13. Media Development: an organisational perspective

As stated previously, media development is seen in different terms by the interviewees, depending on their political and ideological persuasion. The interviewees can be described as key media personnel in Zimbabwe, in both the private and state-owned media as well as the government and its regulatory agencies. Private media interviewees include senior persons such as Dumisani Muleya, who has worked in the NGO sector for over ten years. Others, in what can be described as the private media ‘camp’, include Kholiwe Nyoni, who works for Radio Dialogue (an aspiring community radio station yet to be licensed), and Brenda Burrell, who works for Kubatana NGO Network, an organisation supporting NGOs with Information and Communication Technology development and the dissemination of information using ICT. This private media group expressed more or less similar views on the state of the media in Zimbabwe, and what they see as the key challenges for media development in the country. This view is captured by Sinikiwe Msipa-Ndebele’s description of what have been the most significant changes in the media over the past five years (2000 to 2005).

"First [for me], I would say that one of the most noticeable changes has been the promulgation of laws that hinder the operation of the media, like the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Public Order and Security Act and the Broadcasting Services Act. Secondly, I think that we have seen a contraction of the media industry, with the closure of two media houses. In a landscape where you have about seven media houses operating, if two go it is a cause for concern because it limits the representativeness of the voices that are heard in the media. But, thirdly (from my point of view), we have seen a decline in the funding available for initiatives aimed at media development, and this has seen the scaling down of most media organisations and (in some cases) the closure of organisations that have anything to do with media development. Even those organisations that currently have funding have scaled down their activities because really there is less funding for such initiatives [going forward]. This has changed the landscape. There is less noise being made out there, while there is more fear because of the restrictive environment."

(Sinikiwe Msipa-Ndebele, Director; NGO: Federation of Africa Media Women of Zimbabwe (FAMWZ), Zimbabwe)
State media workers, government agency workers and politicians working in the media (and on media issues) in Zimbabwe share similar views on what they regard as the state of the media in Zimbabwe. These views are largely defined by what they see as the need to protect Zimbabwe’s “sovereignty” and the present ruling elite, which they say is under attack from powerful Western countries over such issues as the land reform programme. During the course of these interviews, strong views (largely representing the government and ruling elite) were expressed by the Chairman of the Media and Information Commission (MIC), Dr Tafataona Mahoso; Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport and Communications and ZANU-PF MP, Leo Mugabe; and Chairman of the Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) Board, Tendai Chari. It is interesting to note that while some of the pro-government and ruling elite interviewees expressed strong political views on the role of the media, and the whole question of media development, others, including MP Leo Mugabe, a media lecturer, Moses Charedzera, and a senior officer with a government regulatory agency, talked positively about what they see as the challenges facing the media, and what needs to be done to develop it.

While all interviewees noted the promulgation of new media laws as an important change, the Hon. Leo Mugabe aptly summarised the various strands of opinion on these laws (while still giving his own interpretation):

“ I think the most notable change is the introduction of the AIPPA; some call it controversial, others call it repressive, still others look at it as a positive development in that now, for the first time since our independence [1980], the media are being governed in terms of falsehoods – [defamation and libel]. Previously, the media would just write any story, defame people, and it was up to the individual to sue the newspaper. Now there are some reasonable corrections that have been taken [creation of statutory criminal offences that can lead to a journalists being arrested for writing falsehoods]. More importantly, any stories that are written are checked for veracity before publication; I think this has been a very positive development in the media… There is also the issue of the distribution of materials printed both inside and outside the country. I have put the issue of whether we should govern the distribution of materials that come from abroad up for debate. A typical example given to me the other day by one journalist was the trouble, economic hardship and product boycotts caused by the publication of those cartoons in Denmark. Therefore, other people [government, state security agencies, regulators bodies] think that the distribution of such materials must be governed. Other people think that too much regulation will cause problems. For now, we are listening to what the public are saying. You see the letters that are being written… we are taking a cue from whatever materials are being written. ”

(Hon. Leo Mugabe, ZANU-PF Member of Parliament (Makonde) and Chairman; Government: Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport and Communications, Zimbabwe)
The interview process highlighted the polarised views in Zimbabwe society. While there is general agreement on the need to develop the media, interviewees disagreed on why this should be done, and how it should be done. The majority of media workers in the private media, and NGOs working on media issues, argue that without changes to the current media laws, and a change of government attitude, the media industry simply will not develop. Senior government officials and state media workers, on the other hand, argue that the media is already developing, and is serving the needs of society (as defined by the ruling elite). This development is described by the ruling elite, state media journalists and government regulatory agencies as seen through media training institutions that the government has set up and is supporting, the restructuring of the state broadcaster among other issues.

