

Alternative Media, Repression and the Crisis State: Towards a Political Economy of Alternative Media in Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Zimbabwe has a tainted media history under Mugabe replete with examples of state orchestrated repression, draconian legislation, harassment of journalists and violation of their work premises. The post-November 2017 coup period is a critical reference point to understand the political economy of alternative media under the so-called ‘New Dispensation’ of President Mnangagwa with its promises of prodemocracy reforms. Using political economy as a theoretical approach that analyses media systems in a holistic manner by linking them to politics, economy, legislation and technology, this study assesses the extent to which the ‘New Dispensation’ has implemented political economy reforms that impact alternative media. Drawing from interviews with selected alternative media journalists and proprietors, the findings reveal that alternative media in Zimbabwe remain entrenched in repression and are in a crisis caused by an exacerbation of the same structural factors that existed before. The ‘New Dispensation’ has instead led to the entrenchment of a new dictatorship by the military junta. Undue political interference, a fragile economy and state orchestrated repression continue to constrain the democratic functions of alternative media. By teasing the continuities and discontinuities of alternative media repression during the Mugabe era and under the ‘New Dispensation’, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the consequence of the 2017 coup and the need for genuine democratic reforms in Zimbabwe post-Mugabe epoch.

Keywords

Zimbabwe, political economy, alternative media, Mugabeism, ‘New Dispensation’, authoritarianism, mainstream media

Introduction

When long-time former Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, was deposed from power through a military-assisted coup code named Operation Restore Legacy in November 2017, euphoria gripped the country as there was hope for a transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. The removal of Mugabe from his 37-year reign came as a relief to some civil society organisations and alternative media who had yearned for an improvement in their operational space and for

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prodemocracy reforms. Mugabe (93) was largely seen by many as an aged despot responsible for economic ruin and suffocating human rights. Upon assuming office, Mugabe's successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa adopted a reformist attitude saying his administration was a 'New Dispensation' that was breaking away from past 'Mugabeism' dictatorial tendencies. The post-Mugabe government advanced the view that President Mnangagwa's ascendancy to power symbolised the advent of a 'New Dispensation' characterised by a new socio-economic, cultural and political order and that Mugabe was responsible for all Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front's (ZANU PF) failures and shortcomings between 1980 and 2017. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) coined the term Mugabeism to describe 'a summation of a constellation of political controversies, political behaviour, political ideas, utterances, rhetoric and actions that have crystallised around [former president Robert] Mugabe's political life' (p. 1139). The removal of Mugabe from power carried hopes of democratic change. The November 2017 coup that deposed Mugabe has been characterised differently as a 'soft coup' 'a non-coup-coup', 'very Zimbabwean' or 'special' coup to underline the uncharacteristic character, (especially of both) the subtle and brute violence of the method of the coup. However, Tendi (2020) has debunked the coup's exceptionalism by examining the motivations of the military generals and dynamics of the coup. He argues that the coup was not unique because it had significant commonalities, justifications and operational attributes with many historical military coups in Africa (p. 39). Besides the euphoria that accompanied the 2017 coup, there was widespread scepticism that the transition will open possibilities for economic revival and prodemocracy reforms. This study investigates the extent to which the postcoup political administration also known as the 'New Dispensation' has implemented political economy changes that impact alternative media.

Research context

This study is located within a specific timeframe from January 2017 to December 2019 during which Zimbabwe's multidimensional crisis elongated. Since 2009, the crisis has manifested itself in many ways that Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012) have concluded that its many crises with many causes. In this study, we take cue from Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020) by framing the crisis of alternative media as emanating from the restructuring of the state into more authoritarian forms and the central role that Mugabe played in fomenting it. Our point of departure is to deploy political economy analysis to answer the question if the removal of Mugabe from power had any consequences for the implementation of prodemocracy reforms and easing of the operational space for alternative media. The ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe has political, economic and human rights dimensions. On the political front, there is a crisis of legitimacy that surround the incumbent President Mnangagwa because he came into power through a military-assisted coup in November 2017. Although Mnangagwa won the June 2018 elections that he desperately sought to use to sanitise his ascendancy to power, he is still regarded as illegitimate in some quarters due to allegations of vote rigging. Mnangagwa is increasingly becoming unpopular because his promises to return Zimbabwe to its glory days under his 'New Dispensation' have not led to a quick economic recovery or an end to the heavy-handedness of his regime (Tshabangu, 2019). The economic crisis manifests itself through a crippling external debt-trap, low domestic productivity and high levels of unemployment due to company closures. Food insecurity is exacerbated by macro-economic challenges and political volatility. Inflation continues to erode the purchasing power and affordability of food and other essential goods. The health system remains fragile and ill-prepared to cope with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes the crisis in Zimbabwe manifests itself as a crisis of resource scarcities, namely: water crisis, health crisis, monetary/cash crisis, fuel crisis, energy/electricity crisis, food crisis and a crisis of disease outbreaks (Chiumbu and Musemwa, 2012).

