

**Reporting and Recording Zimbabwe**  
**The Britain Zimbabwe Society 2008 Research Day**  
**by Wendy Willems**

## Introduction

The Britain-Zimbabwe Society (BZS) Research Day 2008 explored how the Zimbabwe story was 'reported and recorded' both prior to and post Independence. The day addressed a range of research questions, including how the Western media, and the British media in particular, covered the Zimbabwe story, the challenges local journalists in Zimbabwe face in covering issues, and the way in which the news agenda is determined. Zimbabwe's history has been characterised by state attempts to control the media, alongside state support for mass media as a means to reach both rural and urban populations. In recent years, newspapers have been shut down, radio stations jammed, journalists arrested and others have gone into exile. This media environment has been deemed repressive by a broad range of commentators, while government supporters have portrayed the independent media as the product of externally-funded actors. The Research Day attempted to put these developments into broader historical, legal and media contexts.

## Mass media and politics in Zimbabwe: an historical overview

**Winston Mano**, Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Westminster and chair of the first panel, started the Research Day by introducing the first two 'veteran' speakers of the day, Terence Ranger and Bill Saidi, who were tasked to put current media developments in their historical context. While Ranger did this by recounting his encounters - as a historian - with newspapers in the archives, Saidi provided a personal account of his long involvement with the press in Zimbabwe.

In his lengthy research career exploring the history of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, Terence Ranger, BZS President and Emeritus Professor of African History at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, found that newspapers provided an important historical source. In the early stages of his career, in the late 1950s, Ranger avoided reading the *Bantu Mirror* newspaper and the popular magazine *Parade*, because these publications were subjected to censorship by missionaries and government. However, in the 1980s, he rediscovered these publications as valuable sources for a range of research projects. During the day, Ranger shared his fascination for the *Bantu Mirror* and recounted its intriguing stories on urban culture in 1940's Southern Rhodesia. Reports on football matches, clothes, concerts, the young Dorothy Masuka or 'Rhodesia's Judy Garland' and the Black Evening Follies painted a rich picture of the vibrant life in the expanding cities of Southern Rhodesia. While the Native Urban Affairs Accommodation and Registration Act in the late 1950s enacted segregation, the 1940's and early 1950's saw a blossoming of cultural activities in mixed urban townships such as Makokoba and Mzilikazi in Bulawayo. According to Ranger, this was reflected very well in newspapers like the *Bantu Mirror*.

Ranger said he was intrigued by the *Bulawayo Home News*, because it provided an unrivalled portrait of new urban life in Bulawayo in the 1950's. The paper has therefore proved invaluable for Ranger's forthcoming book on the social history of the city, entitled *Bulawayo Burning*, named after Yvonne Vera's novel *Butterfly Burning*. The newspaper *Bulawayo Home News* was established by editor Charlton Ngebetsha on 17

October 1953 and was sponsored by the Bulawayo African Townships Rentpayers' Association. After the enforcement of segregation in Bulawayo in 1949, Ngcebetsha moved into Makokoba township, where he ran a stationers' and bookshop from which he published the newspaper. In it, he expressed fierce criticism of the Bulawayo Council and actively supported the increasing number of strikes organised by the growing trade union movement. Ngcebetsha firmly distanced himself from the *Bantu Mirror* which, as he wrote on 24 July 1954, "is pro-Government and only echoes His Master's Voice and wishes". Instead, the *Bulawayo Home News* provided a countervoice to government, but vibrant township life was central to its pages. Ngcebetsha used the newspaper to report on Bulawayo's boxing matches, shebeens, cycle races, dancing contests and the lively choir performances at Stanley Hall in Makokoba.

Ranger singled out the *Bulawayo Chronicle* of the early 1980's as the best Zimbabwean newspaper. Although it had been subject to Rhodesia Front censorship before Independence and to ZANU-PF control from the late 1980s, Ranger argued that, in the early 1980's, the newspaper carried excellent reports: examples were pieces on returning ZIPRA women and the activities of 'dissidents' in Manicaland and Mashonaland. While the *Bulawayo Chronicle* of the early 1980s excelled in news reporting, Ranger thought that newspapers in Zimbabwe today were dominated by opinion rather than news. He closed his presentation by saying that his dream newspaper would combine Ngcebetsha's colourful stories on urban cultural life in the *Bulawayo Home News* with the strong news reporting of the *Bulawayo Chronicle*.

While Ranger spoke about the rich history of Bulawayo's townships, veteran journalist and editor **Bill Saidi** walked the audience down memory lane from Harare where he grew up in the Old Bricks section of Mbare township. Saidi certainly has seen it all in journalism in Rhodesia as well as Zimbabwe. He began his journalistic career aged 20 in 1957 and has worked for magazines such as *African Parade* and *Horizon*, and newspapers like *The African Daily News*, *The Times of Zambia*, *The Daily Gazette*, *The Sunday Gazette*, *The Daily News* and more recently *The Standard*. Saidi recalled his years at the vibrant *African Daily News* together with Nathan Shamuyarira and Lawrence Vambe. The *African Daily News* provided active support to the nationalists between 1956 and 1964; its offices provided a meeting place for leaders such as Joshua Nkomo and James Chikerema who often visited to find out what was happening in the country. The *African Daily News* was considered a paper for the people, expressed in the song "Tine paper!" [translated from chiShona: "We have a newspaper!"] and its journalists considered themselves very much part of the nationalist struggle. The *African Daily News* sought to keep a balance, despite its support to the nationalists. For example, Saidi recounted an incident where Nathan Shamuyarira asked him to report on a meeting of the reactionary Dominion Party. Saidi feared to be the only black person at a meeting of what he considered to be a very racist political group. So instead, he visited his favourite shebeen and later told the editor he had completely forgotten about the meeting. Shamuyarira maintained, however, that it was important to uphold journalistic balance and argued that "your enemies should be covered as well as your friends".

