

media watch

Press freedom in Zimbabwe is at risk, writes *Review's* CLARE QUINN after an interview with *Financial Gazette* editor Trevor Ncube in Harare

TWELVE years after Robert Mugabe came to power in Zimbabwe, independent media in that country are fighting to stay alive. One such independent is the weekly tabloid newspaper, the *Financial Gazette*, which has taken a battering recently from the Zimbabwean government.

A Mass Media Trust (MMT) was set up in 1981 by Mugabe's ZANU (PF) government with Nigerian aid. The Trust aimed to formulate communication policy, while claiming to distance the major media from government influence and control. In reality, the Trust took on the role of a malignant spectator while journalists were harassed and the rights of the public to truthful information were trampled upon.

The *Financial Gazette's* reports on the recent Land Act Bill, which opens the way for the redistribution of privately-owned farmland, landed the newspaper in the government's bad books. And, at a recent meeting of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists in Harare, the Deputy Minister of Information, Chen Chimutengwende, criticized the independent press for painting a picture that was "chaotic and discouraging". He added that an immediate example was the "unpatriotic stance" taken on the "sensitive issue of land redistribution".

A number of government ministers are understood to be promoting plans to curb the independent press, while some even suggest a complete ban.

Sources also say that Cabinet ministers have suggested that parastatal companies be instructed to cease advertising in the independent press. It has also been mooted in Cabinet sittings that the government restrict the independent press through stricter foreign currency and newsprint allocations.

It was in this atmosphere that I spoke to Trevor Ncube, editor of the *Financial Gazette*, who told me that at any moment the phone could ring. The future of Zimbabwean press freedom depends on that call...

REVIEW: Do you self-censor what you write or do you write what you want and wait for the government's response?

NCUBE: We write what we think is true and whenever possible, we back it with hard facts. We say it out loud and then wait for the consequences. But sometimes the consequences aren't that good. They (the government) phone and protest. They want you to retract it. They want you to apologize. But if you are convinced in what you have said, and it doesn't come from any malicious intent, you stick to your guns.

It is always necessary to acknowledge the factors at work around you. You ought to have a strategy ... a strategy for survival and you shouldn't be a daredevil. You shouldn't weaken yourself by grabbing an opportunity for criticizing the government unjustly when you know that by doing so, you are likely to be closed down. Use the room that you have as carefully as possible. We have realized the constraints within which we are operating. A careful assessment of the

factors which we are against, and a careful measure of what we are going to say and the reaction to that statement is necessary. You also have to ask if it's appropriate to say it then or leave it for another time.

We haven't reached an ideal situation yet, but we are getting there. We are opening it slightly. They are getting used to us but what is more important, is that society is getting used to the new environment. And once society is behind you, you no longer care about those guys in Cabinet or the Central Committee (of Zanu PF) because the people that matter are the readers. For a long time our readers were unused to a free press and became jittery when we became daring. They asked if we were going to survive and if we were safe. But now they are the ones cheering us on.

REVIEW: In 1980, the then Minister of Information, Dr Nathan Shamuyarira, called for a free press. Would you say that the press is free?

NCUBE: Yes I think the press is free but one has to raise certain qualifications. The government has been a bit dishonest when calling for a free press. What is happening at the moment shows you that dishonesty. When they called for a free press, it was before there were opposition parties and before the problems they are presently facing. Now that the press is talking about the opposition parties and the country's problems, the government feels insecure and it now wants to control press freedom. They want to tell us that they want freedom of the press in so far as the press remains docile. It's a contradiction in terms.

Some editors in the official press are censoring themselves and not exercising the freedom the government has given them. So while on paper it states there is press freedom, editors in the official press are sacrificing that freedom for the sake of keeping their jobs and for winning the favour of the people who employed them. So you cannot talk about freedom of the press in that regard because it's either being abused or not being exercised.

As for the independent press, a number of fundamental issues are at work which tend to limit that freedom. Government still controls the resources. In other words, they allocate foreign currency to the private sector and the independent press. They still control the allocation of newsprint. Therefore one cannot really begin to talk about freedom when they can screw you up if you are seen to be overstepping the line. You have to realize that if you become too outspoken, those guys will just dry up the funds.

So one really never talks about the freedom of the independent press. You must take into account the government still controls the instruments of production and therefore the independent press is continuously under threat. Come a time when government does not control these and you are working in a free market environment – only then can you begin to talk about a free press.