At the height of the Zimbabwean crisis, early 2000, government tightened its grip on the state media, narrowed down on communications spaces, forcing many citizens to resort to alternative modes of communicating for expressing their frustrations, joys and despair (Chiumbu and Musemwa, 2012: 18). The rise of an otherwise robust alternative media in Zimbabwe is in response to government mainstream media control. To the author's knowledge, no study has been conducted from a political economy perspective to analyse the state of alternative media in Zimbabwe post the 2017 coup. Using some perspectives from digital journalism, Munoriyarwa and Chibuwe (2021) established that the postcoup period consolidated digital journalism culture in Zimbabwe contributing to the rise in popularity, of small digital-based news platforms that, arguably, are increasingly eclipsing already established mainstream (digital) news platforms as sources of news. In this study, an endeavour is made to demonstrate how the prevailing multidimensional crisis in Zimbabwe constrains everyday operations of alternative media and the extent to which the 'New Dispensation' has implemented prodemocracy reforms. The specific research questions that this paper seeks to answer are: What are the structural factors that constrain the operations of alternative media in fulfilling its democratic functions in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe? What if any, is the source of financing for alternative media in Zimbabwe and how does it impact on its news agenda? To what extent has the post-Mugabe government created an enabling environment for alternative media and implemented prodemocracy media reforms?

The importance of alternative media in a democracy

Although the media landscape in Zimbabwe is generally understood through a simple dichotomy of privately owned players and state-owned and controlled media outlets, in this paper we chose to classify the media as mainstream and alternative. Mainstream media can be defined by their production practices, ownership and control, financial capital, ideological content and market reach. Mainstream media 'are situated completely within (and concomitantly co-creating) the ideological norms of society, enjoy a widespread scale of influence, rely on professionalized reporters and are heavily connected with other corporate and governmental entities' (Kenix, 2011: 3). In the context of Zimbabwe, mainstream media can be defined as mass circulating media owned by both private players and the government. Mukasa (2003) says that by the late 1990s the Zimbabwean press had grown into three categories: the mainstream press owned by Zimbabwe Newspapers, rural newspapers owned by the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust and the independent press owned by the private sector (p. 177). Mainstream media regard themselves as the bastions of traditional journalism because their news production processes are closed for citizen participation. Their journalism is unidirectional reaching mass audiences hence they have the widest audience reach and are the dominant voice of the state. Although mandated to serve the public interest, state mainstream media in Zimbabwe serve the narrow interests of the political and economic elites, disregarding marginalised views. They have uncritical and partisan content that supports the status quo and reflects dominant discourses, current thought or prevailing ideology of the government (Tshabangu, 2019). The government of Zimbabwe has near monopoly of the mainstream media, with over 60% ownership and control of newspapers, radio, television, printing and online platforms (Media Monitors, 2020). The state-owned and controlled print mainstream comprises the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (1980) Ltd (Zimpapers) and the sole public broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). Zimpapers publishes 11 newspapers and three magazines with additional interests in commercial printing, radio and television broadcasting. Its flagship daily, *The Herald* has 1,411,819 readers (Media Monitors, 2020). Despite being mandated to serve the public interest, the state-owned and controlled mainstream serves narrow interests of political and economic elites disregarding marginalised views. As the dominant voice, it publishes uncritical and partisan

content which support the status quo, reflect the dominant discourses and the current thought or prevailing ideology of the government, (Tshabangu, 2019).

Despite a monolithic media environment dominated by the state mainstream, Zimbabwe has a small but significant alternative or independent media sector. The term alternative media, which is the rallying point of this paper, can be slippery to define because ‘everything is, at some point, alternative to something else’, (Downing, 2001: ix). The labels ‘alternative media’ and ‘independent media’ are used interchangeably to refer to media organisations outside the dominant mainstream (Forde, 2009: 4). In this study, alternative media are defined by their negative relationship with the mainstream following Bailey et al.’s (2008) notion of ‘alternative media’ as a ‘as a counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream’ (p. 15). Alternative media are those that oppose the dominant mainstream media in any given context. In repressive environments such as Zimbabwe, any media that confronts authoritarianism can be referred to as alternative (Ruhanya, 2014).