Whereas Saidi found it challenging to report on the nationalist cause in Rhodesia, he

noted that he suffered much more in his career as a journalist in post-independent Zimbabwe. According to Saidi, the African governments that replaced colonial regimes have often opposed freedom of expression. Many journalists have reason to fear being killed by their own governments. Saidi recounted that when he, Geoff Nyarota and Wilf Mbanga set up *The Daily News* in 1999, they were considered *personae non gratae*. The rapid success of the newspaper quickly made it a thorn in the flesh of the Zimbabwe government. At its peak, the *Daily News* had a circulation of 120,000 copies as compared to the mere 45,000 copies distributed on a daily basis by the government-owned daily newspaper *Herald*. When the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won 57 seats in the 2000 parliamentary elections, many sources attributed this to the support received from *The Daily News*.

Saidi gave an example of government repression and intimidation of the media. In January 2007, a soldier delivered a large brown envelope to his office at *The Standard*. The envelope contained a bullet and handwritten note reading “What is this? Watch your step”. It was an obvious threat to the newspaper, which had adopted a critical stance towards the ZANU-PF government. The letter was sent after *The Standard* published a cartoon on 28 January 2007 depicting three baboons laughing their heads off while two men stand in the foreground. One man explains to the other, “They’ve just picked up a Zimbabwean National Army pay slip”. The cartoon was published a week after *The Standard* reported that many soldiers were deserting the army because of poor working conditions and low pay.

Soon after the bullet incident, President Mugabe’s press secretary, George Charamba, warned that, if *The Standard* kept Saidi employed, they were going to do to *The Standard* what they did to *The Daily News*. The government forced *The Daily News* to close down on 21 September 2003 after the paper lost its legal challenge to the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). *The Standard* was also targeted in two separate bomb attacks in April 2000 and January 2001. Despite the challenges that Saidi faced as a journalist in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, he pledged to the audience that he would never give up. Because of the limited changes in the country, one may sometimes be tempted to surrender, but Saidi noted that many Zimbabweans look forward to new copies of *The Standard* and readers feel encouraged that they finally have a voice through these newspapers. And this was enough reason for Saidi to continue the fight for a free press in Zimbabwe.

In the discussion that followed, Wendy Willems asked Ranger whether he agreed that *The Bantu Mirror* provided an idealised picture of the cultural life in the townships, so as to channel coverage away from politics into safer pursuits. This related also to the following advice, which the editor of *The Bantu Mirror* once gave to Lawrence Vambe: “Why did you write about this [politics], why don’t you leave that alone, why don’t you write about sports and beer halls?”<sup>1</sup> Ranger responded that, judging from his oral history interviews at Bulawayo, respondents

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Saunders, Richard (1999). *Dancing out of tune. A history of the media in Zimbabwe*. Harare: ESP, p. 4.

described the 1950s through feelings of freedom. It was a period in which people were enjoying themselves and were happy to have become part of city life. As the novelist Chenjerai Hove once said, reading newspapers from that period felt like “reading Charles Dickens”. Forward Maisokwadzo was interested to know from Ranger how Zimbabwe was covered in the international press at that time, Ranger replied that reporting centred on what was supposed to happen to the Central African Federation (CAF). Jocelyn Alexander asked Ranger to clarify what for him made *The Bulawayo Chronicle* in the early 1980s such a great newspaper. For Ranger, the absence of censorship changed the nature of the newspaper overnight. At the time, *The Bulawayo Chronicle* was able to report critically and the new government had not yet established control over the newspaper. It was able to write things which it could not do before.

Simon Fisher asked Saidi to elaborate on how he experiences Zimbabwe’s current media landscape. Saidi described it as an extremely unsafe environment dominated by a very reckless state. The government is so determined to remain in power that journalists can even be killed. For Saidi, this negates everything that had been fought for during the Liberation War. He also highlighted the important role of urban residents in the struggle for Independence. Trade unionists such as Charles Mzingeli were crucial in leading dissent against the colonial regime, but have been sidelined in subsequent historical accounts. Stella Maravanyika wondered why Mugabe suddenly managed to emerge as a leader, while others like Ndabaningi Sithole, George Nyandoro and James Chikerema had been at the forefront. Saidi responded by saying that that must be a state secret!

## **Evaluating Western media coverage of Zimbabwe**

**Jim Boumelha**, President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), chaired the second panel. *Sunday Times* journalist **Christina Lamb** and editor of *The Zimbabwean*, **Wilf Mbanga**, were unable to attend.

**Wendy Willems**, a PhD candidate in the Centre for Media and Film Studies at the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) discussed the Zimbabwe government’s responses to global media coverage of the crisis. She argued that the government framed the role of global media largely in negative terms; the ZANU-PF government represented Zimbabwe as a victim of an international media onslaught. The emphasis on British and South African media as ‘enemies of Zimbabwe’ was particularly convenient, given Zimbabwe’s historical relationship with these countries. A focus on these media specifically enabled the Zimbabwe government to construct their criticism as a logical continuation of their historical roles as former colonial power and as apartheid aggressor.

