

WHEN COMMITTING JOURNALISM IS A CRIME

BY SHARON HUDSON-DEAN

I was on a date on 3 April 2008. We had just played an exhausting round of evening squash and then took our water bottles and energy bars to a grassy knoll in the middle of the University of Pretoria's athletic fields to watch a pick-up game of soccer. Our conversation could not have been further from the unfolding chaos to the north when my embassy cell phone rang. It was Celia Dugger of *The New York Times* in Johannesburg; her husband and co-Africa bureau chief, Barry Bearak, had just been arrested for working in Harare without media accreditation and the situation was developing badly. Could I help?

That late Southern African autumn night I was in the middle of my time as press attaché at the US Embassy in Pretoria. From my glass office inside the embassy, I had invested a substantial amount of time following events in Zimbabwe in the South African media. That year, I also became a remote member of the Harare Embassy team, assisting Ambassador James McGee and his staff members who came regularly to Pretoria and often found themselves answering questions about Zimbabwe from reporters barred from entering the country themselves.

After speaking to Celia, I called Eric Bost, our outspoken African-American ambassador. Bost stayed on top of events in Zimbabwe. I co-ordinated the writing of numerous opinion pieces and statements for him on the urgency of restoring rule of law and economic sanity to prevent more suffering and to stop the flood of refugees coming over the border into South Africa. When Bearak was arrested, we both knew how high-profile his detention would be in that day's US news cycle. Our colleagues in Harare were already on top of the situation, speaking to Bearak and reaching out to police contacts, but with notoriously poor phone service and erratic electricity, they appreciated a support team in SA.

Later that month, after Bearak was safely back in South Africa, the Pulitzer Prize-winner published a first-hand account of his experience. "I was being charged with the crime of 'committing journalism'," he wrote in *The New York Times*. "One of my captors, Detective

Inspector Dani Rangwani, described the offense to me as something despicable, almost hissing the words: 'You've been gathering, processing and disseminating the news.'"

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and his liberation political party, ZANU-PF, have long played cat and mouse with the media, foreign and domestic. The intimidation tactics are both crude and sophisticated, and applied erratically. Many foreign journalists based in Johannesburg have slipped in and out of Zimbabwe for years, conducting interviews without accreditation and publishing widely. But when the security apparatus decides to flex its muscles and go after the media, a weekend detention in Harare's notorious central prison is often their starting point.

On the flip side, the ZANU-PF propaganda machine runs constant, pervasive, political, messaging campaigns through the Information Ministry, the President's spokesman, Zimbabwe's most-widely distributed newspapers from Zimbabwe Newspapers Ltd (Zimpapers), and the only TV and radio in the country (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation or ZBC). The messages are short, emotional and memorable. Information control and manipulation are two areas where ZANU-PF has excelled in its 32-year history of holding tightly to the levers of power in this beautiful, land-locked country.

But times are rapidly changing in Zimbabwe and the propaganda formula is less and less effective. The balance of power has shifted slightly but importantly due to the disputed 2008 elections that led to the formation of the Government

of National Unity (GNU), giving the opposition MDC-T and MDC-N parties substantial roles in government. They may not have achieved the outright win they deserved according to the polls, but their foot is very firmly in the door with the media shouldering in behind them. And while the MDCs are weak shadows of their rival in the information war, the internet is quietly but steadily breaking ZANU-PF's information stranglehold by touching a growing number of Zimbabwean media consumers – consumers who are 65% under the age of 25, who make cell phone access a top spending priority, and who are the fastest growing users of the internet on their mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa. (Opera Mini browser statistics show that page view and data transfer grew by 4965% and 3450% respectively in the year prior to June 2011.)



Trevor Ncube (top), Soul Makani (above left) and Hopewell Chin'ono (right)

Barry Bearak’s 2008 arrest along with British journalist Stephen Bevan was a peak in the Zimbabwe government’s near decade-long campaign of harassment against international media coverage, which accompanied a more intensive crack-down on indigenous journalists. The two outsiders had fallen foul of the same draconian legal code that had led to the arrest and detention of almost 100 Zimbabwean media workers since 2002, according to the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). A slew of laws used to arrest, detain and harass journalists, including the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), have landed Zimbabwe squarely in the “Not Free” category of Freedom House’s well-respected media freedom list.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the government squeezed independent investigation and coverage out of the state-controlled media by consolidating its control over the board and editors of the state media: Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (owners of ZBC) and Zimpapers. ZBC runs the only radio and TV channels in Zimbabwe (five and two respectively), while Zimpapers has a stable of 13 newspapers and magazines around the country. Independent newspapers and magazines were subsequently pushed out of the publishing business through arrests, libel cases and economic pressure, which culminated in the rapid

creation and signing into law of AIPPA in March of 2002. Only three weeklies, the *Zimbabwe Independent*, the *Financial Gazette*, and the *Standard*, survived between 2003 and 2010, and many veteran journalists fled the country.