Alternative media are historically associated with marginalised people and societies living under repressive regimes (Moyo, 2010), wherein they operate in opposition to or in tension with mainstream media often encouraging radical participation of citizens and pushing for democratisation. Because Zimbabwe has a restricted democratic space, it has a significant alternative or independent media sector that enable groups and individuals to participate and engage in the wider debate on the mutating crisis gripping the country since the turn of the century (Moyo, 2010). The identity of alternative media is relational and contingent on the context of production, distribution and consumption (Bailey et al., 2008). Waltz (2005) illustrates that ‘even a mass-media product like CNN could constitute an “alternative” in a repressive society where all outside media are banned’ (p. 2). In any given context, alternative news media publish different voices; attempt to influence public opinion towards underrepresented, ostracised or marginalised agendas; provide alternative news content that focus on alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events and rely on alternative publishing routines that are unsupported by the major networks (Holt et al., 2019).

For the purpose of this paper, privately owned media in Zimbabwe such as Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) and the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) are considered alternative because of their history in challenging the authoritarian state by publishing counterhegemonic news discourses and attempting to upset the market dominance of the state-controlled mainstream. ANZ are arguably the biggest alternative media organisations. They are the publishers of *The Daily News* and its sister weekly, *The Daily News on Sunday* and the business weekly, *The Financial Gazette*. Their biggest selling product is the *Daily News* which has a nationwide readership of 949,175 readers (Media Monitors, 2020). The AMH is the second biggest group, owned by former journalist and entrepreneur, Trevor Ncube. They are publishers of two weeklies, *The Zimbabwe Independent* (1996) and *The Standard* (1997), and two dailies, *NewsDay* (2010) and the *SouthernEye* (2010). Due to economic challenges, *SouthernEye* stopped printing in 2015 and was subsumed into the *NewsDay*. The *NewsDay* has a national readership estimated to be 677,322 (Media Monitors, 2020).

Although AMH and ANZ choose to label themselves as ‘independent’, we argue that they are part of alternative media because of their negative relationship with the state mainstream, small market share, independent ownership and control structure, openness to citizen participation in news production processes, critical content that is anti-establishment and radicalised editorials that advocate for social and political change. This characterisation of AMH and ANZ as alternative media may be problematic because these outlets consider themselves as mass circulating hence part of the mainstream media market. This problem of labelling is confirmed by Kenix (2011) who

notes that proprietors and journalists often object to the term 'alternative' because it seems to place them at the margins and denotes a secondary status that places too much legitimacy on the mainstream media. The form and nature of alternative media in Zimbabwe include privately owned mass circulating newspapers, Internet-based newspapers, pirate radio stations, community radio initiatives, street theatre and drama, protest art, and start-up; digital native media organisations such as 263Chat, Citizen Bulletin, TellZimbabwe and Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) that circulate counterhegemonic news content on digital platforms. Alternative media in Zimbabwe publish alternative political narratives that contribute to media diversity and multi-voicing of opinions in the public sphere. They are carriers of counterhegemonic discourses that resist the dominant discourses of the state mainstream.

In repressive and monolithic media environments such as Zimbabwe, alternative media carry the burden of upholding democracy and advancing the democratisation agenda. This is because the public mainstream often abdicates on this role by serving partisan interests and churning state propaganda. Alternative media therefore become part of radical democracy as they enable active citizenship, participation and deliberation of public interest issues (Pickard, 2006). They contribute to democracy by increasing the levels of citizen participation in public sphere deliberations through the articulation of marginal views and circulation of alternative political narratives (Tshabangu, 2019). Alternative media can also partner with civil society to form a third force that is independent of the state and the market to speak against state excesses and corruption. By their nature, alternative media are counterhegemonic because they attempt to critique or dismantle hegemonic power. Therefore, they exist in confrontation or opposition to the existing status quo and its legitimacy. Alternative media also form a counterpublic sphere opposed to the mainstream public sphere that circulate counterhegemonic discourses that represent the wishes and aspirations of subordinated and repressed citizens. They are a useful counterpublic sphere that permits the formulation of oppositional interpretations, identities, interests and needs. Alternative media enable the enactment of a contentious politics against concentrated state power by people with limited political voice (Wampler, 2014: 199). They are central to contentious politics because they can be used for the expression of dissident ideas, organisation, mobilisation and advocacy against state power or hegemony (Radsch, 2013: 169). Alternative media are not without fault and must not be over glorified. They become an easy target for the state in repressive regimes because of their potential to contribute to democracy and due to their counterhegemonic stance. Alternative media are also susceptible to political and economic pressures that results in them becoming a stumbling block towards the realisation of democracy (Pickard, 2006). This happens when they advance seclusive interests of politicians and business elites. Alternative media can also have a polarisation influence in society which emanates from itself hostile relationship with the mainstream thereby making the media a site for dominance and resistance (Tshabangu, 2019). The unfolding discussion demonstrates the current crisis of alternative media in Zimbabwe and the varying strategies employed by the state to muzzle its democratic freedoms including media capture.