According to Willems, the Zimbabwe government considered the media to be crucial in the process of the ‘internationalisation’ of the crisis. Stan Mudenge, Minister for Foreign Affairs during the 2002 elections, noted that the extensive media coverage on the BBC,

CNN and other Western media gave the impression that “the elections were to choose the president of a superpower and not of a small, poor, landlocked African country”.<sup>2</sup> The Zimbabwe government argued that the disproportionate attention for the crisis was linked to the British government’s interest in the land issue and the former colonial power’s efforts to promote ‘régime change’ in Zimbabwe. Willems argued that the dominant role of the ‘white farmer’ story in the international media - particularly in the early stages of the crisis – supported the Zimbabwe government’s argument that Britain was only interested in the country because of the land issue. This argument helped to frame the crisis as a black-white conflict over land, which ultimately suited the Zimbabwean government very well, since it contributed towards masking the way in which the régime targeted black opposition supporters.

Willems described how newspaper articles in the state-controlled *Herald* pointed towards the ‘media onslaught’ that Zimbabwe was subjected to, and how the country was presented as an undeserving victim of ‘media terrorism’. By using the word ‘terrorist’, Zimbabwe adopted language similar to that which the British and U.S.A governments used when they used the term ‘war against terrorism’ after the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre. While the United Kingdom and the United States implemented anti-terrorism legislation after these attacks, the government of Zimbabwe justified its implementation of legislation by referring to the threats posed to national security and public order through the rise of the MDC and the ‘terrorism’ of foreign media and governments. Articles in *The Herald* argued that the Zimbabwe government was entitled to implement new legislation in order to protect ‘the nation’. Foreign correspondents were branded as ‘traitors’ or accused of ‘assisting terrorists’. Zimbabwean journalists from the private press who also reported for foreign media were often designated ‘media mercenaries’ who were being used by enemies of Zimbabwe to ‘destroy’ the country or promote régime change.

However, as Willems pointed out, government policy was not only premised on a ‘negative’ curtailing of the operations of foreign media. Policy comprised a ‘positive’ counter-offensive that emphasised the achievements and capabilities of the nation in the face of the Western media onslaught against Zimbabwe. The government initiated a number of new media projects which sought to promote Zimbabwe’s foreign policy position to an overseas audience. Partly this was achieved through the establishment of new media such as a shortwave radio station, Voice of Zimbabwe, and a joint newspaper project with Namibia, *The Southern Times*. The Zimbabwe government also signed media and communication co-operation agreements with neighbouring countries and friendly governments such as Iran and China. The stronger ties between Zimbabwe and the ‘global South’ as well as the ‘East’ resulted in a revived ‘Third Worldism’ in which Zimbabwe claimed to defend the ‘Third World’ in opposition to what was previously known as the ‘First World’.

**Ish Mafundikwa**, a veteran Zimbabwean journalist currently working for the London bureau of the Voice of America (VOA), said he was pleased with the quantity of coverage on Zimbabwe, particularly in the United Kingdom. The media have informed

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<sup>2</sup> NAM endorses election result, *The Herald*, 30 April 2002.

the general public about what was happening in Zimbabwe and put on the spot those who can address the situation in the country. Because of the extensive media coverage, politicians cannot say they were unaware of what was going on in Zimbabwe. However, one of the problems with Western media is that attention can quickly wane.

Mafundikwa is less enthused about the quality of media coverage of Zimbabwe. He said that a number of myths about Zimbabwe have characterised Western media coverage. For example, they have for a long time portrayed Mugabe as a beacon of hope in Africa and for them, things only went wrong in 2000. He recalled that Mugabe was knighted by the Queen in 1994, despite the 1980's massacres in Matabeleland! Mafundikwa finds it hard to believe that Mugabe was regarded as a democrat up to 2000: according to Mafundikwa, the Zimbabwean president has been flawed from the beginning. Western journalists chose to ignore Gukurahundi, as they simply did not care when blacks were killed in Matabeleland; only when Mugabe turned his guns on white farmers in 2000 did he suddenly become an evil dictator. Another myth that concerned Mafundikwa was the idea that Zimbabwe's economy collapsed when white farmers were kicked off the land in 2000. Instead, he argued for a more historical perspective on the current economic crisis. The Zimbabwean economy was already in bad shape before 2000 because of the 1997 unbudgeted expenditure on pensions for war veterans and Zimbabwe's intervention in the Congo conflict. The expropriation of white farms made a bad situation worse, but what the Western media wanted the world to believe is that white farmers constituted the economy of Zimbabwe.

According to Mafundikwa, the current scenario could perhaps have been avoided if the international community had stood up to Mugabe in the early 1980s. One of the reasons why Mugabe behaves as he does now is because he has been doing so for a long time without any repercussions. The Western media should remind readers that what Mugabe is currently doing is nothing new. This also applies to the conduct of elections, which have always been a bloody affair in Zimbabwe. While fewer people may have been killed or beaten up during earlier elections, one must remember that the earlier elections were also characterised by violence. For example, during the 1990 campaign, the national organising secretary for the opposition party Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), Patrick Kombayi, was shot and seriously wounded after an alleged assassination attempt by state security agents. Previous elections have also been marred by rigging: it is another myth that only the March 2008 elections were stolen by Mugabe. The Western media have exhibited a lack of historical perspective in their coverage of Zimbabwe. Chris McGreal, for example, wrote an article in *The Observer* entitled "Zimbabwe's decade of horror," referring to the period since 2000.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, Mafundikwa spoke about the myth that all foreign journalists are currently banned from Zimbabwe and that there are no Western journalists legally reporting from that country. Actually some journalists are still reporting from Zimbabwe. BBC's Ian Pannell produces good reports undercover and talks to a range of Zimbabweans. However, Mafundikwa singled out John Simpson, BBC's World Affairs Correspondent, for his

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<sup>3</sup> McGreal, Chris, There are many villains to blame for Zimbabwe's decade of horror, *The Observer*, 13 April 2008, available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/13/zimbabwe>

eagerness to start his broadcasts with the remark that “the BBC is banned from Zimbabwe.” According to Mafundikwa, Simpson usually continues his report by saying that he is ‘undercover’ in Zimbabwe and reports from the darkness instead of broad daylight to add suspense to the story. Simpson’s reporting is much more about himself than about Zimbabwe.

