains an autonomous existence.

A democratic media and communication policy should also be able to nurture both a vibrant private commercial and community press, with the latter serving geographical (especially in rural areas peri-urban areas with the lowest media density) as well as communities of interests such as professional or religious groups. Prior to the promulgation of AIPPA in 2002, there was no codified policy on the private press. As noted in this study, the negative provisions of AIPPA include among others an outlawing of foreign ownership of the media, registration of journalists and media houses, as well as stringent requirements for the registration and operation of community media, especially community radio. A policy is required which strikes a reasonable balance between local and foreign ownership of the press, as well as lifting the litany of other requirements like compulsory registration. The commercial press should be allowed as a matter of policy to operate unencumbered by the state but regulated through either a system of self-regulation or a binding Code of Conduct agreed upon by, among others, both the state and the media.

Regarding community media, a policy that creates a positive environment for the proliferation of community and rural media is required in Zimbabwe, not least because up to 70 percent of the country lives in rural areas. I have noted elsewhere about community newspapers in Zimbabwe, that:

Earlier attempts at rolling out rural newspapers, done through the ZMMT, flopped partly due to poor funding, poor management and the exclusion of local business and civil society. A policy agenda involving the state, civil society and business is therefore a possible way to address this issue. The necessity for community media cannot be overemphasised in Zimbabwe where both the private and public press have largely been forums for the
articulation of contending elite interests, and where the press is largely an urban phenomenon (Chuma, 2005:59).

Policy initiatives promoting community and rural media should also include alternative non-market and social market media within the same band. A possible attractive model for promoting the growth of non-market and community media in Zimbabwe could be the South African Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), its flaws notwithstanding. An “extra market” initiative to address media needs of marginalised and poor communities, the MDDA emerged as a partnership between the state, capital and civil society “within the constraints of South Africa’s re-entry into a global economy that privileges ‘free market’ solutions to developmental problems” (Pillay, 2003b:401).

In a context where the mainstream media, including the public service broadcaster, is predominantly commercially funded—and therefore in practice subject to market ‘tyranny’— the rationale for the MDDA is to help build the capacity of community media in areas or constituencies marginalised by the mainstream commercial media. It does so mainly through funding and training, ensuring that community media “live up to the participatory-democratic ideals of non-profit media” by involving communities in the decision-making processes on their projects (Ibid:416). The agency receives its funding from both the state and the commercial media industry. The MDDA policy process was a drawn out and strongly contested one, with the resulting legislation (MDDA Act, 2002) a significant compromise between the key partners (Pillay, 2003b; Skinner, 2005). Although the original conception of an MDDA with a strong and transformative mandate only gave birth to an organisation with limited powers after intense negotiations between the mainstream media industry and government departments, the MDDA remains “a path-breaking initiative for developing country with limited resources” (Pillay, 2003b:418).

The South African media scenario is not perfect. The country still has to contend with the reality of a mainstream media that is captive to commercial imperatives, something that is inimical to the ideal of the public sphere. But its adoption of a raft of policy interventions aimed at addressing the information needs of the non-dominant and impoverished groups is laudable. This, in addition to the country’s creation of a
An ideal media policy regime should arguably be informed by the desire to achieve a kind of public sphere that is beholden neither to the state nor the market. Thompson (1995) calls this “regulated pluralism”. This he defines as a principle which, on the one hand “takes seriously the traditional liberal emphasis on freedom of expression and on the importance of sustaining media institutions which are independent of state power” (p.241). On the other hand, the same principle “also recognises that the market left to itself will not necessarily secure the conditions of freedom of expression and promote diversity and pluralism in the sphere of communication” (Ibid:241). This study argues that a policy agenda which can create enabling conditions for a robust and diverse media which approximate the public sphere should be informed by the above concerns. Both the South African model and the Curran architecture attempt to create a media system that is dominated neither by the state nor market forces. They both have their flaws, but when considered in their totality present competent approaches to the intricate task of media policy reform.