Theoretical framework

Political economy is premised on a notion that media operations, practices and outputs are impacted on by structural factors of politics, economy, legislation, culture, technology and institutional factors such as ownership and control, policies, resources and priorities. Boyd-Barret (2002) defines political economy as an approach to the study of media that 'places things structural above things cultural' stressing that 'the production of media products whether news, journalism/ film, advertising, drama, popular music or whatever – is *structurally constrainedly* by economic and political

factors, especially those of ownership and control of the media industries' [*italics author's original emphasis*] (p. 7). This study defines political economy as an approach that focuses on the operations of media within a given social system and how they are affected by structural constraints of politics, economics, technology, culture and legislation. Preliminary studies on the political economy of the media in Zimbabwe by scholars such as Chuma (2005), Mano (2005) and Mazango (2005) that were published in 2005 special issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* must be updated because they focused on how the first wave of the 'Zimbabwe crisis' that occurred between 2000 and 2005 affected the media. This study is an updated political economy analysis of the alternative media landscape in Zimbabwe post the November 2017 coup. The added value of this study and departure point is that it presents a holistic analysis of the media situation in the post-Mugabe era, under a new political leadership which claims to be reform-oriented. It takes a holistic view of alternative media in the country by linking them to politics, economy, legislation and technology.

Methodology

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six people comprising senior journalists and proprietors of different alternative media outlets. The semi-structured interviews had an open-ended approach which allowed us to obtain insights about the state of alternative media in Zimbabwe and how the 'New Dispensation' had impacted on its operations from the participants' perspectives which were context and time bound. Three alternative media journalists were interviewed to gain an understanding of their everyday experiences of journalism practice in the post-Mugabe era. Three alternative media proprietors were interviewed comprising Trevor Ncube of the AMH group which positions itself as an alternative to the state mainstream, Nigel Mugamu of 263Chat – a community serving alternative media organisation and Zenzele Ndebele of the CITE – a digital born alternative media organisation that functions as part of civil society. Interviewing these proprietors enabled us to obtain comparable data and develop a nuanced understanding of the political economy of alternative media in Zimbabwe by triangulating how alternative media functioned as an alternative to the mainstream, as serving community and as part of civil society (see Bailey et al., 2008). Interviews with the research participants were conducted at various sites in Zimbabwe between January and June 2018. All interviewees were selected using a mixture of purposive and snowballing sampling strategies aimed at reaching respondents knowledgeable about the subject matter. As part of the snowballing technique, we used our initial contacts with senior journalists to obtain references and contacts of other journalists who were knowledgeable on the subject matter. Informed consent was obtained from the research participants and interview responses are anonymous to avoid easy identification. Interviews with journalists are coded as Journ1, Journ2 and Journ3 and interviews with proprietors coded as Owner1, Owner2 and Owner3. The interviews insights of the journalists are paraphrased to protect their identity in a country where it is easy to identify and harass journalists especially those that work for alternative media. In conducting the semi-structured interviews, we had a list of prepared questions for the research participants which tapped into their episodic and semantic knowledge of alternative media operations in Zimbabwe. although we exercised flexibility by allowing the discussions to wander off to more topical issues of the day carried in the news media. Flick (1997) underlines that 'episodic knowledge comprises knowledge which is linked to concrete circumstances (time, space, persons, events, situations), whereas semantic knowledge is more abstract, generalised and decontextualised from specific situations and events' (p. 4). The emerging themes were influenced by the interview guide as well as a process of

inductive and deductive reasoning, which allowed us to structure the findings according to an existing theoretical framework. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis as advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006) to search for themes or patterns in the data. This enabled us to produce succinct findings through a process of transcription, sorting and categorisation of the data into meaningful themes.

Findings and discussion

Overall, the study finds that alternative media journalists and proprietors in Zimbabwe are not agreed if indeed the ‘New Dispensation’ had implemented enough political economy reforms that improved the everyday operations of alternative media. This was because some saw the ‘New Dispensation’ as the entrenchment of Mugabeism under President Mnangagwa while others saw it as an opportunity to secure their business interests and establish new political alliances by endearing themselves with those in power.

Repressive operational environment and obnoxious legislation

One of the themes emerging from the research interviews was a concern by journalists that the media environment post-Mugabe is still repressive due to the presence of media violations and obnoxious pieces of legislation that were unconstitutional. Although the ‘New Dispensation’ has provided tokenistic democratic reforms such as reduced public policing which enables citizens to enjoy freedom of speech, association and movement, research participants did not agree that it has improved media freedoms. Some journalists said the ‘New Dispensation’ had increased journalistic freedoms as they were free for the first time to engage in political debates and criticise members of the executive without fear. Journ1 remarked,

As journalists, we are not afraid as we were when Mugabe was president. There is a sigh in the democratic space. For example, the conversation on Gukurahundi¹ is now taking place in public spaces and social media. But during Mugabe’s reign that never happened. It was always hushed and discouraged.