### **Cyber democracy: a role for new media?**

The third panel was chaired by **Knox Chitiyo**, who heads the Africa Programme at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

**Admore Tshuma**, a former Chief Reporter of the Bulawayo-based *Chronicle* newspaper and currently a PhD candidate at the University of Bristol, spoke about his own experiences working as a journalist for the state-owned press in Zimbabwe. For Tshuma, state media in Zimbabwe have largely misinformed the nation, aiming to manipulate and brainwash journalists. Journalists are expected to surrender the ethics of their beloved craft of journalism so they can perpetuate the lies that, he said, are churned out by President Mugabe and his lieutenants. Newspaper editors at state-owned newspapers in Zimbabwe are political appointees chosen by the Minister for Information and Publicity. If editors do not toe the government line or are seen as favouring the political opposition, they are fired. Tshuma provided examples such as the removal of former *Herald* editor Tommy Sithole in February 1998, the firing of *Chronicle* editor Stephen Mpofo in July 2001, and the dismissal of *Chronicle* staff Edna Machirori and Clayton Peel in October 2001.

Government media in Zimbabwe have often been considered state property. News coverage has been used by politically appointed editors to serve the interests of government. Tshuma said that, in 2000, a cabinet minister rang up the news desk at *The Chronicle* and demanded to know from the editor why his rally in Bulawayo had not been covered. Editor Stephen Mpofo was forced to apologise and the newspaper eventually had to cover the rally, even though none of its reporters had attended. *The Chronicle* interviewed the minister and solely relied on the information he provided about the rally, including the number of people attending. Although the minister maintained that more than 10,000 residents had been at the rally, he spectacularly lost his seat to the opposition three months later. In another incident, a cabinet minister confronted a senior *Chronicle* reporter and demanded to know why the report had given MDC representative Welshman Ncube two paragraphs in his article.

Choice of language was also a critical and sensitive issue in the state-owned press. State media journalists refrain from using certain words or phrases when referring to particular issues that are viewed as of national interest. Tshuma highlighted how certain words deemed controversial and unpatriotic, such as ‘land grabbing,’ are banned in the state press. While this term has been widely used by the private and international media when referring to the occupation of white-owned farms from early 2000 onwards, journalists working for state-owned newspapers have been told to use alternative words such as ‘repossessing’ or ‘occupying’. Tshuma illustrated this with an example from 1999, when *The Chronicle* published an article entitled “War veterans resort to land grab.” Soon after

the piece appeared in the newspaper, war veterans came to *The Chronicle* newsroom and sought an audience with the editor, Stephen Mpofo. They told him he should stop using unpatriotic terminology and argued that the war against the racist Rhodesian government was a war to regain land that had been grabbed by British colonialists from their ancestors. The war veterans felt it was anti-Zimbabwean for a newspaper to refer to their actions on farms as a 'land grab'. The war veterans emphasised that land was used by nationalist leaders as a motivation to lure them into the armed struggle. To them, it was a fulfilment of their sacrifices.

In his role as Chief Reporter at *The Chronicle*, Tshuma often found his articles heavily edited and toned down. For example, on 11 April 1998, he filed a story about four mass graves that had been identified in Tsholotsho. Villagers had told him that the graves included people killed by the Fifth Brigade during Gukurahundi in the early 1980s. However, after filing the story, *The Chronicle* editor summoned Tshuma to his office and told him he would have been fired if the story had been published in the way that Tshuma wrote it. Subsequently, the content of the article was modified. Villagers were killed by 'unknown gunmen' instead of by the 'Fifth Brigade'. However, the final published article still contained a reference to the Fifth Brigade, leading to Tshuma receiving a phone call from the then Minister of Information and Publicity, Chen Chimutengwende, who warned the reporter that the story constituted an allegation against the Fifth Brigade.

Hence, at the editorial stage, material viewed as unsympathetic to government policies was often left out of state-owned newspapers. According to Tshuma, state media in Zimbabwe attempt to produce an uncritical and brainwashed society under the false banner of the so-called Third Chimurenga. The media divert people's ideas and feelings and do not offer informed answers on the causes and effects of a corrupted system. Instead, state media claim that the problems in Zimbabwe are caused by - to use President Mugabe's words - "demons in 10 Downing Street". While people are dying of hunger across the country, the news reports a bumper harvest. Reporters cannot report their own viewpoints or criticise the government. Journalists in the state media are merely there in order to feed their families, and cannot practise their craft of journalism. The journalists are often forced to come up with fictitious stories so as to promote government propaganda. Ultimately, the state media misinform the nation about the causes of Zimbabwe's problems.