9.3.2 Challenge of Journalism Practice

Media policies can only facilitate rather than generate or represent the multiplicity of voices so necessary for the survival of the public sphere. It is the task of journalism practice, operating in an enabling policy environment, to nurture the public sphere. In the Zimbabwe case study, the media policy regime was designed to constrain the public sphere, while mainstream journalism practice also largely negated the same.

A key challenge facing Zimbabwean journalism practice is the development of media activism around media rights, media professionalism and journalists’ unionisation. This study has noted that throughout the transition, the power of journalistic agency was largely weakened by the political and to a lesser extent economic structures. Throughout its existence, the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), like its predecessor the Rhodesian Guild of Journalists, did not sufficiently stand up in defence of the professional rights of its practitioners in the wake of threats from both the state and capital. As noted in this study, ZUJ was largely a lame duck organisation with neither a secretariat nor ‘teeth’ to protect its members, yet alone the public, from
violations of media freedom. The fact that the state had an active hand in its formation, and that the majority of its members were state-employed journalists arguably added to the organisation’s ineffectiveness. The fact that despite being a member of the ZCTU, ZUJ was never actively involved in the labour body’s programmes of action, including numerous mass protests against state management of the economy and increasing state repression, is testimony to its lethargic history. In 2001, many journalists from the private press left ZUJ to form a rival union, the Independent Journalists Association of Zimbabwe (IJAZ) to protect its members and fight state laws and policies. The successes of IJAZ are still to be noted at the time of writing. The closure of the Daily News and other newspapers after 2003 whittled down both IJAZ and ZUJ’s membership and adversely affected their operations. Ideally, Zimbabwe would require a vibrant journalists’ body or bodies with adequate resources and power to lobby and intervene in the interest of unencumbered journalism practice. A stronger ZUJ or IJAZ would also have to team up with organisations within civil society to present a formidable front to potential threats to media freedom and professional media practice.

The situation in Zimbabwe was not helped by the absence of institutional structures—voluntary or statutory, before 2002—to monitor journalistic ethical conduct and provide mechanisms through which the public could interact with journalists or file complaints against unfair treatment by the media. Even after 2002, the Media and Information Commission (MIC), established by AIPPA, has revealed itself to be a very partisan body whose mandate appears to be presiding over the demise of the private press. During the period covered by this study, journalists in Zimbabwe were not bound by any Code of Conduct. Different media houses claimed, during interviews, to have their own internal ethical codes of practice. However, the predominance of ‘oppositional’ and ‘patriotic’ models of journalism in the mainstream press under review does not bear out these claims. For media to serve the public sphere, the journalistic fraternity in Zimbabwe would ideally need to come up with a Code of Conduct drawn up by a range of interests including the media owners and unions, members of the public, civil society groups, the state and capital. Such a

7 In 2005, ZUJ, IJAZ and MISA produced a blueprint Code of Conduct as part of their negotiations with the government aimed at creating a voluntary regulatory body for journalists. At the time of writing, however, the Code remains non-binding to media organisations.
Code must bind journalists to professional practice, and compliance should be monitored by both the journalists associations and individual media houses.

Another challenge for journalism practice in Zimbabwe, linked to the question of professionalism raised above, relates to the training of journalists. Rozumilowicz (2003) argues that for a media culture that promotes information proliferation and tolerance of ideas to exist, journalism education has a role to play. She notes that, among other things, “training schemes for journalists could be instituted which would instruct them in the ways of investigative journalism and a sense of professionalism in their craft” (p.17). Although this study does not primarily focus on the training of journalists in Zimbabwe, the issue of poor training and lack of professionalism came up in interviews with ZUJ, newspaper editors and some journalists. It should be noted that even as it established ZIMCO to address the problem of journalism skills shortages among blacks, the state viewed journalism training as an arena of hegemony-construction. Graduates of the sketchy six-month crash programme (later upgraded to two years) armed with basic news-writing and interviewing skills were hardly competent enough to both withstand systematic pressure from the state and ‘mediate’ the transition in a much more nuanced and professional manner. It is therefore plausible to argue that a better journalism training regime in Zimbabwe can lead to improved professionalism, which—coupled with progressive and democratic policy reform—can create a media system that comes closer to the ideal of the public sphere.

