

Mediating electoral conflict in Zimbabwe

Stanley Tsarwe and Admire Mare examine the media's role in triggering political violence. This post is part of the *African Elections series*.

As part of a research grant provided by the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and the Social Science Research Council, we analysed the role of the media in Zimbabwe's 2008 general elections. Our study contributes to the broader literature on the role of the media conflict situations, particularly in societies such as Zimbabwe that are characterised by contradictory processes of democratisation (emerging post 1980 independence) and tendencies towards authoritarian rule. Zimbabwe has often been characterised by electoral violence, and in 2008, the media played a key role in its mediation from the build-up to the election through to the post-election period.

Our curiosity in this research follows what we viewed as an apparent bias by the Zimbabwean press in the coverage of contesting political parties, an obvious omission of facts and a propensity towards fanning divisive politics through name calling and the use of inflammatory language. The same observations were echoed by the SADC Electoral Commission which declared that: "The mission noted with concern the partisan and biased coverage given to some political parties and their candidates by both the public and private media". In addition, we had also observed that the same behaviour by the Zimbabwean press followed similar trends witnessed elsewhere in Africa, Western and Eastern Europe in past decades.



For example, in Rwanda, *Radio Mille Collines* fanned violence using a blend of popular entertainment and proselytising by announcers. The government-supported broadcasts demonised one group of people and built up resentment and fear among the other group. In Germany, during the time of Hitler the media moulded popular opinion against Jewish people. The same happened in former Yugoslavia, when Serbian media revived newsreels of a decades-old conflict and atrocities as part of a campaign of propaganda and hate mongering disguised as news, to motivate popular sentiment against Albanians and others. We show these examples to illustrate that the media is often a complicit partner in fanning political violence.

Ideally, the media can be an instrument of conflict resolution when it is effectively used to give information that is reliable, respects human rights, and represents diverse views. Such ideals are

enshrined in Galtung's formulations of the concept of "peace journalism", and further conceptualised by others as "responsible journalism". Galtung[1] defined peace journalism as an approach to conflict reporting which foregrounds stories that highlight peace initiatives, tone down ethnic and religious differences, prevent further conflict, focus on the structure of society, and promote conflict resolution, reconstruction, and reconciliation.

In this current research, we analysed 50 weekly newspapers in Zimbabwe composing of both privately-owned and public press to identify their patterns of reporting so as to understand how the press covered the 2008 elections. We also interviewed journalists from these media houses to examine why they reported the 2008 election in the way they did.

An interesting pattern emerged when we looked at the news articles in three newspapers. Firstly, *The Sunday Mail* (state-owned weekly) and *The Zimbabwe Independence* (private weekly) both took clear positions which were overtly blatant and sometimes relied on unidentified sources about who the perpetrators of political violence were. The newspapers adopted biased positions based on their allegiance to political parties – that is, *The Zimbabwe Independent* took the side of the opposition MDC and *The Sunday Mail* took the side of ruling party, ZANU PF. Both newspapers made counter accusations of how supporters of the "other" political party were perpetrating violence on the supporters of "our" party.

We demonstrated that the press was both tacitly and overtly a willing agent in fanning political violence and perpetuating social and political polarisation through acts of omission and commission. In 2008, journalists assumed a "positioned" reporting style feeding on the political fodder of hate speech, name calling, divisive politics and propaganda which, in this study, we characterise as 'war-like journalism'[2]. An environment dominated by a hostile political climate resulted in the media circulating conflicting discourses which had a tendency to mirror the polarised political environment associated with the two major political parties. In this context, the nature of political reporting tends to create what a Zimbabwean media scholar referred to as "journalistic regimes" which were either patriotic or oppositional[3]. This media scholar[4] described the prevailing media environment at that time as a "bifurcated media environment characterised by a genuflecting and 'patriotic' state media on the one hand and a vociferously 'oppositional' press fighting on the side of the opposition".

Secondly, *The Sunday Mail* news articles were punctuated with inconsistent admissions and refutations about the occurrence of political violence. This, we argue, was used as an ideological strategy with the intention of giving a wrong impression of peace when the reality on the ground showed the contrary. We argue that *The Sunday Mail* practiced a subtle display of war journalism through acts of omission; that is, by deliberately maintaining a silent attitude towards the suffering of the children, women, poor, and the mostly powerless rural folks who were at the receiving end of political violence. We argue also that this is in tandem with the definition of war journalism characterised as "... the task of war journalism is war secrets".

Third, and on the other hand, *The Financial Gazette* was characterised by a distinct pattern which we argue approximates to the aspirations of peace journalism. *The Financial Gazette* particularly used the voices of political victims (without name-calling), civil society, women and youth. We argue that this resonates with the definition of peace journalism because "...in peace journalism we give a voice to all parties... The peace journalist focuses on suffering — maybe particularly on women, the aged and children — give voice to the voiceless and name the evil on all sides". In addition, peace journalism is non-partisan, people oriented, avoids labelling "good and bad guys"[5]

Our current research recommends that both the private and public press must adhere to ethical policies and guidelines particularly on election and conflict coverage, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) must ensure that those who transgress ethical frameworks on elections coverage must be brought to book, the political and economic forces behind the media ought to depolarise so that media polarisation can be arrested and peace reporting must be prioritised especially during divisive media events like elections.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge and sincerely thank the Social Science Research Council through the African Peace-building Network (APN) for providing a grant that enabled the authors to undertake this research in Zimbabwe. The authors are APN 2013 fellows.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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