



Newspaper, alive and in exile

Every week the 15 000 copies of the Zimbabwean are snapped up within hours. Brett Lock talks to editor Wilf Mbanga in exile in London.

When shadowy figures started scaling his walls and creeping around his garden in the dead of the night, journalist Wilf Mbanga knew that it was not safe to stay in Zimbabwe much longer. A founder of Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ), he and his reporters had been subject to phone taps, harassment and arrest, and the clampdown on the press by President Robert Mugabe's regime was getting worse. Now, even after he'd left ANZ to become an independent communications consultant, the harassment continued.

It all started in 1999 when Mbanga had become tired and disillusioned with the state-controlled media. So together with a band of investors, he founded the *Daily News*, an independent newspaper which dared to criticise Mugabe's regime. Their motto was "telling it like it is" and the paper's uncompromising commitment to reporting without wavering and embellishment soon saw it become the largest daily newspaper in the country.

Ironically, Mbanga had spent a lot of time with Robert Mugabe in the mid 70s and they'd been on quite friendly terms. Mbanga had been the first journalist to write a biography of Mugabe in the press. He remembers that besides a mutual interest in Elvis Presley's music, he was impressed with Mugabe's vision for a non-racial Zimbabwe based on economic and social justice.

On independence day, 1980, as Prince Charles lowered the British flag and the Zimbabwean flag was raised, Mbanga remembers being in tears. Finally, he thought, there will be genuine democracy and respect for human rights. Like others, however, he soon felt betrayed by Zanu-PF's abandonment of these principles.

Veteran British campaigner Peter Tatchell, who once helped fundraise for Zimbabwean liberation groups in the 1970s, but now most famous for his repeated attempted citizens arrests of Mugabe tells a similar story: "I have a copy of Zanu's 1970s political programme," says Tatchell. "Its goals were a socialist democracy with a free press and workers' rights. That is why I supported Mugabe and Zanu in their liberation struggle. It is also why I now oppose the present tyranny. Mugabe has abandoned the left values he once stood for."

As the chaos of social and economic collapse, government corruption and political violence became impossible to ignore, Mugabe realised the media needed to be brought to heel. It started with



➡ arresting the newspaper vendors on the street, and then the journalists and the editors and soon Mbanga himself saw the inside of a jail cell. By 2003 the government closed down Mbanga's paper.

With increasing fears for his safety and that of his family, Mbanga was pleased to take up an offer in 2003 – just a few months before the paper was finally banned – to spend a year in the Netherlands at the Stichting Vrijplaats, an initiative of the city of Tiburg. The Vrijplaats project was set up in the wake of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie as a haven for writers and journalists fleeing persecution in their own countries.

Soon he was writing a column in the local press for *Brabants Dagblad* called, quite aptly, "I write as I please". Everything went smoothly until one of Mbanga's columns about Hilary Anderson, a reporter for the BBC programme *Panorama*, was republished on the Netherlands Institute of Southern Africa (NIZA) website which is monitored by the Zimbabwean government.

Panorama had been critical of the government's apparent hijacking and militarising of the national Your Service training programme. Soon NIZA got a letter from the Zimbabwean government complaining about the story.

"The *Panorama* story was correct," states Mbanga, adding that the *Daily News* had run a similar story during its heyday. It was stories like these that ultimately led to the paper's closure.

Reflecting on the closure in one of his columns, Mbanga noted: "My newspaper was a true mirror of Zimbabwean society, with all its ugly warts. When the government looked in it, they didn't like what they saw. But instead of doing something about themselves, they smashed the mirror."

With the mirror smashed, suddenly Mbanga found himself "an enemy of the people of Zimbabwe" and realised that at the end of his year in the Netherlands it would not be safe to return home. He decided to head to London where he and his wife could get a visa on the basis of her UK ancestry.

It was in the UK that he noticed a gap in the market. He realised, that like himself, thousands of Zimbabweans "in the diaspora", as he puts it, were cut off from the news at home. What's more, since the closure of the *Daily News* the pool of independent news sources in Zimbabwe was getting smaller and smaller. It was in London that he hatched the plan to launch a Zimbabwean newspaper-in-exile: *The Zimbabwean*. The editorial office would be in the UK, but it would also be printed in Johannesburg for distribution in Zimbabwe.

Every week, the 15 000 copies shipped from Jo'burg to Zimbabwe are snapped up within hours, along with the 12 000 held back for distribution in South Africa and 1 000 more sent to Botswana, Swaziland and Mozambique. It is also printed in the UK and is available through selected news agents around the country.