13.1 Key organisations

The AMDI Zimbabwe hub research process involved 15 interviews with leading individuals in both the private and state media, NGOs working with the media, journalists’ unions, an NGO working on promoting the use of ICT, media training and government. These organisations were represented by personnel at the most senior level possible in the interview process. Targeted organisations included:

- a leading weekly private newspaper;
- the parliament of Zimbabwe;
- two government regulatory authorities for the media and telecommunications sectors;
- five NGOs working on media advocacy, media and gender, media rights and freedom of expression, and the promotion and the use of ICT;
- community media;
- the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ); and,
- a media and political analyst.

The level of interviewees’ involvement in the management of their organisations varied. Apart from interviewees from the state and private media, and one media training institution, the remaining interviewees are individuals with decision-making powers and experience who have initiated media development projects in their work.

13.2 Impact of media development initiatives

Zimbabwe’s current political and economic environment is a challenge to any meaningful media development. While it may be defined in terms of initiatives that promote the growth of the media, improve access to information and support the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, the media industry in Zimbabwe has diminished as a result of the closure of newspapers, the imposition of restrictive media laws and the generally unsupportive media environment.

Fourteen interviewees cite the closure of The Daily News, The Tribune and Weekly Times as negative developments, while 11 interviewees see these events as controversial and repressive.
The NGO personnel, private media employees and political commentators interviewed say the laws and the restrictive media and freedom of expression environment are the most notable changes over the past five years. Key laws that feature prominently in all interviews are AIPPA, POSA and the BSA. While the government argues that these laws were passed by a democratically elected parliament, this argument is dismissed by the NGOs and the private media, who counter that legislative authority has been subverted by a lack of debate and partisanship, which has seen legislators voting not on the merits of the issues under discussion but along party lines.

While the AIPPA, BSA and POSA were passed by the majority of parliamentarians (from the ruling ZANU-PF party), the opposition voted against these laws. It is further noted that the passing of these laws was done despite adverse and critical reports that were passed by the Parliamentary Legal Committee and the Parliamentary Portfolio Committees, under whose jurisdiction these laws fall. Parliamentary reports on AIPPA noted that this law would stifle the enjoyment of media and the freedom of expression rights in Zimbabwe and also that the laws were in violation of section 20 of the Zimbabwe Constitution that guarantees the enjoyment of freedom of expression rights.

There was also strong resistance to these laws from journalists’ unions and NGOs working on media rights issues. The reservations of all these groups were ignored, and even now, when the government says it is open to discussion on these laws, the position remains that nothing much will change. These laws have served the present government “well” in the sense that they closed platforms for public debate and outlets for critical voices. A point noted by ten NGO and media interviewees is that these laws are applied selectively, further strengthening the argument that the laws were in fact passed to target particular media houses, and not bring “sanity” to the media industry (as is argued by the government).

The impact of these laws (defined as repressive by NGOs working in the media and the private media) is captured by Dumisani Muleya:

“Over the past five years there has been a dramatic contraction of the private media in Zimbabwe as a result of the hostile political environment and legislative framework, which began in the mid-1990s. The media legislation had changed a lot following the founding of some private newspapers. They came into play in a situation where the environment was largely dominated by state-owned, print and broadcast media. So in 1996 we had the founding of the Zimbabwe Independent newspaper (which I work for), then came the Standard Newspaper, then, two years later, another new media group, the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ), came onto the scene with about six titles, one of them national and the others regional. Later the ANZ founded another Sunday newspaper. As we know, some of these newspapers [ANZ Newspapers] have collapsed for economic reasons, and two of them have been closed as a result of the harsh media regulation and legislation in the country. So over the past five years we have seen a complete reversal of the gains we recorded between 1995 and 2000. We are back to the old situation whereby we have a very small private media sector versus a vast and expansive state media sector that kills the way the media in Zimbabwe generally functions, with a mass of information coming out of the government media and a small amount coming from the private media.”