The Ndebele media tycoon

Journalists were not the only ones affected. Zimbabwe entered an alternate economic universe at the advent of the new millennium. After independence in 1980, the new ZANU-PF government spent massively on public services and gave big payouts to liberation war veterans. These policies created a dangerously unstable economy with large deficits. In order to stay in power and maintain a complicated web of political cronyism, ZANU-PF embarked on an aggressive land redistribution campaign in 2000 that removed, often violently, 90% of the commercial – often white – farmers from the land and gave it to inexperienced and under-resourced black citizens. The “bread basket of Africa” became a net importer of food within a few years and the country’s international reputation was destroyed. Capital, both human and financial, flew out of the country and, by September 2008, inflation was 500 billion% (African Development Bank, Zimbabwe Short-Term Strategy: Concept Note, April 2009).

Trevor Ncube could have easily abandoned his roots as he built a highly successful career as chief executive of South Africa’s leading weekly and online publisher, the *Mail&Guardian* Group, but he never gave up on Zimbabwe. After being fired from the position of editor-in-chief of the *Financial Gazette* in 1996 for being too critical of President Mugabe and his party, Ncube and two partners created Alpha Media Holdings and launched *The Zimbabwe Independent*, a weekly that remains

the cornerstone of his media products. A year later they added *The Standard* Sunday paper and then focused on the business side, purchasing a distribution company and later a printing press. In a country where most businesses were rapidly shutting down or facing severe political pressure, Alpha Media’s long-term success hinged on controlling its own printing and distribution.

Ncube pushed forward with his dream of launching the first daily, independent newspaper since the forced closure of *The Daily News* in 2003. Alpha Media applied for a license to publish *NewsDay* in September 2008 and finally received it in May 2010. Having set up a newsroom and designed the layout of the paper over the previous nine months in preparation, *NewsDay* hit the streets in a month. Ncube purposely priced it at 50 cents a copy, half the price of the state media’s daily *Herald* newspaper. Zimbabwe had adopted the US dollar as its currency in early 2009 but does not use coinage; as part of a clever marketing campaign, consumers paid \$1 and received that day’s newspaper plus a grey token the size of a Kruger Rand to be redeemed the next day for another paper. Two *NewsDays* for the price of one *Herald* put the market into play almost overnight, causing the *Herald* decision-makers to start focusing more on better content and, gradually, less propaganda. Today, the *Herald* covers police corruption stories, missteps by low level ZANU-PF officials and more MDC activities (although high level ZANU-PF leaders are still off limits except for glowing tributes).

Ncube and his team have worked hard to establish *NewsDay* as a national media leader, but they continue to work with a host of market and socio-political factors that make each month a struggle. The last paper mill to produce newsprint in Zimbabwe closed in 2007 and imported newsprint is expensive. The 50 cent *Newsday* price was not sustainable for long and Alpha Media was forced to hike the price up to \$1, the same price as *The Herald*, in the middle of 2011. And two new competitors launched in March 2011, *The Daily News* and *The Mail*, drawing readers, journalists and profit away from *Newsday*. Although *The Mail* lasted less than a year due to a weak business plan, the three remaining national dailies must fight tooth-and-nail for the limited number of readers, who are all on limited budgets. Add to their precarious financial situation the increasing arrests of Alpha Media journalists and editors, thanks to the restrictive legal and political environment, and it is by no means guaranteed that Ncube’s empire is on more stable ground than the rest of the country.

The wizard of Wiztech

Is television the most threatening media form in Zimbabwe? According to Hopewell Chin’ono, it is. “The present government knows TV is powerful because it allows you to really see people’s issues.”

In a country with one unpopular and horribly low-quality television channel, Chin’ono is a star video

journalist. A tall, gentle 39-year-old, he studied journalism against his father’s wishes. But Hopewell pursued his passion, eventually winning the CNN African Journalist of the Year Award in 2008, among other awards. He has been banned twice by the Ministry of Information but continues to work in his native country, both for international television stations and as an independent producer. His documentary *A Violent Response* is his second major film, made during and about the brutal 2008 post-election season. The authorities refused to register him in 2008, preventing him from covering the elections for South African e.tv, so instead, he spent his time collecting footage for a documentary. It is a powerful study of the violence used against MDC supporters in the post-election runoff.

Hopewell is frank about the state of television in Zimbabwe today. “If you want to understand the depth of disillusionment about state TV (ZBC), go to (the Harare township) Mbare and look at the number of satellite dishes. The people there are the poorest of the poor. They cannot even afford a loaf of bread every day but they buy a dish so they don’t have to watch ZBC.”

The internationally-trained producer sees two main lessons in the incongruous scenes of mud rondaval houses in rural areas topped with satellite dishes: that the ZANU-PF propaganda machine has failed in its messaging campaigns and that the party doesn’t understand how to win the game. “For a message to be effective, it needs to have an audience. The Zimbabwean audiences are turning to foreign TV and radio (available free-to-air with a cheap Wiztech satellite dish and decoder). People know there is more out there than what is reported on ZBC, so they invest in other ways to get their information from outside broadcasters.”

