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

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This study examines media framing of political contestation in post-independence Zimbabwe, in the context of the relationship between the press, state and capital in the country. The press's representation of periodic national elections, the state's mechanisms and strategies for policing and shaping media practice as well as capital's role and influence on patterns of representation through ownership and funding, are examined in particular as sites where this dynamic relationship is played out.

At the core of the investigation is ultimately an attempt to theorise the institutional role of the press in relation to the public sphere in the context of an African postcolonial transition. The impact of the triangular (press-state-capital) relationship on this institutional role of the media forms a key part of the analysis. A critical political economy of the media approach informs this analysis, which operates on two related research questions:

- In what ways does the mainstream press in Zimbabwe frame the contest for power in the transforming postcolony?

- Based on the analysis of the above, to what extent and in what ways is the public sphere role of the postcolonial press in Zimbabwe enhanced or constrained by its relationship to the emerging or dominant political and economic hierarchies?

In sum, the study addresses both the question of representation of political contests and related issues, as well as the question of whether, in the context of a national transition, "changes in the array of forces that exercise control over cultural production and distribution limit or liberate the public sphere" (Golding & Murdock, 2000:78).

Having analysed the key research questions, the study, at the end, attempts a discussion of ideal forms of ownership, organisational structures, ways of funding and financing, and policy and regulatory contexts which would nurture an ideal press serving as a forum for critical rational debate in Zimbabwe.

The study's interest in exploring the media's representation of a new postcolonial dispensation in the context of press-state-capital relations is part of a growing body of literature that seeks to 'unpack' the African transition from colonial rule. In the Zimbabwean case, the question of whether the emerging political and economic hierarchies have—along with the new coterie of (mostly black) journalists who took over after 1980—enabled the press to act as arenas for diverse and pluralist participation of ideas is of fundamental importance. The ideal of the public sphere entails that the press act as institutional sites "where popular political will should take form and citizens should be able to constitute themselves as active agents in the political process" (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991:2). Analysis of the media's role in the constitution of active citizenship is of critical importance in Zimbabwe, not least given the skewed nature of the mainstream media inherited at independence and the attempts to reform and 'transform' it to address the issues and concerns of the new dispensation. The period covered by the study stretches over 24 years, from 1980-2004.

1.1 Structure of Thesis

The first three chapters of this thesis deal with the theoretical and conceptual, historical and methodological background to the study. The first chapter is the introduction to the study; the second covers the methodologies applied in the investigation, while Chapter Three discusses the theoretical framework informing the study.

For analytical purposes, the discussion of the transition in Zimbabwe is divided into three phases, covered by chapters Four to Eight. The first phase, which is discussed in Chapter Four, covers the first decade of independence, i.e., 1980-1990. This period, dubbed the 'first' transition, was characterised by the new majority government's initiatives to reform the inherited media and other social infrastructure. In general, or perhaps in comparison with the later phases, this period saw the press enjoying

relative editorial autonomy. It was also a period when, despite obvious and hardly concealed political pressures being brought to bear upon newspapers especially within the state-owned Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers) stable, the press allowed a somewhat broader range of voices and interpretative frameworks in its coverage of elections and related topics such as the one-party state debate.

During both the first and second decades of independence the press, as a section of a national media system, was largely an unregulated terrain. As Saunders argues, the press at the time was "structurally conditioned and placed within the social formation in a way which…facilitated and sometimes provoked (its) crucial intervention in the space of national political life" (1991:4). This relative autonomy has been explained variously; ranging from the comparatively 'harmonious' alignment of political and economic elite interests within the first decade of independence, to the undisputed popularity of the Zanu (PF) government which was evidenced by its sterling performance in the elections of 1980 and 1985. It has also been explained in terms of the international political economy of donor funding as well as the national reconciliation project, to which the incumbent political elite had committed itself (see Saunders, 1991).

The second phase took off from 1991, spanning up to 1997, and is captured in Chapter Five. This period can be categorised as the era of market economics and politics of the belly that threatened the tremendous achievements of the first decade (Sylvester, 2003). Although no significant changes occurred in terms of media policy and regulation within the realm of the press, it was a phase during which the state began to sound its impatience with a critical press, occasionally beginning to crack the whip. The period also experienced an expansion of the press occasioned in large measure by the deregulation of the economy. Local, black capital became actively involved in the ownership of the private press during this phase of the transition.