However, Journ2 said journalism had changed for the worse in the post-Mugabe era. He likened the ‘New Dispensation’ to a ‘military junta’ that came into power through a coup d’état in November 2017. Journ3 remarked,

We are free, but we are not entirely free. There is still a high level of self-censorship amongst journalists. Suppose if you get picked [arbitrarily arrested] by this military junta what will you do, who will help you and where will you get legal recourse? It’s tricky because the military guys are above everyone. They have the guns to kill!

Although Mugabe is gone, there is still a legacy of fear that permeates Zimbabwean society. Journalists fear violence and intimidation from holders of power specifically ruling party politicians and military personnel. In their everyday line of duty, they fear state surveillance and forced disappearances like that of prodemocracy activist Itai Dzamara, who was alleged abducted by state security agents at his Harare home in March 2015 and have not been seen since then.

We established that media violations continue in the post-Mugabe era making it difficult for alternative media to execute its public sphere and watchdog roles. Data obtained from MISA Zimbabwe indicate that media violations that include arrests, threats and harassment of journalists have continued at a declining rate since 2017. State repression of alternative media is a way

of silencing its criticism while encouraging uncritical reportage from the state-owned and controlled mainstream. As from January 2014 to December 2016 when Mugabe was still in power, 76 media violations were recorded. In contrast, 46 media violations were recorded as from January 2017 to December 2019. This represents a 38% decline in media violations. This decline does not mean that the 'New Dispensation' has sufficiently reformed. There is growing evidence that suggests that President Mnangagwa and his 'New Dispensation' have perhaps not reformed significantly. These include allegations that national elections held on 31 July 2018 were rigged in favour of ZANU PF and the killing of six civilians in Harare by soldiers during street protests over the delayed release of election results on 1 August 2018. In January 2019, there was yet another public show of military brutality when more than 300 civilians across the country were arrested and beaten up for taking part in streets protests on a 150% fuel hike. By year end 2019, Zimbabwe's economy had tumbled back into hyperinflation killing hope that the 'New Dispensation' will bring economic and political stabilisation. Under Mnangagwa, it seems, the country relapsed into an arguably worse crisis than that experienced under the presidency of Mugabe. The year 2017 is conspicuous for its record low media violations with seven cases recorded. This was because 2017 was the year of the political transition. Since the political transition was of interest to the international community, Mnangagwa began his term of office by implementing tokenistic reforms aimed at sanitising his 'New Dispensation' as reform orientated. Because of this, there were fewer media violations in 2017. The number of assault cases against journalists warrant special mention. Twenty-three journalists compared to 14 were assaulted in the post-Mugabe era. This confirms fears by some journalists that the 'New Dispensation', which is backed by the military, is more ruthless on journalists than Mugabe's police state. In the post-Mugabe era, there have not been any case of journalists being legislated or sentenced to prison for violating the statutes because the state has put into motion the reform of media laws.

Alternative media in Zimbabwe are also suffocated through the selective application of archaic and obnoxious laws that are not yet aligned to the Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013 which provides for freedom of expression and the media. This makes the need for media law reforms urgent. Draconian provisions in the Criminal Codification Law Act (2004) undermine the rights to freedom of expression and the media through archaic provisions on criminal defamation, prohibitions on publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the State and criminalising undermining authority of the President or insulting the President. Other laws that have the potential to constrain journalism practice include the Interception of Communications Act (2007) which empowers the Ministry of Information, Communication, Technology, Postal and Courier Services to lawfully intercept and monitor certain communications during their transmission in Zimbabwe. This contradicts constitutional provisions on the rights to privacy, freedom of expression that includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. The Cyber Crimes and Cyber Security Bill (2017) may expose journalists to digital surveillance, limit Internet freedoms and possibly deter alternative media that are digitally native.

In the post-Mugabe era, no journalists have been legislated or sentenced to prison for breaching any of the above statutes. This is because the state had at the end of 2018, begun a process of reforming the country's media laws to align them to the 2013 constitution. The media reform processes has so far seen the notorious Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA, 2002) being replaced by the Freedom of Information Act and the Protection of Personal Information Act. The Public Order and Security Act (POSA, 2002) has been replaced by Maintenance of Peace and Order (MOPA) Act. Although the media reforms are welcome there is public scepticism that the newly passed statutes are cosmetic name changes of the previous draconian statutes.

