



# Diasporic journalism

**T**he Zimbabwe crisis' since the 1990s has resulted in an estimated three million Zimbabweans leaving for South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the US, says *Tawana Kupe*. Among these are many journalists, now operating beyond the borders of the country, but focusing their energies and stories on Zimbabwe, still.

➔ A scene straight out of Animal Farm?

Zimbabwe is one of the few countries in Africa that in 2005 does not have private- and community-owned radio stations despite the Broadcasting Services Act of 2002 which takes into account advances in new technologies and regulates them in advance! Still the only service is state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings.

In the last three years the government closed down four newspapers including the longest-surviving, privately-owned *Daily News*.

There is strict licensing of publications, media houses and individual journalists under the euphemistically-known Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act! The Act is better known for its protection of government secrecy and the privacy of powerful ruling party and government officials.

And the government has attempted to censor the Internet by procuring monitoring and filtering equipment or asking Internet service providers to play a watchdog role and preserve communications passing through their system in case they are needed for investigation. Indications are that the government has also purchased sophisticated jamming radio jamming equipment from China.

Almost all foreign correspondents have either been deported or have been refused renewal of permits and have had to leave or they are selectively allowed in after hefty accreditation fees for restricted periods and kept under watch.

Zimbabwe also has in place an extensive government-controlled media empire made up of two television channels, four radio stations, two daily newspapers, four weekly newspapers and a few monthly newspapers and magazines.

For much of Zimbabwe's 25 years of independence the government has enjoyed a virtual monopoly over media serving captive publics.

Besides the government-controlled empire there are three privately-owned newspaper groups publishing one daily (with very low circulation), two business and financial weeklies and two Sunday papers.

In price, content and distribution these papers are aimed at affluent audiences and the topics and discursive practices are intended for an audience with high levels of education.

In short, therefore, just in relation to circulation, reach, range of languages used, topics or issues, the government media is the mass media which is accessible to larger publics across the country. The privately-owned media, or "independent" media, is the media for the elite and at the same time the public sphere for alternative and critical voices.

Jürgen Habermas, in his work translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, advanced the notion that for a democracy to function there should be a "public sphere" in which all are equally able to participate through rational discourse on public affairs. This open public sphere should not be controlled by the state or the market and should ideally, allow all rational voices on public matters to be heard, no matter how dissenting.

Habermas has been criticised for idealising the public sphere and critics point out that historically there never was one public sphere for all in a society which operated to include every voice.

**Diasporic journalism**

What I am calling the "mediated public spheres of the Zimbabwean diaspora" consist of *radio stations* based outside Zimbabwe, *online news sites*, *activist websites* which carry news and advocacy material, *a weekly newspaper* published in Britain and South Africa and distributed formally in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana and the UK.

They essentially aim to provide news and information that the state-controlled media is deemed to suppress; provide a platform for Zimbabweans in the

**The Zimbabwe crisis**

**Politically, the crisis manifests itself in:**

- three national elections that have been heavily contested as not free and fair by the most serious nationwide opposition party to emerge since independence in 1980, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), civil society and sections of the international community especially North America and Europe;
- legislated restrictions on civil liberties including the right to free association and assembly;
- political polarisation;
- violence on the opposition and its supporters; and
- the general absence of the rule of law.

To protest what they see as a serious deviation from "democratic norms" and universal human rights the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the European Union countries imposed personal travel restrictions on those top Zanu (PF) leaders it deemed responsible. In its defense the Zimbabwean ruling elite and ruling party claim to be a victim of imperialist aggression because they have dared take back the land seized by colonialists in the 19th century and taken measures to defend sovereignty and self determination. In their words "Zimbabwe will never be a colony again".

**Economically the crisis manifests in:**

- hyper-inflation, the second highest in the world at 127% (but down from a peak of 623% in 2003);
- lack of foreign currency;
- massive disinvestment;
- collapse of productive industries;
- shortages of basic commodities;
- inability to purchase inputs for manufacturing and industry, including fuel;
- collapse of the agricultural sector because of a "fast track land reform programme which turned into a 'land grab'" from white commercial farmers and multinational corporations. And in turn the land reform programme has led to a decline in food production and food scarcity;
- withdrawal of donor support.

**Socially, the crisis manifests in:**

- the high costs of basic necessities when they can be found;
- high costs of collapsing social services including health and education;
- unemployment estimated at about 70%;
- high prevalence of HIV/Aids and high rate of death.

diaspora to debate and discuss the crisis and what needs to be done; to mobilise for democracy and also to provide some arts, music, culture and sport journalism focusing especially on Zimbabwean and South African musicians.

They also set themselves up as "alternative" and "independent" media.

These mediated public spheres have taken or ascribed to themselves the role of being "the voice" of the Zimbabwean diaspora as well of Zimbabweans inside the country. The weekly newspaper, for example, calls itself the "Voice of the Voiceless".

A not unimportant role is of course the quest to present to global publics, including those in Africa who support Mugabe, "what really is happening in Zimbabwe".

Looking particularly at the radio station *SW Radio Africa* based in London, the news websites *NewZimbabwe.Com* hosted from the UK and to a lesser extent *Zimonline* hosted in South Africa and the London based newspaper weekly *The Zimbabwean*, a number of things are common to these "mediated public spheres":



Chris Kirchhoff

- They are owned by Zimbabweans in the "diaspora" even though they might be funded by international NGOs and other aid donors who fund governance and freedom of expression initiatives. They are in a precarious financial position.
- The media is available in Zimbabwe electronically or physically in the case of the paper.
- They have *multiple publics* which include Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe "to cure them from state propaganda", Zimbabweans in the diaspora, Africans in Africa but in particular in South Africa, global publics interested in Zimbabwe and other media/journalists.
- The journalists are Zimbabweans who left Zimbabwe because of the "crisis" and often after political harassment for their journalistic work.
- They have small editorial staffs because of limited resources. To offset this lack of capacity they engage regular columnists and contributors. Males dominate in terms of staff and columnists.
- The content they carry is the typical mix of com-

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mercially-driven mass media news and information, exposés or investigative journalism, analysis and debate, sex, crime, sport, scandal, gossip and music.

- Columnists and contributors generate debates which can often demonstrate a remarkable degree of sustained engagement and presentation of differing views. They also draw a lot of material from NGOs and other organisations that are campaigning for democracy in Zimbabwe.

- Although they claim to provide “factual” and “objective” content they often take up an advocacy role in opposition to the “propaganda” of the state-controlled media. This puts them in line with the MDC and in opposition to Zanu-PF, which at points, contradicts their claims to being sites of independent and professional journalism.

- However, they generate a lot of debate on the issues they cover – particularly online because of the greater access diasporans have to the Internet. To some extent they prove some of the theories about the power of the Internet to act as an arena of the

public sphere.

- They break stories which are then picked up by the media in Zimbabwe.

- They have a range of sources in Zimbabwe which include ruling party and government officials as well as the opposition and civil society. As a result their news reports have a great diversity of views and opinions. This is a remarkable achievement made possible by the use of cellphones and email which are not controlled by the state.

- They have a strategy of sustaining critical commentary and through the use of cartoon strips ridicule, lampoon and lambaste the Mugabe government and Mbeki positions.

- They have managed to attain credibility with the mainstream media across the world as sources of news on Zimbabwe. Leading media outlets often quote them as sources. In part this is because foreign media often cannot report from Zimbabwe because of the restrictions on foreign journalists and the expulsions of the last five years. ■