So organised is *The Zimbabwean's* distribution system that when I tell Mbanga my postcode, he taps away at his keyboard and within seconds tells me my nearest stockist. In addition, they have international subscribers and the paper is sent to members of parliament, embassies and universities around the world.

When I mention I'm writing this piece for *Rhodes Journalism Review*, Mbanga quips "ah yes, your Guy Berger was one of our first subscribers". It's as if he's come to know all his subscribers personally as he's nurtured the paper's circulation.

This is impressive enough, but what really blows one away is that the paper is run almost entirely by volunteers. Over 50 Zimbabwean journalists from around the world have volunteered their services to get the paper off the ground. "Even the accountant volunteers his time," Mbanga tells me.

Of course, none of this would have been possible

READ

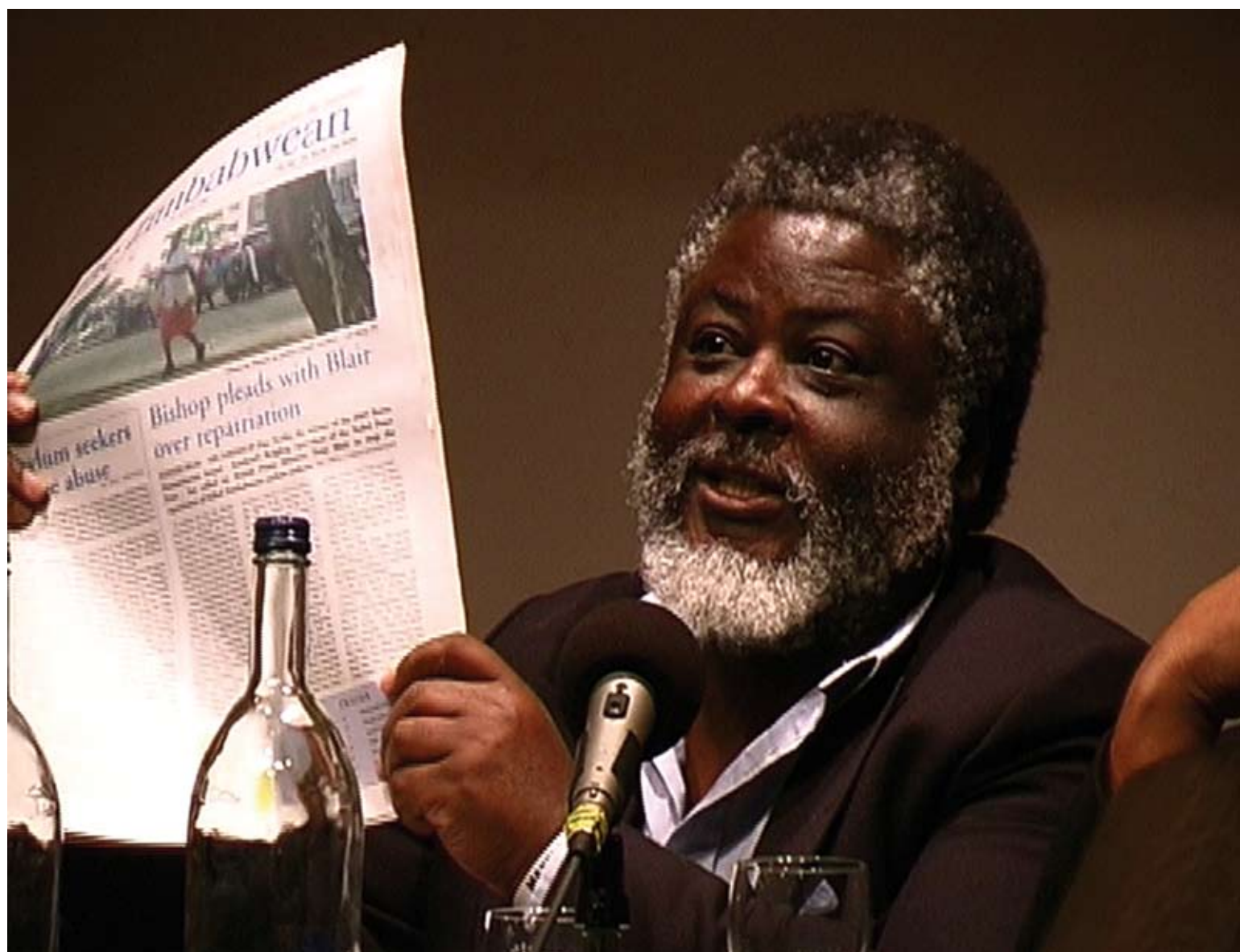
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"Another benefit to this extended reach is that the information becomes more accessible to the Western media, which Wilf Mbanga (above) says, is not without its faults and blind spots."

a few years ago. The advent of desk top publishing and now the Internet has made things possible today – on a shoestring – that few would have imagined a decade ago.

