

Fear is everywhere

by *Hendrik Bussiek*

The right to express oneself freely depends on where one is, who one is with and what one says” – that is one of the findings of the African Media Barometer on Zimbabwe. It captures much of the essence of what citizens with a mind of their own, and not least those in the business of journalism, experience daily.

Ten women and men met over a weekend in April 2006 in a lodge far away from the capital, Harare, to express themselves freely. They came from all walks of Zimbabwean civil society life – media and human rights activists, the church, the university, a newspaper, a publishing house. They gathered to discuss the state of freedom of expression in their country and they spoke as if there were no limits to this right.


As a panel they took part in the continent-wide African Media Barometer exercise, a project that seeks to assess the state of the media using indicators drawn from African policy documents, mostly from the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. And the assessment is done not by outside ‘experts’ but by informed citizens in each of the countries concerned. (See *Rhodes Journalism Review* No 25 and the report on the SA Media Barometer in this edition).

One of the first indicators is whether people practise their right to freedom of expression “without fear”. In Zimbabwe fear is everywhere. “One cannot speak freely on the bus or in public or go to the national broadcaster or the media with one’s views, if these are not in line with the views of government. In rural Zimbabwe there is fear of victimisation, fear of disappearance, torture, and violence

when one expresses oneself... Politicians and policy makers are even more restricted than the average citizens, as they cannot openly express their views: they make totally different statements on one and the same issue depending on whether they are in private or in public... Even the supposedly private spheres are affected. Children cannot talk freely with their parents or adults, and women can also not freely express themselves to their husbands.”

“The fear factor is always there – and it is increasing, particularly in the public sphere. Government is determined, to the point of obsession, to increasingly control what people say and do. Private schools are controlled. If Zimbabweans say something outside the country presumed to be critical of government, the net could be closing in on them and their passports may be seized.”

“Journalists and the media are under particular restrictions for various reasons. The state media have to suit the policy makers’ expectations. The independent media live under the threat of being deregistered by the Media and Information Commission, thus they exercise self-censorship for fear of not having their licences renewed.”

This commission is appointed by the Minister of Information and Publicity in the President’s Office and was established by the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) – an Orwellian misnomer for a piece of legislation aimed at precisely the opposite: to make access to information difficult and to protect the government, rather than the privacy of individuals. All media have to be registered with the commission, as have journalists. A media practitioner can be struck off the roll under section 80 of the Act: “A journalist shall be deemed to have abused his (sic) journalist’s privilege and committed an offence if he (sic) 

► falsifies or fabricates information.” It is the commission which determines whether a piece of information is “false” or “fabricated”.

Self-censorship has thus become a survival strategy and it “occurs in both the state and independent media – both consciously and unconsciously. Many reporters, whether working for the state or the private media, are ‘conditioned’ in the sense that they know what is expected of them without anyone having to give them directions. They suffer from the ‘publish and perish syndrome’, afraid to publish certain stories for fear of victimisation.”

“Journalists do not want to offend the Media and Information Commission for fear of losing their accreditation or being arrested under AIPPA. For example, when a prominent businessman disappeared from Harare, having been arrested for allegedly spying on the government, the news got to the media but no one dared to take it up. It was only after (the state-controlled) *The Herald* had written about it that all the other papers followed suit.”

No wonder, then, that “corruption is rampant”. One of the main reasons “is the constant fear of losing one’s job by falling foul of the stipulations set by AIPPA. This exposes journalists to the temptation to accept bribes and incentives as long as they are available... Journalists ask business people not for a bribe, but for a ‘loan’ as a condition for a favourable article. They regularly get ‘presents’ such as radio-3CD changers, beds and other assets from persons who want to avoid having negative stories written about them. Certain politicians are always frequenting the press’ meeting point, the Quill Club, where invitations start with lunch and progress until something more substantial is offered and the terms are spelt out: ‘I can help with bridging your loan gaps’, ‘I have influence and I can assist with the bureaucrats’. A journalist was offered ‘a little ladder to get him to finish building his house’. Then the politicians tell their story – and get it published.”

There are only two privately-owned weeklies left, *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard*. *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sunday Mirror* are owned by an academic aligned to the ruling party. *The Financial Gazette* is said to be owned by the governor of the Reserve Bank. All other papers are state-owned and controlled, with *The Herald* as the flagship. But even this daily is not easily accessible: a copy (as at March 2006) “costs Z\$100 000, nearly as much as a loaf of bread – and most people prioritise bread over newspapers”.

This leaves broadcasting as the main source of information, more aptly “described as ‘narrow-casting’ as the state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings has a monopoly over the airwaves. There is no other broadcasting operator in the country. ZBH is certainly not the first choice of the people – but they have no alternative”.

“The broadcaster is biased towards advancing the cause of the ruling party and government. There is a lot of reporting on the president, government and the ruling party. Typically, news stories start off by saying: ‘The government warns the public’, ‘The minister urges civil servants’, ‘ZANU(PF) cautions against ...’ etc, regurgitating statements at state functions and ruling party meetings.”

Zimbabweans lucky enough to have access to Internet at home or (more commonly) in their offices, read online newspapers run by Zimbabweans in the diaspora, including ZimOnline, Zimdaily and NewZimbabwe.com, with ZimOnline being the most popular. Their sources: correspondents inside the country who gather and supply stories against all the odds and ever present dangers.

Even these online services, however, are now under threat: “An Interception of Communications Bill which will make the surveillance of all communication including Internet traffic ‘legally’



possible has been drafted. In the draft, the persons who can make applications for the interception of communications include the chiefs of defence and intelligence, the director-general of the president’s department of national security, the commissioner of the Zimbabwe Republic Police and the commissioner-general of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority. All Internet service providers (ISPs), freight forwarders, courier companies, postal and telephone service providers and any providers of any medium that facilitates communication, need to put in place systems to monitor and record all information that passes through their system at their own expense.”

All in all then, the stranglehold on freedom of expression and the media is getting more suffocating by the month. And the atmosphere of oppression, of constant fear, of self-censorship and dishonesty, and the daily struggle for survival in a hostile climate has helped to resurrect and feed another monster: sexism and male chauvinism: “Media houses are described as being notorious for sexual harassment of women. It has been reported that ‘carpet interviews’ are infamous, meaning that some women get a job and survive in the media houses

only in exchange for sexual favours. There is also the systematic exclusion of women from prestigious arenas such as business and financial reporting and the lack of assistance of new female journalists in the newsrooms to take up this area. All this forces women who seek a better working environment out of the newsrooms and into the public relations sector”. ■

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