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The misrepresentation of the Zimbabwean crisis by South African weeklies, 2000-2008

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Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the Zimbabwean crisis by the *The Sunday Times, The Sunday Independent and The Mail & Guardian* from 2000-2008. Using critical political-economy theories of the media, theories of news production, cultural studies and a triangulated qualitative methodological approach, the thesis contends that the representation of the situation is sensational, superficial and amounts to misrepresentation. It echoes a particular kind of journalism witnessed in mainstream newspapers driven by commercial interest. Such interests are shaped by ideologies of journalism which not only lean towards a Western perspective of news construction but also define the criterion of news selection. The criterion demands that journalists write news and not history and in the process strive to be objective. This limits possibilities of contextualizing events. Further, objectivity is a myth since it assumes the existence of an independent objective reality. Therefore, news representation is problematic considering that the Weeklies used 'official' sources who furnished them with raw material for framing stories. In addition, those who own the Weeklies are in positions of control depending on how these newspapers are funded. Economic factors such as advertising and sales, working in tandem with political ideologies that lean towards liberal democracy and human rights, influenced representation. In such a context, news is conceived and valued as a product of mass production in the 'free market.' A closer inspection of the Weeklies' representation of the crisis reveals the underlying complex ideological dichotomy where Western uni-polar discourses of human rights and democracy are celebrated while those of pan-Africanism, African renaissance, national patriotic history and liberation solidarity in South Africa and Zimbabwe are taken for granted. However, this was to be expected of the three neo-conservative Weeklies studied. This thesis argues that competing discourses should be given an equal chance of scrutiny if humanity, irrespective of race, is to reach a consensus regarding the complexities of the history of human civilization and its future predicament. Such conclusions were reached through semiotics, which included ideological analysis, as the methodological approach used. The latter entailed the analysis of textual elements utilized to construct meanings of the situation at the covert level revealing how the Weeklies expressed the desire to change Zimbabwe out of fears of a Zimbabwe in South Africa. This created the necessary pressure, locally and internationally, leading to the formation of a Government of National Unity.