**Clayton Peel**, a former deputy editor at *The Chronicle* and currently a PhD candidate at the University of Wales, talked about the plurality of websites that have emerged with the growing Zimbabwean diaspora in the 2000s. He referred to Wole Soyinka's terming of African exiles as 'lucky drainees' as compared to their stay-at-home colleagues whose brains could as well "be found as grisly sediments on the riverbed of the Nile. Or in the stomach linings of African crocodiles and vultures".<sup>4</sup> At home, Zimbabweans could not speak out about politics but exile has offered them the chance to become critical analysts of the situation in their homeland. Political debates have occurred on the increasing number of websites providing Zimbabweans with a platform to express themselves, to

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in: Soyinka, Wole (1990). *Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa's Culture Producers*. In: *PMLA* 105(1), p. 112.

engage in racially-charged political debates, to discuss the high rate of HIV-AIDS infection and the changing gender relations in the Diaspora. The internet has also enabled journalists such as Peel to continue their profession in cyberspace. Exiled Zimbabwean reporters have found it almost impossible to become part of media organisations in the United Kingdom. The internet has provided an alternative medium where diasporic Zimbabwean journalists can continue writing.

Websites have actively responded to events as well as tracked and witnessed the political and economic ruin in Zimbabwe. According to Peel, as a result, new social networks have formed in the Diaspora. The emergence of political critiques on websites has also clearly irked the Zimbabwe government. When Mugabe addressed the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at Geneva, he argued that the internet represented “the same platforms and technologies through which virulent propaganda and misinformation are peddled to de-legitimise our just struggles against vestigial colonialism, indeed to weaken national cohesion and efforts at forging a broad Third World front against what patently is a dangerous imperial world order led by warrior states and kingdoms”.<sup>5</sup>

For Peel, the internet has been a positive reflection of the microcosm of Zimbabwean diversity. Websites have mirrored the different ethnic communities that were unrepresented in the authoritarian nationalism of the last 38 years. Communities perceived by both home and host countries as insignificant have expressed themselves on the internet. Peel argued that Zimbabwean-run websites have constituted a transnational public sphere which represents a vibrancy absent from the ‘intolerant’ and ‘dull [...] intellectual ghetto’ that Zimbabwe had become.<sup>6</sup> In his research, Peel hopes not only to show how the internet has extended democratic space, but also how the medium has contributed towards the production and reaffirmation of marginalised cultures. The Mugabe government has attempted to forge a corporate Zimbabwean identity and history that excluded or assimilated minorities, or distorted their historical roles and the entitlements of their Zimbabwean citizenship.

Peel also argued that, whereas the Zimbabwean diaspora of the 1980s could find no space to reflect on issues such as Gukurahundi, the émigrés of the 2000s used the internet for such debates. Peel recollected vibrant discussions on issues affecting people in Matabeleland at meetings of the Bulawayo-based cultural association *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu*. In Zimbabwe itself, these meetings which converge on the basis of ethnic background were often frowned upon and posed risks. But in cyberspace, communities can now come together and debate on websites such as [www.inkundla.net](http://www.inkundla.net). Websites constitute virtual communities that contribute towards communities in Zimbabwe. For example, [www.goffal.com](http://www.goffal.com), (now MR ZIMS. NET: Ed.) a website for

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<sup>5</sup> Speech by His Excellency President Robert Gabriel Mugabe of Zimbabwe on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, Switzerland, 10 December 2003, available from: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/geneva/coverage/statements/zimbabwe/zw.html>

<sup>6</sup> See: Nyamfukudza, S. (2005). ‘To skin a skunk’: Some observations on Zimbabwe’s intellectual development. In: M. Palmberg and R. Primorac (eds.), *Skinning the Skunk – Facing Zimbabwean Futures*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, pp. 21, 23.

Zimbabwe's Mixed Race community, collected money to enable someone in Harare to undergo urgent surgery. The website of the Association of Zimbabwe Journalists ([www.zimbabwejournalists.com](http://www.zimbabwejournalists.com)) has enabled exiled Zimbabwean journalists to pursue their profession and allowed them to link up with fellow journalists. According to Peel, this has created a virtual community of Zimbabwean journalists.

Former editor of *The Sunday Mirror* and blogger, **Innocent Chofambo Sithole**, discussed Zimbabwe's emerging cyberdemocracy through the prism of Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, reach a common judgment by way of rational-critical debate. Sithole assessed the state of the public sphere in Zimbabwe through an analysis of the country's media landscape. In his presentation, Sithole sought to measure the extent to which Zimbabwe's public sphere could be seen as a free space that reflects a diverse range of opinions.

Sithole argued that the public sphere in Zimbabwe has never been plural or diverse. The emergence of private newspapers during the government's implementation of the Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s did not result in a well-functioning public sphere. Weekly publications such as *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard* were business-oriented and focused on financial affairs. They had no strong presence in the political debate and largely addressed an élite readership of policymakers. However, *The Daily News*, which was established in March 1999, targeted a broader audience in both rural and urban areas. The rise of this newspaper in 1999 and 2000 coincided with the establishment of a rival political party, the Movement for Democratic Change. While the MDC challenged the monopoly of ZANU-PF, *The Daily News* contested the long-standing dominance of *The Herald*. The government's response to *The Daily News* could be summarised as one of intolerance and quickly reversed the media liberalisation that had occurred in the 1990s.

Sithole distinguished three different strategies that government has deployed in its response to the vibrancy of private media. First of all, there was a militaristic strategy which involved bombing of media outlets such as *The Daily News* in April 2000 and January 2001, and radio station Voice of the People (VOP) in August 2002. Secondly, there was a legalistic approach, in which government passed draconian laws such as AIPPA which resulted in the closure of several privately owned newspapers. The third strategy was the covert approach, by which hitherto private newspapers were appropriated by the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO). This strategy saw members of the security forces or intelligence agents buying into existing publications such as *The Daily Mirror*, *The Sunday Mirror* and allegedly *The Financial Gazette*. The strategy has also involved the establishment of state-sponsored news websites.

