

## Abstract

The post- 2000 period in Zimbabwe has been marked by a major shift in the role of the media in national identity construction. This thesis uses contrasting case studies in the form of *NewZimbabwe.com* and *The Herald* to examine trajectories of national identity construction through the media in Zimbabwe. The research illustrates that various notions of alternative national identity have been constructed in the backdrop of the dominant narratives advanced by the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-Pf), articulated through the public owned and government controlled public media—*The Herald*, while *NewZimbabwe.com*, a diasporic online medium, has been used to propagate alternative discourses on national identity. The two publications were selected because of their different ways of covering issues on and about Zimbabwe. The public owned publication, *The Herald*, acts as a mouth-piece of the government of the day while *NewZimbabwe.com*, despite its changing ideological positions over the years, has constantly allowed for a myriad of views and has been a space for contentious debate. The research data consists of textual material from both *The Herald* and *NewZimbabwe.com* between 2000 and 2011. Zanu-Pf, together with patriotic scholars and journalists has managed to use land reform, race, colonial and liberation war memory, national holidays and anti-imperialism as some of the core themes to sustain its narrow formulations of national identity. On the other hand, ordinary citizens have discursively challenged these constructions of the nation ‘from below’ and their formulations of the nation have largely been constructionist, demonstrating the fragility and fluidity of national identities. Besides being a contested terrain, it seems ethnicity has played an important role in disrupting and fracturing the nationalists’ perceived notion of a cohesive Zimbabwean national identity. While Zanu-Pf has used violence and state-induced amnesia to bar debates of the 1980s genocide which has engendered feelings of alienation among some ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, the latter have used genocide memory as a site of resisting the Zanu-Pf formulated version of national identity. These alienated communities have used online media and offline activities to agitate for their own separate state. Zanu-Pf and ordinary people’s constructions of identity are not always at variance. On issues of homosexuality, the thesis demonstrates some forms of ideological confluence. In addition, much as new media are liberating, they remain problematic due to ethical considerations and mirroring repressive hierarchical forms consistent with public controlled media where opinion leaders and not ordinary readers set the agenda on many debates. The research is theoretically and conceptually underpinned by nationalism and public sphere theories. In addition, the interdisciplinary approaches of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) are used to analyse most national identity debates advanced by both ordinary citizens and Zanu-Pf. The research makes scholarly contribution through this interdisciplinary and multi-theoretical approach to national identity construction. Whereas most scholarship privileges elite constructions of national identity, this research suggests that ordinary people’s voices matter and when not given platforms, they are likely to be innovative and use other spaces like online media. The findings reveal the enabling and central role of new media as alternative digital public spheres used by ordinary citizens to facilitate the discursive construction of national identity.