(Dumisani Muleya, News Editor; Media Practitioner, Private Sector: Zimbabwe Independent, Zimbabwe)
As a result of current legislative conditions, NGOs working on media development issues have increased their advocacy work and put structures in place for human rights protection. Other NGOs and private media interviewees say there is now a decline in funding for media development work as donor partners focus on “political” issues. On the contrary, the state media and government assert that the media industry has in fact changed for the better. State media workers say the introduction of the BSA, as well as the 75% local content requirement, has actually assisted in developing local talent in areas such as film, music, drama and documentary-making. According to Tendai Chari (ZTV Board Chairman), changes to programming content were the result of the promulgation of progressive legislation such as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) Commercialisation Act. For him, this law has meant that the state broadcaster has had to change its focus and mandate.

“The Broadcasting Services Act brought in the 75% local content policy requirement. This has meant that TV and radio programming has changed significantly in so far as it now caters for local content (which was not the case before). We also saw the promulgation of the ZBC Commercialisation Act which set in motion the unbundling of the ZBC into several companies or SBUs (Strategic Business Units). This has been one of the major events we have witnessed in the broadcasting sector, as well as the decentralisation of the radio stations into different regions of the country – [such as to the cities of Gweru and Bulawayo where two radio stations are now located].”

(Tendai Chari, Chairman; Media Practitioner, Public Sector: Zimbabwe Television Board, Zimbabwe)

The unbundling and commercialisation of the ZBC into SBUs is currently the subject of parliamentary debate, with concerns being expressed that the new structure is unworkable and has created a bureaucratic nightmare for the state broadcaster. A parliamentary report released on 31 May 2006 argues that the new Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings should return to its former structure and streamline the SBUs that have been created. While some interviewees noted this as a strategic change influenced by external forces (ie, the legislation), other interviewees argued that the real benefits of the legislative change have not been realised. This, according to Moses Charedzera, a media lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University, is because no steps have been taken to realise the benefits of laws such as the BSA, or licensing new and independent players. Other government agencies, including POTRAZ, say that they have done a lot to improve the telecommunications sector in Zimbabwe. A senior official with POTRAZ (who declined to be named) says the regulatory body has done much to transform the telecommunications industry, as a contribution to economic development. This, argues POTRAZ, is witnessed through the licensing of new players in the mobile telecommunications sector. Zimbabwe now has three wireless phone operators. POTRAZ argues that factors beyond their control have affected the growth of the telecommunications sector, including the suspension of donor support to the Zimbabwe government by international bodies such as the World Bank.

13.2.1 Strategic changes within the interviewees’ own area of work

All interviewees commented that they have had to change their strategies to suit the prevailing political and economic environment in Zimbabwe. Changes at a strategic level in the operations of media organisations, regulatory bodies and NGOs are varied as these are in different sectors, seeking to address different objectives. For the private media and NGOs, such changes include having to adapt to the existence operations and requirements of regulatory bodies, including the MIC.
“We have undertaken a number of initiatives in order to survive under the harsh political and legal conditions we are operating in. The first was when the… (AIPPA) law came into effect in 2002. We were advised by lawyers that, whilst the law was generally very repressive and there was a definite inclination across the media and civil society to defy it, we first had to register in order to be able to function; then we could try to fight the legislation from the right side of the law. So we adopted this strategy, recognising that in such an authoritarian environment it would not be easy to defy the laws and tackle the government head on. The law requires that journalists must be registered, so we did this, saying that we would continue to challenge the law whenever possible. The government remains hostile and takes every opportunity either to threaten to close newspapers or get journalists arrested. We have taken a pragmatic approach to this situation, choosing which fights to take on with the government.”