Mbanga FTPs (file transfer protocol) the finished layouts to the printers in Jo'burg. "I have no idea how it all works," he says, "but hours later the paper is on the streets of Johannesburg and on its way to Harare."

A twist in the law – for now – allows *The Zimbabwean* to be sold in Zimbabwe without a licence. Because the company that owns and prints it is registered in South Africa, it is technically a South African newspaper. "If we tried to register in Zimbabwe, we wouldn't get a license," says Mbanga. He's also not sure how long they'll get away with distributing the paper. Already the state-run media has launched a counter-offensive. Cartoons have been printed depicting Mbanga kneeling in front of (British Prime Minister) Tony Blair.

"They've denounced me, they've denounced the paper," says Mbanga of the Mugabe regime's response to *The Zimbabwean*. "But," he adds proudly, "they've never disputed the facts!"

While it is obvious that the regime would try to characterise the paper as anti-government, Mbanga stresses that this is not the case. "We reserve the right to criticise everybody," he says. "It is the truth that

Mugabe is causing the suffering in Zimbabwe. We are by no means an MDC (Movement for Democratic Change, the official opposition) mouthpiece, though because they are denied access to the media in Zimbabwe we try to compensate for that, and for the fact that they're demonised in the government press.

"All we want to do is inform people about what's going on so that they, in turn, can make informed choices. We are merely asserting the right of all Zimbabweans to freedom of expression and access to information. A news blackout is dangerous for any society."

In his efforts to promote the values of a truly free press, Mbanga says he tries to incorporate a wide range of points of view and to guarantee a right of reply – even to the government.

However, concerned that the distribution of the paper in Zimbabwe was always under threat – and of course to extend *The Zimbabwean's* global reach – the paper launched in cyberspace in March this year, with technical assistance from the Guardian Foundation.

"We have purposely kept it simple, quick to download and easy to access – especially for people in Zimbabwe where there is limited bandwidth," he says. "The entire newspaper will be available on the website free of charge."

The website – www.thezimbabwean.co.uk – will

Should governments own newspapers?

by Peter Schellschmidt

Media debates in Africa of the last two decades or so have produced some widely accepted key standards:

- The indispensability of an independent and pluralistic press (Windhoek Declaration of 1991), and
- The need to transform state broadcasters into public broadcasters (African Charter on Broadcasting 2001).

This again has influenced to a large extent the formulation of the “Declaration on Freedom of Expression in Africa”, adopted in 2002 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). This declaration has received much acclaim (although less attention than it deserves) as one of the most comprehensive global documents on freedom of expression and freedom of the media issues.

But, surprisingly, even this document is relatively silent (or vague) on an issue that has received very little attention even in media circles: what to do with state-owned newspapers?

State-owned newspapers are not particular to African countries. They used to be a regular feature in countries of the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe and they still exist in China and North Korea as well as some other authoritarian regimes in Asia. But they never played a significant role in democratic societies in Europe and the Americas. But in quite a number of African countries they still do. Obviously, some parts of the colonial heritage die very hard.

The African Commission’s Declaration, mentioned above, makes reference to state-owned print media in just one sentence: “Any print media published by a public authority should be protected adequately against undue political interference.”

Measured against the mostly very concise stipulations of the other parts of the declaration this sounds fairly vague: what

is “adequate” and what is “undue”? And is there (or should there be) anything like “due” political interference at all?

Even in most of those countries which still maintain state-owned newspapers, the consensus prevails that the print media – as opposed to broadcasting – does need little or no regulation. Basically company legislation and some kind of competition legislation will do, sometimes with some additional restrictions on foreign ownership.

Where print media need to be registered with governments it is just a formal process with no restrictions attached. The famous exception to that rule are the notorious strangulations of the media in Zimbabwe.

But why then do some governments still feel that they should operate print media? Is it an legitimate interest of governments to maintain their own means of communication and should it stay that way?

