

Theoretical Paradoxes of Representation and the Problems of Media Representations of Zimbabwe in Crisis

Nhamo A. Mhiripiri

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7593-8763>
Midlands State University, Zimbabwe
nhamoanthony@yahoo.com

Oswelled Ureke

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0775-9699>
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
ozzieureke@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to theorise the various representations of Zimbabwe in the media. It does so by scanning the media landscape for significant events constituting what is commonly called the “Zimbabwean crisis”. Such representations centre around the person of former Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, perceived human rights abuses, and many other facets of political conflict, whether real or imagined. The article problematises the concept of representation within the context of the Zimbabwean conflict and the various texts associated with and emerging from it. It shows that the image of Zimbabwe most commonly found in the media is a product of ideological constructions, sometimes bordering on propaganda. This article may contribute useful insights towards understanding the various images of Zimbabwe in local and international media as well as social media.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; representation; conflict; ideology; propaganda; media

Introduction

Zimbabwe has experienced a protracted crisis since the beginning of its controversial land redistribution programme in the late 1990s. The programme saw predominantly white farmers lose huge tracts of land to black people, largely those aligned to the ruling ZANU-PF party, then led by Robert Mugabe. This happened amidst allegations of violence and a breakdown of the rule of law, resulting in numerous representations of what is commonly referred to as the “Zimbabwean crisis”. Under the rule of Robert Mugabe, which ended in November 2017, Zimbabwe survived an indictment before the UN Security Council on charges of operating as a “rogue” state. The charges were the

UNISA 
UNIVERSITY
OF SOUTH AFRICA
PRESS

 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

 critical arts

Critical Arts
www.tandfonline.com/rcrc20
Volume 32 | Numbers 5–6 | 2018 | pp. 87–103

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2018.1548026>
ISSN 1992-6049 (Online), ISSN 0256-0046 (Print)
© Unisa Press 2018

result of numerous reports about rights violations submitted to regional and international forums by critics of Mugabe and ZANU-PF. In response, the Mugabe regime generated its own counter-discourses to the accusations of abuse of power.

No systematic studies have been conducted on how the materials produced and disseminated by the pro-ZANU-PF sector or their opposition have been received and used in different contexts. Indeed, the material disseminated at international forums where decisions to indict Zimbabwe for one transgression or another were expected had a bearing on how dignitaries and diplomats understood and treated this southern African country. This has been the case for political spaces such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) special forums that have had to deal with Zimbabwe. However, the continuous contestation of and lack of closure to the Zimbabwe crisis shows that unanimity was never reached.

This article utilises reception theory in an attempt to understand the various facets and possible readings of the so-called Zimbabwean crisis. Reception theory caters for dominant, negotiated, oppositional/radical, and aberrant decoding (Hall 1993; Morley 1992). Following Stuart Hall and David Morley, dominant decoding occurs when the preferred meaning from “primary definers” of texts is taken literally, as initially intended by its producers. A negotiated reading involves various possibilities of decoding dependent on the experiential circumstances and preoccupations of the receivers of the message. An oppositional reading turns the preferred meaning on its head and disputes the legitimacy and veracity of the message. Lastly, an aberrant reading possibly entails some pathological, psychotic, or idiosyncratic decoding by the reader.

Besides textual analysis, ethnographic studies of audiences of media material on the Zimbabwean crisis might reveal the political and cultural dynamics informing people’s reading and use of such material. For instance, what type of black Zimbabwean—both at home and in the diaspora—is likely to accept the adverse reports by critics of ZANU-PF and Mugabe as “truth”? When Africans on the continent viewed Mugabe as a hero, were they employing oppositional readings to the vilification of African leaders by the dominant Western media? What are the cultural reasons informing their perceptions and interpretations? Were all white people in the world horrified by Mugabe, or were there others who understood the nature of the Zimbabwean matter differently and empathised with him? These are some of the questions informing this article.

