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Mediating the transition : The press, state and capital in a changing Zimbabwe, 1980-2004

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Abstract

There is consensus in media scholarship that in the best conditions, the media can play fundamental roles as institutions of the public sphere in both established and fledgling democracies. This study applies the critical political economy of the media approach to explore the manner in which the mainstream press in Zimbabwe 'mediates' the country's postcolonial transition through coverage of political contests and political debate. It assumes that how the press frames these pivotal features of democracy is a significant pointer to its role in relation to the public sphere.

While on the one level examining patterns of media framing of elections in the selected six newspapers over a period spanning over two decades, on the other level the study explores the relationship between the press and centres of political and economic power in the transition. This is done with a view to establishing the role and influence of these relations on media functions.

What emerges from this study is that both the state and fractions of capital informed the manner in which the press 'mediated' Zimbabwe's transition. The state was particularly the most influential power centre which, as its legitimacy waned after the first decade of independence, adopted authoritarian and predatory tendencies with the effect of polarising media along highly partisan forms of 'oppositional' and 'patriotic' journalism. Where nodes of critical-analytical journalism appeared, as did 'independent nationalist' journalism in 2000, they were nipped in the bud by unrelenting political and economic constraints.

The study's major finding is that restrictive media policies aimed at constructing Zanu PF hegemony through the press, as well as pressures from fractions of capital and sections of civil society vying for control of state, combined to seriously compromise the press's mediation of the political contestation in the transition. It also notes the press's institutional inability to actively assert its powers of agency against structural constraints, and explains this as a partial inheritance from lethargic Rhodesian institutions such as the Rhodesia Guild of Journalists. Overall, the thesis argues that to

nurture a media system that approximates the ideal of a multi-layered and differentiated public sphere which best serves an array of citizens' interests, Zimbabwe would need radical reforms at the levels of media policy and media practice.

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