According to Sithole, this three-fold approach should be seen in the context of ZANU-PF's régime survival project which saw a gradual closure of democratic space. The project maintained government control on broadcasting encapsulated through the monopoly of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). Media were considered as

an area of national security. While use of violence was one aspect of this régime survival strategy, control of private media and broadcasting of nationalist propaganda constituted another element. 'Patriotic history' was at the heart of this propaganda and has been defined by Terence Ranger as a revisionist, narrow narrative of Zimbabwe's national liberation history. In the state media, patriotic history was championed principally by ZANU-PF aligned public intellectuals such as *Sunday Mail* columnist Dr Tafataona Mahoso who threw the country back into the language of the liberation war. In these circumstances, there was no space for the expression of alternative points of view and a complete absence of a well-functioning public sphere.

The growing economic and political crisis forced many Zimbabweans into exile, including journalists. However, Zimbabwean journalists continued their professional activities in the Diaspora. Journalists established news websites, some of which have received more traffic than websites of state newspapers. These websites are not only frequented by diasporic Zimbabweans but also by Zimbabweans at home. According to Sithole, Zimbabwe currently has 1.2 million internet users, who represent 8 percent of the total population. Apart from news websites, social networking sites have also been established by the Zimbabwe diaspora in order to maintain community identities, network with the homeland, facilitate political debate and engage in business activities (e.g. [www.mukuru.com](http://www.mukuru.com)). Civil society organisations have increasingly used the internet as a tool for campaigning, advocacy and mobilisation, exemplified in websites such as [www.kubatana.net](http://www.kubatana.net) and [www.sokwanele.com](http://www.sokwanele.com). Political parties have effectively deployed new media to carry out their work and to sustain their campaigns. Whereas political parties were not given space in state media, the internet offered the opportunity to carry on the struggle for democracy. For example, Simba Makoni, candidate in the March 2008 presidential elections, set up a website to share his political vision; the MDC also posted its manifesto on its website.

According to Sithole, in the Zimbabwean context, the internet has functioned largely as a public sphere, because it has provided space to a diversity of individuals and groups and facilitated discussion between Zimbabweans at home and abroad. However, Sithole also outlined the limits of new media. He expressed concern about the poor observance of journalistic ethics and poor content of online news websites, which has hampered the quality of debate. Furthermore, Sithole observed the limited internet access within Zimbabwe. While it costs little to set up a website in the United Kingdom, in Zimbabwe access to the internet remains a privilege for the majority of the population, and particularly those in rural areas. The internet remains largely confined to urban users, who have access to other forms of media such as newspapers and television. The medium therefore marginalises the politically decisive majority in the countryside, without whom Zimbabwe's political system cannot be democratised. The government has made no effort to invest in new media as a tool for facilitating citizens' access to centres of power. According to Sithole, politicians and government officials continue to talk down to the nation from the cliff of the state broadcaster. Any serious discussion about the public sphere in Zimbabwe, therefore, has to take into account the real challenge of providing a space for people in the countryside to express their views and to do so freely. State-sponsored violence and intolerance, both key elements of the ZANU-PF régime survival

strategy, continue to poison the political arena, rendering impossible the attainment of a viable public sphere. As only people in the urban areas can access the internet, a multimedia strategy is needed to reach the political majority in the rural areas. Radio should play a key part in such a multimedia strategy.

In the discussion, Rori Masiane asked the panel members how much the CIO was monitoring media and what resources the CIO use to watch over the internet. Sithole felt it was difficult to know the exact figures, but argued that many websites are clearly in line with the state press, and perhaps even owned by government. According to him, the government is more concerned about radio stations such as Studio 7 and SW Radio Africa than the internet. Firoze Manji was pleased about the way in which the presenters celebrated the potential of cyberspace and the internet, but urged panel members to consider the limitations of the medium, given that only 8 percent of Zimbabweans have access to the internet. He wondered what options were available for dissemination of information under the current constraints.

### **Political, commercial and legal pressures on journalists**

The last panel was jointly chaired by **Edgar Moyo**, BZS Vice-President, and **Gugulethu Moyo**, a lawyer with the International Bar Association (IBA). **Gerry Jackson**, station manager of the London-based SW Radio Africa, could not attend.

**Rashweat Mukundu**, Director of the Zimbabwe Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), provided an update on the latest developments, issues and challenges with regard to media in Zimbabwe. He described the situation largely in negative terms and pointed towards the repressive legislation and adverse political environment. Journalists have been arrested, beaten and abducted. Private newspapers and foreign media have been banned and prevented from operating in Zimbabwe. Media houses, printing presses and radio stations have been bombed. The economic crisis has resulted in a low media density among Zimbabwean citizens. Despite state support, the state-owned *Sunday Mail* newspaper only has a print run of 40,000 copies, whereas it used to print 400,000 copies per week. Private newspapers have been forced to reduce their print run. Some only print 5,000 copies weekly in order to satisfy their subscribers, but cannot print more because of the adverse economic circumstances. The state continues to monopolise the airwaves, although short-wave radio stations such as Voice of America, SW Radio Africa and Voice of the People have challenged state domination of electronic media. The media infrastructure in Zimbabwe has sharply declined. For example, it is extremely difficult to make mobile phone calls and SIM cards are expensive. Skilled journalists have left the country and state media are largely run by young people without significant experience.