Depressed economy, low advertising revenues and poor journalistic incomes

The economic crisis that affected alternative media in the Mugabe era lingers on, making it difficult for alternative media to survive. This was summed by Owner 1:

The biggest factor that affects us is the economy. We are growing as an organisation in a shrinking economy. We have been in this office for two years now. You see [points outside his office window] those two vendors? They were not there two years ago when I moved here. This is a simple reality check. The economy is not working. You cannot expect any media business to survive in a shrinking economy.

The economic crisis forced alternative media to cut employee salaries and operate with bare budgets. Organisations such as the AMH group cut newsroom staff, closed bureau offices previously spread across the country and became dependent on free content produced by citizen journalists. The launch of the citizen journalism platform, *AMH Voices* in 2014 by the AMH group, was part of an organisational cost cutting strategy to utilise free citizen labour in news production processes. Because of the economic difficulty of maintaining bureau offices, alternative media are forced to operate from centralised head offices. The newsmaking activities of head office-based journalists are often crippled by lack of transport to cover events in outlying areas of the capital hence its dependency on hyperlocal content by citizen journalists. Zimbabwe's economic crisis is worse for alternative media because they are not adequately funded like the state mainstream. This has led some alternative media outlets into debts and salary arrears. Poor revenue inflows have forced some organisations to devise staggered payment plans as they battle to clear unpaid employee wages often resulting in disputes and strikes. The low-end salaries force alternative media journalists to hustle for additional incomes in as much as ordinary Zimbabweans do to survive the country's economic hardships. Flexible work times due to digitisation enable the journalists to leave office for a few hours to clinch personal business deals and do part-time work. The most common type of part-time work that alternative media journalists engage in is moonlighting for foreign publications. In general, Zimbabwean journalists across the media divide also make extra incomes through unorthodox means such as bribes from politicians for favourable media coverage and freebies that come in their line of duty.

Another economic challenge for alternative media in Zimbabwe is that they do not obtain adequate advertising revenue for two reasons. The first is that the government through its state-owned enterprises and departments is the biggest advertiser in the media. Government is always reluctant to advertise in alternative media because it is perceived to be hostile to the state. Bailey et al. (2008) attest to this saying alternative media usually lose advertising in repressive regimes because they are considered a threat to the state resulting in them limping from one financial crisis to another. The second reason is that advertisers believe that alternative media have a small market niche and of limited audience reach. This belief feeds into unaudited Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey results that are allegedly manipulated in favour of the state-controlled mainstream. Owner 3 said his media house employed different strategies to sway advertisers from the mainstream such as selling advertising space at predatory or undercut rates, making them 'agile destroyers of mainstream media practices'. Lack of advertising revenue is disastrous for alternative media in Zimbabwe because they do not have other viable income sources since newspaper copy sales are diminishing due to lack of consumer disposable incomes and reader migration to online news platforms. The challenges of securing advertising revenues are not only peculiar to alternative media in Zimbabwe. Bailey et al. (2008) note that in general alternative media fail in attracting advertisers because they create small counterpublics rife with conflict and antagonism. This is echoed by Herman and Chomsky (1988)

who note that ‘advertisers don’t like the public sphere, where audiences are relatively small, upsetting controversy takes place, and the settings are not ideal for selling goods’ (p. xviii).

The lure of donor financing

Due to the economic challenges of operating alternative media, all the interviewed proprietors said they were actively seeking funding to sustain their operations from donors, businesspeople and even politicians. This points to the continuation of the economic crisis that bedevilled alternative media in Zimbabwe during the Mugabe era, forcing it to seek additional funding outside the traditional financing models of advertising and copy sales. Some alternative media outlets in Zimbabwe are financed through grants from Western donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), Open Society Foundation, International Media Support, Free Press International and the Netherlands-based Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS). In cases where donors are not able to give a cash injection, they provide material support in the form of newsprint or other technologies that aid news work processes. Since 2010, the US-based charities of Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have been the largest financiers of alternative media in Zimbabwe. MDIF funded the start-up of the alternative title *NewsDay* in 2010, securing 39% investment shares. Alternative media in Zimbabwe also receive funding from sympathetic local businesses and taps into funding of professional associations such as the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe. Occasionally, some NGOs provide grants for the coverage of neglected beats such as women and children’s rights, health and hygiene. By receiving funding from Western donors and local NGOs, alternative media have been demonised by the state as paid-up agents of regime change. Myers (2018) argues that one of the drawbacks of foreign funding for alternative media is ‘who is setting the agenda and deciding what stories to cover’ (p. 37). When donors fund alternative media, they expect it to help them achieve accountability outcomes such as exposing corruption; holding the authorities accountable and to provide a platform of debate for critical voices. By doing this, donors can set the news agenda for alternative media. To illustrate this, Owner 3 said they received a grant from an NGO to investigate the exploitation of the country’s rich minerals resources by Chinese investors in cahoots with corrupt ruling party politicians. This although well-meaning and intended to bring accountability of the government resulted in a backlash from the state which accused the outlet of being over ambitious and non-patriotic to its Look East policy that has seen China become the biggest business investor in the country. The framing of news discourses using non-dominant perspectives that emphasise human rights, democracy and good governance often couched in activist language makes alternative media a victim of state backlash. Another challenge with donor funding is that it creates a dependency syndrome and a sustainability risk because ‘donors come and go, and their priorities can often change with little warning’ (Myers, 2018: 37), depending on the political and economic situation in the recipient country alternative media. Alternative media must move out of the outdated business model of advertising, copy sales and donations to diversify their revenue streams.