The 'third' transition—covered in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight —began in 1998 with the food riots that rocked Harare in January that year and the escalation of competing interests vying for control of the state. The extremely tension-ridden phase was still unrolling in 2004. The third phase bore a strong resemblance, yet also with fundamental differences, with the last phase of colonial rule in Zimbabwe, known as

the era of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). In short, this period witnessed a bifurcation of political life—both lived and mediated—in Zimbabwe; it was a period of frenzied lawmaking and press repression; of waning editorial autonomy across the media divide (i.e., both private and public press) and for the first time in postcolonial Zimbabwe, three newspapers were forced by law to close shop within nine months of each other. Also of interest in this phase is that the duality of authoritarian and democratic tendencies reflected in the first decade of independence remained a consistent feature of media policymaking. The relations between different fractions of capital and the state were played out in the press in a much more pronounced fashion during this phase than during the first and second decades of independence.

Chapter Nine offers a conclusive discussion of the study. Among other things, the chapter argues that issues of propaganda and hegemony-construction were manifest in the framing of the elections by the papers through the dominant prisms of 'oppositional' and 'patriotic' journalism. The third model, 'independent nationalist' journalism provided a diverse and analytical coverage of the 2000 elections, but this nascent promise of the public sphere was lost with the *Zimbabwe Mirror's* degeneration into 'patriotic' journalism in 2002. The skewed relationship between the press, the state and capital informed the manner of media coverage of political contests and related subjects. The chapter also attempts a working model of an ideal press-state-capital relationship in a transforming, fledgling democracy and how this can enhance a rational-critical mediation of the transition in the interest of the public sphere. In so doing, the chapter draws some examples from the South African transition and how the triangular relationship cited above operates.

Overall, this study pays particular attention to the manner in which the broader political economy of the three transitional phases in Zimbabwe, both in their individual and collective capacities, influenced the press in its representation of elections and related issues and debates in the transition.

1.2 Why Political Economy of the Press?

The rationale for this study is an attempt to contribute to a fledgling body of literature on the political economy of the media in Africa in general, and Southern African

media in particular. Of critical importance to both this study and other emerging literature in the area is the nature of the relationship of media and communication systems to the broader structures of society, especially in the context of societies in postcolonial transition. Therefore, by drawing attention to the democratic agency role or potential role of the media in Zimbabwe, the study attempts to explore new insights that could contribute to African media theory. It is an addition to a small but growing body of literature focusing broadly on, among other things, the constraints and opportunities of the media as institutions of the public sphere in Africa, media-state relations, business and economics journalism on the continent, and the role of media in Africa's democratic transition. This literature includes, among others cited in Chapter Two, works by Goran Hyden et al (2002), Nyamnjoh (2005a, 2005b), Kareithi and Kariithi (2005), Kupe (1999, 2005) and Ronning (1995).

Against the backdrop of a dichotomised media theory premised on either radical or liberal pluralist perspectives on media performance—approaches with a genesis in the Cold War era and rooted in experiences of Western Europe and the United States—it is important that new possibilities for theorising African public communications be explored. This is compounded by peculiarities of the African media, such as their historical relationships to colonialism and apartheid as well as their 'transformation' to meet the challenges of a new 'democratic' dispensation in the aftermath of the demise of the repressive colonial or apartheid state. It is also of fundamental importance to this study to debate possibilities for reformulating and rethinking a media system best positioned to play the public sphere role within the African context. Such debate takes interest in issues such as how an ideal media system should be funded and financed, what should characterise its relationship to social and political hierarchies, how accessible should it be to the populations, and the kind of laws and policies that should regulate it. Importantly, this will be part of a broader debate on the challenges of African media systems in developing and democratising nations in the age of globalisation.

There is consensus in media scholarship that communication constitutes a major element in structuring democracy. However, as Dahlgren and Sparks (1991) argue, the question of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach

informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt—their public sphere role—is conditioned by historical circumstances and perhaps imbued with other potentialities. It is therefore important that specific media systems in specific historical contexts in this part of the world be examined as a way of discussing the efficacy of media as cultural sites or zones where a range of diverse and pluralistic representations is articulated for the benefit of citizenship.

This study of both the content of news in terms of representation of debate, as well as the broader socio-political context shaping such representation, can help us explore the extent to which the attainment of majority rule in Zimbabwe has facilitated broader citizen participation in the polity through access to and interaction with the press. The inquiry into the mediated public sphere is also of critical importance when considered against the fact that media as social institutions are part of and are shaped by the transformation process, but at the same time are charged with mediating, and in a way shaping, the same process.