Mukundu argued that media policy has mainly been used as a political tool. Immediately after Independence in 1980, the government had no media policy and saw itself as a free country that required no specific policies with regard to media. Much stringent legislation introduced by the Rhodesia Front régime was maintained and no serious discussion took

place about reform of colonial laws. In the 1990s, Zimbabwe came under the influence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and liberalised its economic policy environment. These changes resulted in investment in print media, private broadcasting initiatives and mobile telephone networks. The Zimbabwe government recognised that it was part of a global community and, to some extent, acknowledged the existence of private media. This radically changed in the post-2000 period, when the government realised it needed a media policy: it perceived the nation to be under threat from external forces such as the MDC and the West. The government's approach was not to promote media, but its policy was geared towards increased regulation and protection of the interests of the political élite.

According to Mukundu, the 2000s largely reversed the gains made during the 1990s. New legislative measures implemented through AIPPA, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Interception of Communications Act (ICA), the Criminal (Codification and Reform) Act and the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) imposed restrictions on foreign ownership of the media and introduced a stringent licensing system for media organisations as well as journalists. BSA stipulated that only Zimbabweans living in the country could invest in broadcasting. AIPPA led to the shutdown of newspapers such as the popular *Daily News*. AIPPA also led to restrictions on foreign media reporting and saw the arrests and harassment of numerous reporters. POSA protected the President and other senior officials from direct criticism.

Zimbabwe's media landscape has increasingly come under political and economic pressure. The government has branded private media as stooges of the West, and issued attacks on specific individuals and publications such as *The Zimbabwean*, *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Financial Gazette*. For example, in May 2008, a truck transporting 60,000 copies of *The Zimbabwean on Sunday* was hijacked by unknown gunmen who set fire to the vehicle, destroying it and the newspapers. The once popular and mixed journalist hang-out, the Quill Club in Harare's New Ambassador hotel, has been turned into a space of fear. Journalists are now worried whenever strangers enter.

The adverse economic situation has severely pushed up the costs of production in Zimbabwe. The price of imported inputs such as newsprint has reached sky-rocketing levels. The government has also imposed price controls on newspapers, so that media houses are forced to sell their papers below the cost of production. Newspapers in Zimbabwe often derive significant revenues from government advertising. When government does not advertise in private media, these publications have lost resources. Private newspapers have limited circulation in certain locations, particularly in rural areas, as government will seek to prevent distribution of critical news to these areas. More recently, government has also introduced a 40 percent duty on imported newspapers such as *The Zimbabwean*, which have been classified as 'luxury products'.

In order to address these restrictions on media in Zimbabwe, Mukundu listed a number of measures that need to be taken in the future: revision of repressive legislation like AIPPA, POSA, BSA and ICA; establishment of independent regulatory bodies such as a Voluntary Media Council; training and reorientation of journalists; promotion of

community newspapers and radio stations; and transformation of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation into a truly public broadcaster. Mukundu proposed a bottom-up strategy in which freedom of expression is strengthened within communities as part of a broader process of democratisation. Regional and African human rights bodies such as the SADC Tribunal and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) need to be strengthened, so as to ensure that media and freedom of expression rights are promoted by African governments and guaranteed in the constitution.

**Alex Magaisa**, Senior Lecturer at University of Kent's Law School, explored the way in which legal constraints have impacted on the practice of journalism in Zimbabwe, and how these have affected the way in which stories have been covered by local and international media. Magaisa expressed his concern about the practice of journalism in Zimbabwe, and the high level of plagiarism and lack of respect for ethics in media reporting. He gave the example of a recent news article headlined "MDC supporters have been relocated", which appeared in a state newspaper. The piece was about the 60 MDC supporters who were arrested at MDC's Harvest House office in Harare. The state newspaper euphemistically described the arrest as a 'relocation,' which demonstrates that information published in Zimbabwean newspapers needs to be read very critically.

What stands out in Mugabe's attempt to remain in power, according to Magaisa, is his legalistic approach. Through the introduction of new legislation, government has tried to obtain control over knowledge and information. Underlying this approach is government's assumption that information is a source of power. One of the key effects of media regulation has been the closure of public space. But, as Magaisa explained, the legal measures implemented by the ZANU-PF government have also had some counterproductive consequences. The tone of foreign media reporting has become increasingly sceptical. For example, BBC World Affairs correspondent, John Simpson, has put the legal measures implemented by government into the forefront of his reporting. Simpson's reports are often more about his personal struggle to report from Zimbabwe than about anything else. The legal context has also forced some reporters to use pseudonyms in their published stories, so it is difficult to ascertain whether a report is credible. The fact that a journalist will not be identified in a story will impact on how a story is written. These examples, for Magaisa, have shown how the Zimbabwean legal environment has severely compromised journalists' reporting.

**Sandra Nyaira**, former Political Editor at *The Daily News* and now secretary of the UK-based Association of Zimbabwe Journalists (AZJ), urged all journalists based in the Diaspora to come together and to reclaim their profession. She called upon Zimbabwean journalists based in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand to support journalists in Zimbabwe. As she explained, many journalists still there are no longer employed and some have been affected by HIV/AIDS. Journalists based abroad, on the other hand, no longer have access to jobs in the media sector. AZJ aims to assist colleagues in the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) and jointly to demand an end to the media tyranny in Zimbabwe. AZJ provides a network where people can exchange ideas on a daily basis, not only about the media profession but also about the media situation in Zimbabwe.

**Brilliant Mhlanga**, formerly Secretary General in the Student Executive Council (SRC) of the University of Zimbabwe, a member of the civil society movement in Zimbabwe and currently a PhD Candidate in Media Studies at the University of Westminster, advocated a more critical assessment of the opposition by Zimbabwe's private media. Further, he urged the media to consider their actions in a bid constructively to project the future of Zimbabwe. He began by giving an analogy derived from the African adage taken from Chinua Achebe which says; "When a leopard wants to feed on its young-ones it first accuses them of smelling like goats". He stated that the ZANU-PF habit of seeking an excuse whenever the party wants to suppress divergent views has permeated into the mindsets of the Opposition. He further lamented how this habit has been engraved into the minds of ordinary citizens, so feeding into the process of polarisation. He saw this also as a generational crisis which has aggravated the failure to tolerate divergent views.