Limited distribution networks and reverse engineering mainstream practices

Dombo (2014) observes that although the alternative title *Daily News* published by ANZ played a fundamental role, between 1999 and 2003, in opening spaces for political freedom in the country, it failed to influence national politics on a grand scale because its circulation was limited to urban

areas since it was outlawed by ruling party activists in rural areas due to its counterhegemonic content. This points to one of the enduring challenges afflicting alternative media in Zimbabwe, that of limited distribution networks. Outlets such as the AMH group and ANZ often fail to deliver copy on time and sometimes fail completely to deliver copy in outlying areas of the country because production is centralised in the capital of Harare. Unlike alternative media, the state mainstream Zimpapers stable does not encounter in-country distribution challenges because they have regional newspaper titles that cater for specific geographic communities and bureau offices in major towns for easy production and distribution. To counteract the distribution challenges, alternative media are using accessible digital and mobile platforms to distribute content in the counterpublic sphere. This saves them from huge capital investments such as the purchase of production machinery that includes printing presses, newsprint and ink. Circulating content on mobile and digital platforms means that alternative media does not realise much revenue from hard copy sales. To obtain some revenue from the sale of content, they use paywalls and subscription-based electronic newspapers (e-paper). The alternative publication, *NewsDay* owned by the AMH group, introduced an 'e-paper' in 2018 which is a subscription-based service that distributes via email a replica of the *NewsDay* to subscribers. ANZ introduced the paywall system for all its publications – an arrangement whereby access to news content on their online platforms is restricted to subscribers or paid-up users. The rationale behind paywalls is that readers pay for content available to them on online platforms so that news organisations can move towards financial stability through the online subscription revenues. Alternative media outlets such as Chat263 and CITE use WhatsApp to disseminate free content. The use of WhatsApp groups to disseminate news and information is a creative journalism practice that uses technologically innovative ways of storytelling to break away from traditional journalism. It increases the prospects of citizen participation in journalism through content sharing and feedback comments.

Resorting to online platforms and the challenge of the digital divide

Because alternative media in Zimbabwe do not have all the requisite machinery for news production, they often resort to readily available digital technologies to produce and disseminate news. This was explained by Owner1:

We do not have a printing press! There was a time when we desperately wanted one but now, we absolutely don't need it. To put the story across we decided that we must work with what we have. We have the internet. It comes with free Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We are utilising these available digital technologies to tell the alternative Zimbabwean story to the multitude of our followers on social media.

Resorting to online platforms to distribute content is a key strategy for survival by alternative media. The AMH group implemented a Digital First Strategy in 2013 that saw the creation of interactive websites for each of its print publications of the *NewsDay*, *The Standard* and *The Zimbabwe Independent*. These interactive websites allow professional journalists to engage with audiences in public sphere debates and for ordinary citizens to participate in newsmaking processes. The ANZ newspaper websites, although interactive in design, are not accessible to everyone because of the paywall system that restricts access to content to subscribers. The impact of online news websites by alternative media in Zimbabwe is limited by the digital divide. Mabweazara (2010) describes the digital divide as the 'asymmetrical distribution and use of [digital] technologies in Africa' (p. 27). The digital divide creates the haves and have-nots of digital technologies. The technology haves are usually Zimbabweans in the diaspora and the urban middle-class dwellers that access

alternative media news websites via the Internet at home, work or on their smartphones. Although alternative media in Zimbabwe have a strong online presence, their access to audiences is affected by government-instigated Internet shutdowns and surveillance. The state believes that social media and Internet-driven alternative media encourage political indiscipline and engenders the production and circulation of alternative political narratives. For this reason, the state ordered an Internet total shutdown over a five-day period as from 14 to 18 January 2019. The Internet shutdown was meant to prevent the use of social media to organise mass protests in response to a government decision to increase fuel prices. Internet shutdowns, censorship and continued surveillance of online platforms as experienced in Zimbabwe paralyses potential interest of citizen participation in alternative media. Digital native alternative media in Zimbabwe contend with the digital divide, Internet shutdowns and poor technological infrastructure that contributes to weak Internet connectivity and to intermittent breakdowns.