1.3 The Selected Newspapers and Methods of Study

This research examines the postcolonial press in Zimbabwe over a 24-year period, paying attention to the coverage of elections and related debates, as well as trends and patterns of ownership, funding and financing and government policies on the press. Each discussion/chapter is structured in three parts. The first part discusses the broad political economy of the transitional phase being covered, relying on secondary sources. This includes the economic, social and political policies and realities confronting the transforming state and society in general. The second part focuses on the specific subjects of media policy, media funding and financing and the relationship of the press to the state and capital at the time. The discussion is based on both secondary sources and interviews with journalists, government officials, business and advertising industry personnel. The third section focuses on the framing of elections and related topics by the media. This is followed by a discussion of the interface between media framing and the prevailing press-state-capital relations.

A combination of institutional analysis and analysis of editorial positions (on the elections) taken by selected major newspapers in the country is applied. These newspapers include *The Herald,* the *Sunday Mail, The Daily News, The Zimbabwe*

Mirror (now the *Sunday Mirror*), *Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Financial Gazette.* Also employed by the study, as part of institutional analysis, are qualitative interviews with journalists, former journalists, policymakers in business, government and civil society. The media coverage of elections of 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2002 is analysed, from the point of view of broad frames and themes rather than specific, detailed discourse analysis (see Chapter Three). The selection of elections is informed by their centrality in both the theory and practice of democracy. One of the key issues in the struggle for Zimbabwe was the question of the right to vote, and since 1980, Zimbabwe has consistently held elections as provided for by the Constitution. Throughout the three transitions under focus, national elections "serve as moments when a range of contending mythologies about 'the true' postcolonial Zimbabwe can be heard" (Sylvester, 2003: 30). How the national press frames these contested national political events is of critical interest to this study.

Given the breadth of the work, (including the number of newspapers involved as well as the length of the period under study) analysis of electoral coverage of the first two transitions is premised on selected editorial comments. In the 'third' transition, which is covered by Chapters 6-8, both editorials and front page news stories are analysed because of the intensity of the political contestation of the period. Content analysis is blended with institutional analysis including interviews and document analysis, making the whole process a triangulation of methods which is arguably a comprehensive approach to a study of this nature.

1.4 Conclusion

This study makes a number of critical observations with regard to the press-state-capital relationship during Zimbabwe's 24-year multifaceted transition and its impact on the framing of political contestation. In the first place, the nature of the inherited state in 1980 entailed a transformation paradigm informed from above (and not from below), making the task of media reform an elite prerogative that largely left the media institutionally vulnerable to the government and state as had been the case during colonial rule. Secondly, the relationship of the press, state and capital was for the entire period determined by the nature of the alignment between political and economic elites at the different phases of the transition, with the press being the site where intra-elite cohesion, diversion and struggles were played out. Thirdly, for most

of the transition—and especially during the 'third' transition—the press acted as political tribunes for forces within the state and capital seeking to establish popular consensus and drive the national political agenda.

Framing of the elections, especially by the public press, betrayed a hardly veiled propaganda and hegemonic project by the ruling Zanu PF. Although sections of both the public press (e.g., coverage of the "Willowgate" scandal) and private press (e.g., coverage of elections in 1990, 1995 and to an extent, 2000) at different stages, provided critical platforms for debate on issues affecting national life around election time, this was an exception rather than a norm. The study argues that both the public and private press misconstrued their functions in relation to the public sphere. The former saw itself as a defender of the (narrow, Zanu PF-defined) nationalist cause, committed to the same agenda set and defined by the ruling party on the basis that this was in the interest of the country and democracy. In so doing, the public press became a handy propaganda institution at the service of the party. The private press viewed itself (and indeed functioned) as a counter-hegemonic, if politically dispassionate and disinterested watchdog of the leviathan state. While this arguably worked in the 'first' transition, the 'second' and 'third' transitions witnessed this press's adoption of the polemic 'oppositional' journalism model, under which the framing of political contestation was largely reduced to an existential struggle between an evil ruling party and a progressive, democratic opposition. This way the mainstream private press became the flipside of the public press which practiced 'patriotic' journalism.

While the frenzied lawmaking and regulatory footwork that characterized the post-2000 era might have appeared to some as a new trajectory in the media transformation agenda, this study argues that this was a logical progression of the ruling party's hegemony-construction project initiated at the outset of independence in 1980.

Finally, the study discusses the ideal scenarios including regulatory, policy frameworks and funding mechanisms that can nurture a critical-rational press system that best approximates the ideal of the public sphere. As stated earlier, based on secondary sources, the study also brings in case studies of other experiences, in particular the South African experience in media and transformation for comparative analytical purposes.