Most private media in Zimbabwe have criticised the ZANU-PF government, and still continue to do so, though without openly discussing the weaknesses of the opposition movement. But, according to Mhlanga, in this way, private media have to some extent censored themselves. He problematised the term 'independent media,' by suggesting that it has not been useful in the Zimbabwean context. The question that needs to be asked is: "Independent of whom?" Mhlanga argued that private media have been slow to criticise the Opposition, and particularly Morgan Tsvangirai, even though the MDC have made many blunders. Mhlanga showed how the levels of polarisation in Zimbabwe have deepened because of the paradoxes in which people often find themselves. The conclusion is frequently drawn that you belong to ZANU-PF if you criticise Morgan Tsvangirai, and that you belong to the MDC if you criticise ZANU-PF.

According to Mhlanga, the so-called 'independent media' still have a role to play in charting the way forward for Zimbabwe and in offering a solution to the current crisis. He emphasised that the media must inform citizens about the different possibilities facing Zimbabwe, by openly discussing issues such as the option of a transitional government and a government of national unity (GNU). He added that these concepts must be explained to ordinary citizens, so they can make informed decisions in future and understand the course of action being taken. Mhlanga felt that private media have merely canonised the Opposition, which has made the Opposition think that the independent media belong to them and that they should not be criticised. He also gave examples of some prominent journalists who, he argued, have entrusted themselves with the duty of spinning information for the Opposition. He expressed disappointment with this course of action, as there is no future in playing such roles. Instead of praising the opposition, Mhlanga challenged the private media critically to reflect on how to address Zimbabwe's problems. He concluded by acknowledging that the media have in some instances tried constructively to perform their duties. However, he argued that that is not enough, as much needs to be done, given the levels of polarization in and outside Zimbabwe.

**Mduduzi Mathuthu**, former reporter with *The Daily News* and initiator of the popular website *NewZimbabwe*, provided the audience with insights about his experiences at *The Daily News* and the success of his website. He described the difficult circumstances under

which journalists at *The Daily News* were working. “You write a new story and ..are simply arrested to explain that story because it is felt to cause alarm, fear and despondency”. According to Mathuthu, this level of harassment by government has not helped journalists in the private media to be independent. As he pointed out, “How can you be fair to someone who is abusing you?” For Mathuthu, it was unreasonable to expect private media journalists to be reasonable towards government. As a journalist for *The Daily News*, Mathuthu felt like an opposition activist and he saw his role as trying to make things better for the MDC. He admitted that most *Daily News* journalists were advocates for change, and possibly lost their objectivity in the process. This ended up in a polarised situation where *The Herald* was pro-government and *The Daily News* became an opposition outfit. Despite the harsh treatment that Mathuthu received from the state, he still respects his colleagues at *The Herald* and feels they are not ‘evil people’ but merely trying to make a living in a crisis situation. Not all state media journalists support government: his website receives requests from many journalists from *The Herald* and *The Chronicle* who would like to write for *NewZimbabwe*.

Explaining the success of *New Zimbabwe*, Mathuthu said that, when he moved to the U.K. in 2003, he found few news websites that focused on the situation in Zimbabwe. His main aim with *NewZimbabwe* was to set up a platform from which to challenge the former Minister of Information and Publicity, Jonathan Moyo. Mathuthu began receiving emails from people who wanted to contribute to the project and the website soon became a success. Since 2003, *NewZimbabwe* has seen many new competing websites which have tried to challenge *NewZimbabwe* and paint it in a bad light. Some have accused *NewZimbabwe* of being supportive of ZANU-PF, but Mathuthu said he does not support the ruling party and has no intention to do so. He feels many online publications have published material that is outright libellous. For him, *NewZimbabwe* simply exercises its independence in its reporting. The website produces reports with no strings attached, and seeks to retain its objectivity by providing a platform to a range of different voices.

In the discussion session, Simon Bright wondered whether panel members felt that ZANU-PF had consciously been manipulating the Western media by killing farmers, so as to draw attention away from attacks on the opposition. Sandra Nyaira replied that the ZANU-PF government did not intend to kill farmers, but matters had merely got out of hand; the government could not control the war veterans. Makusha Mugabe disagreed and felt the killing of white farmers was a deliberate strategy and served a specific purpose. The government could easily have stopped the violence but refused to do so. Another member of the audience asked the panel what had brought the world’s focus on Zimbabwe, rather than on other places such as Iran. Mathuthu agreed that there had been disproportionate attention for the Zimbabwe situation while there was a worse crisis in Sudan; Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were also curtailing democratic freedoms. He felt it was convenient for the United Kingdom to address the situation in Zimbabwe. Matthew Nyashanu argued it was unnecessary to compare what happens in Gaza and other places with what is occurring in Zimbabwe. For Nyashanu, the responsibility of a journalist was not to balance issues while the country is burning. Instead, the responsibility of journalists was to protect society. Sandra Nyaira commented on a question from the audience on the need for ethical guidelines in cyberspace. She argued that it is difficult to

police websites. She said the internet provides enormous opportunities in terms of reaching out to other colleagues. But, she said, the freedom to express oneself on the internet can get out of hand, if the medium is not used in line with basic ethical principles.

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About 80 people attended the Research Day. A collection was held which raised £120 to support needy people in Zimbabwe.