Finally, the underlying assumption in my discussion of both policy and practical proposals for media reform in Zimbabwe is that there should be political and moral will for such reforms. The period covered by this study witnessed the state in Zimbabwe degenerate from its effective developmental thrust to one which, aside from ubiquitous militarization, became weak, undemocratic and predatory (Bond & Saunders, 2005). Media imbalances in society reflect the balance of power in that society. Equally, progressive media reforms cannot happen in highly authoritarian

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8 For a discussion of the shortcomings of the ZIMCO training programme, see Tim Nyahunzvi’s paper delivered at the Willie Musarurwa Memorial Trust indaba, August July/1995. The paper was also published the following year in a collection entitled: Towards Press Freedom, Harare: Willie Musarurwa Memorial Trust.
contexts. There is a correlation between media reform and the democratisation of the state (Price, Rozumilowicz & Verhulst, 2003).

9.4. Areas for Further Research

How should a media system that best serves the public sphere be organised in the context of a post-colonial society in transition? How should the press frame key political issues such as elections in emerging postcolonial societies where democratic institutions are still under construction or face a stillbirth? And how do relations between the press and centres of political and economic power influence the press’s functions in relation to the public sphere? These inter-related questions informed this study’s investigation of the Zimbabwean media scenario over a period spanning over two decades. It was not possible to be exhaustive in the context of a single, limited study and therefore there are certainly many other aspects that require further exploration within the same broad area this study treads.

Among key issues that would need to be closely researched on is the issue of appropriate funding models for a media system that can best approximate the public sphere ideal in transforming societies with limited resources but operating in globalising contexts. The South African MDDA model for non-profit media funding and capacity building is laudable, but requires more resources and a bigger, more transformative mandate. How to strengthen and sustain such a model in the context of state fiscal frugality and business reluctance is a challenge for further research.

Another possible area for further research would be the changing nature of the journalism workplace and its implications for the role of the media in societies in transition. The influence of commercial imperatives, the role of the internet and the twin processes of ‘casualisation’ and ‘juniorisation’ of newsrooms among others need to be explored. In ailing economies with high unemployment for journalists, and general insecurity for those in employment—such as the case in Zimbabwe—exploring the changing nature of the workplace and what it means to be a journalist could shed light on why some media organisations frame key issues and debates in particular ways. It could also possibly address issues such as the absence of a vibrant culture of media activism, strong unionisation and professional agency among journalists, which this study raises as a key concern.
9.5. Conclusion

During the three-phase transition covered by this study, the relationship between the press, state and capital largely informed the manner in which political contestation was mediated by the selected newspapers. The authoritarian state sought to establish and maintain its hegemony over the transforming society partly through controlling the manner in which electoral contests were framed at different stages in the postcolony. Pockets of the private press which initially set out to provide a sanctuary to an array of alternative voices were later sucked into opposition politics following the weakening of vibrant opposition parties beginning in the early 1990s. This gave birth to a journalistic phenomenon I refer to as ‘opposition’ journalism, which ran parallel to the ‘patriotic’ journalism practised at Zimpapers. A third semi-phenomenon, ‘independent nationalist’ journalism, provided critical-analytical journalism in 2000, but thereafter died down, arguably because of mounting pressure from the state, financial difficulties and changes in ownership structures.

This study has argued that to nurture a vibrant media that serves the interests of the public sphere, changes have to be put in place at the levels of media policy and practice. The process of authoring democratic policy should be inclusive, rather than confined to just one set of interests as happened in Zimbabwe. The country would need to dismantle the authoritarian legal infrastructure which negates a free press and free expression, and put in place constitutional protections for both the above freedoms. Equally, journalists would also need to actively claim and exercise their agency in the interest of not just the dominant groups on either side of the divide but—more importantly—the smaller, weak and marginalised voices whose input into political debate and practice in the transition received scant media attention during the period under study. Journalists would also need to be accountable to the public through a comprehensive Code of Conduct which ensures fair and unbiased reportage of issues and events affecting citizens.