(Dumisani Muleya, News Editor; Media Practitioner, Private Sector: Zimbabwe Independent, Zimbabwe)

While some private media houses have managed to survive the tough regulatory structures of the MIC, others have not been so lucky, being shut down under the same regime of media laws. Changes at a strategic level for NGOs have had to deal with an influx of legal cases, arrests and assaults directed at media workers and media houses. Irene Petras of ZLHR highlighted this as a major concern for NGOs, as did Thomas Deve of MISA-Zimbabwe, and Mathew Takaona of the ZUJ. In the case of Zimbabwe, these violations cannot be separated from the political tensions that were and are taking place in the country, particularly the stiff political contest between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition MDC. Media NGOs note that around election time there is a dramatic increase in violations against media houses. Considerable resources have been put into defending arrested media workers and assisting those assaulted, arrested and in need of protection after receiving threats of arrests over their media or human rights work. While NGOs working in the media say that their main thrust is to promote the development of the media, considerable resources have been diverted to defending media personnel under threat. Irene Petras notes:

“"We have had to respond to the repression of the independent media and the effect this has had on our own operations and the projects we have undertaken. We have had to take on a huge number of cases involving attacks on media practitioners. As human rights defenders, we have seen a lot of arrests and a lot of assaults; many of our members have had to respond to these incidents." "

(Irene Petras, Programmes Coordinator; NGO: ZLHR, Zimbabwe)

Challenges that organisations such as ZLHR face are that the judiciary in Zimbabwe has been under severe stress as a result of the interference of the Zimbabwe government in its operations. Senior judges in the High Court and Supreme Court have left the bench after threats from the government. Some court judgements have been rejected by the government.

Organisations such as MISA responded to this situation by setting up a Media Defence Fund (MDF), which worked hand in glove with the ZLHR. These changes have also seen NGOs and the private media working increasingly closely with parliament, as a strategy to influence policy. According to Thomas Deve of MISA-Zimbabwe, considerable resources have also gone into advocacy work, as well as into using regional and international human rights charters, and international organisations such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, based in Banjul, the Gambia.
We have done quite a lot of advocacy; we have gone to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport and Communications to discuss issues relating to communications. On one occasion we protested in the streets, and although we did not really succeed – [in having the proposed law dropped] we did demonstrate our anger with the legislation when it was being launched in parliament. We have also travelled around the region trying to highlight issues of media repression.

(Thomas Deve, Chairman; NGO: MISA, Zimbabwe)

Thomas Deve also says that Zimbabwe has in fact regressed in terms of media development. Deve says the closure of newspapers such as The Daily News, The Tribune and Weekly Times was a blow for media growth and freedom.

Unfortunately, Zimbabwe has not witnessed growth; indeed, it has seen a regression – the closure of one of the leading daily newspapers [The Daily News], which was published by Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe [ANZ], followed by the closure of the Tribune newspaper [also an independent initiative] and the loss of personnel...

(Thomas Deve, Chairman; NGO: MISA, Zimbabwe)

In addition, he sees that experienced manpower has been lost in both the state and private media due to the banning of private newspapers and the dismissal of veteran media workers who do not appear to be toeing the official line in the state media.

The Daily News, in particular, had presented a major challenge to the ruling elite through its exposés of corruption, human rights violations and general abuses of power. The paper became a rallying point for forces opposed to the ruling elite, and at the same time a target for numerous attacks, including bombings. NGOs and the private media, therefore, argue that media laws, which have stifled media development, were passed after attempts had failed to physically destroy the private media.

NGOs, the private media and political commentators believe that the success of media development can be measured through the diversity of players in the market, increased access to information by citizens and the repeal of repressive laws (including AIPPA, POSA and BSA). The BSA presents a contradiction in media policy-making in that, while the government argues that the law opens up the industry to other players, NGOs working on media advocacy point out that there are a number of restrictive conditions that make it virtually impossible for private players to broadcast. These conditions include the banning of foreign investment in the broadcasting industry, the compulsory 75% local content requirement (without the requisite production houses in Zimbabwe to support this) and the banning of the coverage of political news. Four interviewees, however, see the BSA as a progressive law, despite the criticism proffered by NGOs and the private media. According to NGOs and the private media, government policy on the media is driven more by political considerations (especially the need to retain power and promote government views) than by the need to develop the media for the benefit of all sectors of society. These views, however, run contrary to what the ruling elite and government see as the role of the media in Zimbabwean society. While all interviewees agree that media laws such as AIPPA are controversial, government officials and senior individuals working for government regulatory agencies argue that there have been some positive developments over the years.
“I have observed that there are quite a number of newspapers that have been established or formed since 2000, and this has meant the broadening of the media sector, especially the newspaper industry, in Zimbabwe. We have seen newspapers like The Daily Mirror coming onto the scene. We also saw the introduction of The Tribune, which subsequently closed. The Weekly Times I think was also formed/established. In addition, we have witnessed the rejuvenation or revival of community newspapers under the Ziana or New Ziana stable and, of course, the restructuring that has been taking place at Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings. We have seen the promulgation of a number of laws that have significantly changed the climate in which the media is operating... We also witnessed the end – or the coming to the end – of the statutory monopoly of broadcasting by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and the promulgation of the law [BSA], which provided for the entry of new players into the sector. Although we do not have any new players at the moment... it paved the way for the entry of new players into the broadcasting sector. These are the key changes which [I would say] have taken place in the media industry between 2000 and 2005.”