ZBC television is for many Zimbabweans a national embarrassment. Often referred to as “DeadBC,” it has been unable to purchase new programming for many years, leaving it reliant on old sitcoms from the 1980s to 90s to fill the time between crude propaganda discussion and news programmes. I visited the studios in February 2011 to be interviewed on a live midday program and was shocked by the emptiness of the newsroom. Unlike the bustling broadcast studios in Johannesburg I had frequently visited in the years just prior to moving to Zimbabwe, the ZBC offices looked abandoned. Broken desks were empty as if unoccupied for months; only two computers seemed to be working;

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Philip Dube (top) and Sharon Hudson-Dean

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and there was no discernible research or story-chasing activity in the building.

As the quality of ZBC declines, sales of Wiztech satellite dishes are up. For only \$70, consumers can buy a dish and decoder that brings in the South African Broadcasting Channel's three stations, Botswana TV, the BBC, France TV and a few others. No monthly subscription fee applies, unlike a subscription to the DSTV satellite service that dominates the upscale African market and is far beyond the average Zimbabwean's affordable price point. Add to the dish an inverter and a battery with solar panels to charge it and, for only \$120 more, you have Zimbabwe's most popular home entertainment system suitable for all locations and most budgets.

The true believer

Soul Makani had never seen the internet until the day his boss at the shopping centre where he worked as a clerk bought a PC and got a dial-up connection. It was 2001 and there were 500 million internet users worldwide – many in the US but few in Africa. Exploring the internet took Makani's life from black and white to colour in an instant. "My first time on the internet was a religious moment," he says, smiling a deep, knowing smile and recalling intimately the experience. "Today, internet uptake in Zimbabwe is still slow but that 'moment' is happening now to a lot of people."

Makani went on to study information technology and in 2009 started TechZim, arguably Zimbabwe's leading technology website featuring product reviews and local IT news. With 3 000 page views per day, TechZim has set its sights on building a culture of start-ups and innovation in Zimbabwe. "A lot of Zimbabweans see the internet as a product, not a platform," he laments. "They think they are just an audience, but they need to see how much they can do and put on the web."

Makani is a true internet devotee and has an unbending faith in Zimbabwean online entrepreneurs and their power to change Zimbabwe. "The internet is so powerful," he repeats, "it is out of sync with offline politics. And it is really pointless to try to block it – there are always ways around to get to what you're trying to find. Because it's the internet – the whole idea is we are all connected on it and you can find anything."

As on the rest of the continent, Zimbabwe's mobile internet access is where the dramatic growth in internet access is coming, and coming fast. In his 2012 budget speech, Finance Minister Tendai Biti noted that the "Information Communication Technology (ICT) sector remains one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy... Concurrently, the voice penetration rate or tele-density has improved, reaching 68% in 2011, of which mobile penetration accounted for 65%, making Zimbabwe one of the countries with the highest rates

alongside South Africa, Botswana, and Mozambique."

He went on to confirm that the three main mobile service providers now have 8.1-million subscribers. What the Minister failed to highlight is that by the end of 2011, all three GSM mobile service providers had affordable mobile broadband data packages available to their subscribers, opening the internet to two thirds of the population.

The scene today

The cat and mouse game goes on today with many diplomats and human rights NGOs taking careful note of the uptick in journalists' arrests and harassment of the media (although it remains significantly lower than in 2008). Election season will soon be here. No one knows exactly when – some say end of 2012, others say first half of 2013 – and anxiety is slowing building. But the fault lines are different this time compared to the disastrous election of 2008, and the new open media space may be a game-changer.

Most symbolic to me of Zimbabwe's changes was my visit in February 2012 to Kutama Marist Brothers Missionary College, Robert Mugabe's alma mater. The all-boys boarding high school sits adjacent to the President's rural home, a little over an hour's drive south of Harare. The boys there are smart, handsome and hard-working; the sons of middle-class Zimbabweans who cannot afford the elite private schools but may be able to afford university in South Africa if they get assistance from other relatives. With the school's church choir practising Catholic hymns in the next hall, I spoke to 120 juniors and seniors about US university scholarships. Near the end, I asked them if they were on Facebook. All hands went up.

Philip Tawanda Dube, a 2011 graduate of Kutama who escorted us, explained the system, "Everyone uses Facebook on their cell phone. Technically, cell phones are not allowed on campus but the boys all have SIM cards, so one boy will be brave enough to sneak in a phone, and the rest will borrow it, just swapping out the SIM card. That way, everyone can get an hour online a day and the risk of getting caught is lower.

"It will take time to change Zim," he concluded. "But you know, my aunt was originally really against Facebook, and she recently sent me a friend request! She's got kids in the UK and now she likes it." On the way home, we stopped the 4x4 to take pictures with my iPhone next to a stone monument marking the Robert Gabriel Mugabe Highway that runs past Kutama. "You must tag me in that when you put it on your Facebook page," Philip pleaded. "I'll friend you now." He was tagged – and we were 'friends' – before we turned off the Mugabe Highway.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Department of State or the US Government.