REVIEW: Why do you think they have allowed an outspoken critic of the government such as yourself to

continue? Is it because they want to give the impression that they allow public debate?

NCUBE: Yes that's it. When they are here, they are irritated with what we say and want to close us down. Closing the independent press down is what the Cabinet is talking about at the moment. However, when they fly to foreign capitals, they want to carry the *Financial Gazette* and other independent newspapers as evidence of the existence of a free press in Zimbabwe. The main issue here is that of international pressure. They need international support for whatever problems they might have. It is that pressure which irritates them because they always have to think twice before they can close down the independent press.

At the moment, society is moving towards openness. There are problems that they are aware of and society expects the press to speak up. The public is aware of which sections of the press speak loudest about the problems they are experiencing. Government would be very foolish to move against those sections of the press which are seen as independent and objective. They would lose the grass-roots support that they need. So they are tolerating us. They want to close us down but they can't.

The Land Act Bill, recently passed in Parliament, is a good example of government irritation with us.

The *Financial Gazette* took up a position largely informed by what it considers to be in the interests of the country and not merely of sectional interests. We've admitted that there is a need for land, and land which needs redistribution. But what we've argued is that the government has gone about this the wrong way and that this is going to lead the country into the doldrums.

In a recent address to the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, the Deputy Minister of Information, Mr Chen Chimutengwende, said they were irritated with certain sectors of the media who had campaigned against the Land Acquisition Bill, when the Bill was meant to benefit the majority of Zimbabweans. We don't believe that is the case. We believe this is one ploy for government to pick up the weighty support it needs. They want to use emotional blackmail against the black citizens of this country as evidence that they will forward the land to them.

The Cabinet's reason for discussing the banning of the independent press is because of the stance we took against the Land Act Bill. They made it a point to tell us they were very irritated with us and that they were going to fix us. We are waiting for the outcome.

REVIEW: *What do you think will happen?*

NCUBE: I think it is another empty threat. They won't be able to do anything. What might happen perhaps, is that they will cut down our foreign currency allocation which will obviously present us with problems. They have already threatened to withdraw all parastatal advertising from the independent press, particularly the *Financial Gazette*. So that is what they

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want to do, but whether or not they will do that is another thing.

REVIEW: *Being a black editor on an independent business newspaper, are you accepted by blacks? Are you not perhaps seen as a sellout to the black cause?*

NCUBE: We are accepted by blacks, whites, everybody. We are a national newspaper and not just a newspaper for whites and therefore I wouldn't see myself as a sellout. To begin with, the newspaper is black-owned. Just because we might think differently from someone in the civil service, doesn't mean that we're anti-black. It simply means we are thinking in a business way. We are interested in profits. We are interested in seeing this country grow and in seeing this government create conditions conducive to the release of as much private energy and individual initiative as possible.

We have taken some flak regarding our position on the Land Acquisition Bill. I remember a white friend of mine, sitting where you are now, saying, "Trevor, it must be hard for a black person like you to justify the position of over 4 000 whites (farmers)". It wasn't difficult because it's something that came from deep inside me. I wasn't selling out. I believed in what we were saying.

As I said earlier, we weren't against the Land Acquisition Bill. We just wanted modifications. We wanted a deal that would secure this country forever, as far as food and self-sufficiency are concerned. If our position was mistaken for comforting the white people, that is very unfortunate.

In some circles, some would see us as having sold out to the black cause. One colleague told me that in an editorial on the Land Act Bill, I had sounded like a white farmer. But, if people think that the black cause is one of playing second fiddle, and of poverty and destruction, then we want to disassociate ourselves from that cause. Ours is a constructive cause.

REVIEW: *How would you define Press Freedom?*

NCUBE: That is a difficult and subjective question but one would want Press Freedom to be responsible, sensitive journalism, conscious journalism. I am aware that what I am saying might be a contradiction in terms. The press ought to respect individual needs – it ought to respect individual privacy. It ought to be aware of the environment in which it is operating. The press must not withhold information which is of importance to the public, for whatever reason.

The only areas which I think are no-go areas are those of national security. The press ought to be free to inform, educate and entertain the public within the confines of what I have said. That is to be sensitive, cautious and responsible.

(At the time of going to press, Trevor Ncube has still not received that telephone call. But he sits tight, waiting...) ●

CLARE QUINN is a fourth-year journalism student at Rhodes University.