(Tendai Chari, Chairman; Media Practitioner, Public Sector: Zimbabwe Television Board, Zimbabwe)

The positive changes pointed out by Tendai Chari include the revival and expansion of what the government calls ‘community newspapers’, under the New Ziana stable. Three other interviewees note this as a positive development. It came at the same time as the government was shutting down critical newspapers, including The Daily News and The Daily News on Sunday, The Weekly Times, and The Tribune. As noted previously, there seems to be a total disjuncture between what NGOs working on media and freedom of expression issues see as positive media development and what government officials, state media employees and their agencies see as positive media development. The expansion of the state media is described by Irene Petras of ZLHR as simply the expansion of the government’s propaganda infrastructure.

“I believe there is a desire to develop the media, but that it is motivated by the wrong reasons. There is perhaps a focus on giving the state-run media more support, assets and technology, but this is not being done with a view to the positive development of the industry as a whole. I believe it is being done for political reasons.”

(Irene Petras, Programmes Coordinator; NGO: ZLHR, Zimbabwe)

These different interpretations of what is positive and negative media development are at the centre of the controversies and debates that surround the current media laws in Zimbabwe. While NGOs and the private media see the involvement of the government in the media as negative – indeed, an expansion of government propaganda – the government argues that it is under siege from powerful Western countries that are using the media to effect “regime change”. This, argues the government, is why laws such as the AIPPA, BSA and POSA were promulgated, in order to protect the present Zimbabwe government from undue external pressure (prompted, the government argues, by the controversial land reform programme). Dr Tafataona Mahoso captures the government attitude when he says that the private media in Zimbabwe, as well as foreign media (especially from the EU countries and the USA), have a “regime change” agenda, and the media is being used to push anti-Zimbabwe sentiment.
Further positive changes, noted by five interviewees involved with media training and government and regulatory bodies, are the increasing number of training institutions, which have meant that Zimbabwe has a sound media human resource base. The Zimbabwe government is noted as having invested in media training through the establishment of media studies departments at higher education institutions, including the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), the National University of Science and Technology (NUSA), and Midlands State University (MSU). Hitherto, journalist training was confined to the Harare Polytechnic and a few private institutions.

While acknowledging the increased training of media workers as a positive development, Stanford Matenda says this training is affected by the repressive environment, which has limited opportunities for employment.

“From a training perspective, we have seen the closure of newspapers and other developments which affect opportunities for our students. The closures have limited the choice for student internships, whether in the broadcasting sector, the print media sector or in online media organisations; we are aware that online media organisations are based outside of the country and there is virtually none which is gathering and disseminating information locally... These developments have affected our work; we therefore continue to monitor developments on the ground closely, looking at how our operations are affected and potential roles we can play.”

(Stanford Matenda, Lecture and Chairman of Department of Journalism; Academic: National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe)

Interviewees involved in training see issues around curriculum development as important, and as having had an impact in their work. The challenge, according to Stanford Matenda, is that there is a dearth of African intellectual material that can be used in media studies.

“I would say that, right now, curriculum development in itself is a key component of our business. While the current training curriculum has weaknesses (which we are trying to close), by and large I think we are satisfied with it, as are our students. However, there is a challenge in building African textbooks and resources into the curriculum, so that when we train we are not just using materials informed by Western experience. The lecturers themselves also need to be aware of the African perspective.”

(Stanford Matenda, Lecture and Chairman of Department of Journalism; Academic: National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Zimbabwe)