These were some of the questions that were debated during a brainstorming workshop which took place in May 2005 near Stellenbosch in South Africa. The Media Project for Southern Africa of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation had invited some of the most renowned media scholars and media activists from Southern African countries for that purpose.

The group came up with a joint position paper, called “Memorandum on the transformation of state newspapers”, which is quoted in its essential parts here (see column on the right). But the group at the same time cautioned that this “first memorandum... needs further in-depth debate, including on the future role of state-owned news agencies”.

And that is exactly what it is: a first position paper for much needed further debate. Or, to put it this way: an invitation to actively participate in that debate, which is still very much in the beginning stages.

also act as a complementary source of information to the print edition.

Another benefit to this extended reach is that the information becomes more accessible to the Western media, which Mbanga says, is not without its faults and blind spots.

“Since 9/11,” Mbanga says, “the world’s attention is elsewhere. Nobody’s interested in Africa anymore. Mugabe is free to do as he pleases, nobody is watching him.”

What’s more, Mbanga says, the Western media often get it wrong, or get a distorted perception. Part of the problem is that Western journalists are often banned from Zimbabwe, but even so they’ve unwittingly helped to perpetuate the myth that Mugabe takes farms away from whites and gives them to blacks.

“It’s nothing of the sort,” Mbanga exclaims. ‘He’s taking land from white farmers and giving it to his

cronies!’”

A free Zimbabwean press operating on the international stage will help to remedy these deficiencies, as the Zimbabwean situation is reported around the world by Zimbabweans.

Their mission?

“To produce and distribute a newspaper dedicated to freedom of expression and access to information for all peoples of Zimbabwe, founded on the sacred principles of journalism – fairness and honesty. To play a role in opposing everything offensive to basic human decency and hostile to peace, in order that Zimbabwe may return to the path of wisdom and sanity, and become once again an honourable nation, governed by honourable people with due respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.”

They appear to be doing a fantastic job – running a world-class newspaper on a shoestring – and FTP! ■

Memorandum on the transformation of state newspapers

- State controlled/owned newspapers as a legitimate tool of communication for governments have outlived their purpose in view of the multitude and plurality of independent media voices.
- Governments’ responsibility to inform citizens on government issues is best served through their professional public relations departments.
- Governments have the responsibility to create an enabling environment for a free press and must ensure a level playing field for all sectors, eg: in regard to use of government facilities, access to capital, taxation, (duty free) import of newsprint and equipment as well as the widest possible distribution of newspapers. All government advertising should be placed by a commercial agency (selected through a tender process) according to criteria of impact. Government publications should not carry commercial advertising.
- Governments should not own, control or operate newspapers.
- Viable state newspapers should be privatised. This process should be based on:
 - decisions by an institution that operates at arm’s length from government;
 - documentation submitted by the bidder in regard to editorial independence;
 - professional quality standards;
 - the avoidance of monopolies and undesirable foreign ownership with a view to increasing media diversity and pluralism.
- The process of privatisation will take different forms according to specific circumstances in the various countries (eg: vibrancy of private market, number and types of state newspapers):
 - State newspapers should not necessarily be sold to the highest bidder.
 - Additional conditions could be set to ensure editorial independence through boards of trustees and/or editorial staff rights in appointing top editorial staff.
 - Shares could be offered to citizens in general in certain (limited) amounts for each individual/group, with restricted rights of resale, to ensure broad-based ownership.
 - Staff and management could be offered a buy out.
 - An appropriate solution might also be a mix of the above options.
- Wherever such a transformation is not possible due to lack of political will, the danger of creating a new (now private) monopoly, or no buyer being found, as a transitional solution state newspapers should be transferred to a public legal entity. This entity must be accountable to the public at large through a board protected against any political or economic influence and appointed in an open and transparent manner involving the participation of civil society.
- Whenever the information needs of citizens are not sufficiently catered for by the mainstream press, media development agencies should be put in place to promote community and local media. Such agencies must be independent even if public funds are used.

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Some useful websites

The following sites offer important information on the state of the media in Zimbabwe:

The Zimbabwean – <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk/>

Stichting Vrijplaats – <http://www.koppenhinksteeg.nl/>

NIZA – <http://www.niza.nl>

New Zimbabwe – <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/>

Wilf Mbanga Profile – <http://people.africadatabase.org/en/person/14023.html>

Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe – <http://www.mmpz.org.zw>