The future of alternative media in the post-Mugabe era

The uncertain political and economic environment in Zimbabwe presents contradictions for alternative media. At some point, the 'New Dispensation' seems to be reform-oriented indicating that it may improve the operating space for alternative media. At the same time, it is keeping some authoritarian Mugabeism tendencies that repress the media. Because of the conflicting signals, alternative media proprietors are treading the political terrain with more caution as they are afraid to alienate the new political leadership through overcritical editorials and content. This cautious approach was aptly summed up by Owner 3 who said,

We always try to navigate the politics carefully. In Zimbabwe a day is a very long time politically. You can be fine with the government of the day now and tomorrow morning you are deemed an enemy of the state. Because of the political uncertainty our attitude is to play the ball with more caution.

Some alternative media owners are making decisions based on political expediency at the expense of journalism and the public interest. Embracing the 'New Dispensation' for political and economic protection seems to be a necessary survival strategy. For example, before the removal of Mugabe from power in November 2017, the AMH group positioned itself as a robust alternative to the state-controlled mainstream, opposing status quo Mugabeism, advancing counterhegemonic narratives and advocating for political change. However, in the post-Mugabe era, the AMH group publications softened their editorial stance in line with the interests of the owner, Mr Trevor Ncube, who publicly made known his support for the incumbent President Mnangagwa. By aligning himself with the 'New Dispensation', Ncube's business interests were secured as his online radio and television station, Heart and Soul Broadcasting Services, was unfairly awarded a broadcasting licence ahead of deserving community radio initiatives. Ncube himself was appointed into the Presidential Advisory Council in charge of media and communications. This led to public outcry and speculation that the AMH group has been 'captured' by the state. Ncube instituted editorial changes, and evidently, the AMH group publications are slowing losing the editorial potency that defined them as alternative to the mainstream. The ANZ group also faces similar allegations of being captured by securocrats through an alleged Central Intelligence Organisation-linked investment company called Fruitlinks. Allegations of media capture bring to doubt if Zimbabwe still has any vibrant alternative or independent media that can effectively challenge the hegemonic status quo. A captured media cannot be trusted to defend the public interest because it always serves the political and economic interests of those in power. Media capture due to political and economic pressures results in an unprofessional media and an impoverishment of democracy because citizens

may not have access to a professional news media that truthfully informs them and acts as a marketplace for the exchange of ideas. Alternative media in Zimbabwe have a lot to do if they are to regain public trust. Among other things they must avoid polarising content, conduct themselves professionally, clear allegations of capture and develop self-funding mechanisms. Mare (2019) recommends the radical transformation of the whole media in Zimbabwe which will ensure that they are not captured by the few actors in terms of ownership and editorial influence (p. 99). He also recommends building the resilience of media institutions so that they can cope, adapt and 'bounce back' from the adverse socio-economic and political environment.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the 'New Dispensation' has not adequately reformed itself as it continues to maintain Mugabeism repressive practices that limit the democratic functions of alternative media. Munoriyarwa and Chibuwe (2021) observe that 'the repressive tendencies of the regime, especially towards the media and journalists, are becoming more quotidian, banal, and brutal' (p. 2). Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020) rightly point out that the political transition in Zimbabwe was repetition without change because the current Mnangagwa regime remains entangled in Mugabeism. Alternative media continue to suffer from state repression and under the weight of the ongoing multidimensional crisis. The economic crisis demands that alternative media adopt innovative financing and business models that will remove their dependency on donor funding and limited revenue inflows from copy sales and advertising. For alternative media to be self-sustaining they must explore hybrid business models that include service provision, grant making and crowdfunding. Furthermore, Zimbabwe needs to implement genuine political reforms that will guarantee democratic freedoms for its citizens and the media. Such reforms must remove archaic and obnoxious laws that limit media freedoms. The media must be reoriented to serve the public interest and not partisan interests.

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1. Gukurahundi was a state-orchestrated ethnic cleansing genocide that occurred between 1983 and 1987 targeting people of the Ndebele ethnic group in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of the country. An estimated 20,000 people were killed in the genocide. The state has previously prevented public discussions on the issue until 2017 when a National Peace and Reconciliation Commission was constituted to conduct public hearings on the matter with a view to bring about national reconciliation by encouraging people to tell the truth about the past and facilitating the making of amends and the provision of justice.

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