The writing of this paper took place during a period of fluidity in Zimbabwe, after a new regime, led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, took over from Mugabe following a military intervention in November 2017. Some issues discussed as belonging to the Mugabe era may persist during Mnangagwa’s reign, while others may have been transformed or be in the process of changing. The scope of this article therefore entails the Zimbabwean crisis as experienced during Mugabe’s rule.

What Is the “Zimbabwean Crisis”?

The phrase “Zimbabwean crisis” has almost become a cliché and is often used unproblematically. The “crisis” is in fact an amalgamation of several crises—political, economic, social, and cultural—whose root cause remains debatable; it thus has different meanings (Freeman 2005).

Some scholars (Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart 2013; Mamdani 2008) believe that the crisis was caused and worsened by Western superpowers, as opposed to the radical and revolutionary redistributive agenda of ZANU-PF under Mugabe. At the core of this agenda were moves to reclaim land, often violently, from white people who unfairly owned large tracts of land, some of it acquired through colonialism. The agenda also included “indigenising” the economy by claiming shareholding in foreign-owned economic operations. Mugabe was largely the face of this revolution, often trading public hostilities with Western leaders in the international media. Another reading of the same crisis lays the blame squarely on ZANU-PF and Mugabe for mismanaging the economy, closing off opposing ideological spaces, and physically assaulting political opponents.

Regardless of the divergent views of the crisis, all these factors resulted in a great deal of suffering for Zimbabweans, which became more pronounced from around the year 2000. As a result, many Zimbabweans left the country to seek better fortunes elsewhere. Those who remained behind grew increasingly vocal against Mugabe or supported him for their own personal gain. The sociopolitical and economic ramifications of the crisis became crises in themselves, particularly in popular discourses.

This article complements scholarship on the crisis, albeit from a communications perspective, attempting to describe it as well as explain its various manifestations in texts and the readings thereof. There is a need to update the scholarship on this issue, due to the recent departure of Mugabe. This article constitutes such an attempt.

New information and communications technologies (ICTs) have formed one of several “windows” through which the Zimbabwean crisis has been viewed. This is largely because of the liberative potential of these technologies—particularly those driven by the internet, which offer citizens the chance to contribute to, and sometimes oppose, popular discourses. In Zimbabwe, these ICTs manifest as citizen-driven media residing in the cybersphere, where “ordinary” Zimbabweans interact.

One of the major subjects of such interactions is the issue of human rights, which ZANU-PF has been accused of violating on several occasions. There has been a proliferation of national and international human rights monitoring groups focusing on Zimbabwe, and these have documented and published different types of alleged government violations. Furthermore, advances in ICTs have resulted in rapid and nearly instantaneous international reporting on such issues.

In response, the Zimbabwean government employed a repertoire of official responses, including official denials of accusations, turning a defensive position into an attack on the critic, or partially acknowledging criticism and promising redress. The Zimbabwean government also used state-controlled media and sympathetic pan-African media outlets, such as the London-based *New African* magazine and the Namibian-based *Southern Times*, to rebut criticism and provide an alternative empathetic, sober, and rational self-representation, which Terrence Ranger (2005) has termed “patriotic journalism”. Supporters and sympathisers of ZANU-PF believed there was an engineered bias in the coverage of Zimbabwe by the Western media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and that Mugabe and his liberation movement were relentlessly demonised for political reasons (Ankomah 2008).

Zimbabwe’s denial of human rights abuses has often been desperate—especially where visual evidence was presented—although not always unfounded. Officials have accused both professional and citizen journalists and human rights organisations of slanting their reports, selecting images to fit an already predicted scenario, or—more dramatically—staging incidents in collusion with the alleged victims. Denial can be implied through attacking the reliability, objectivity, and credibility of the informant of a rights abuse. Writing about regimes criticised for atrocities in general, Stanley Cohen (1996) notes that “victims” can sometimes be discredited as liars with a vested political interest in embarrassing the government. Similarly, witnesses can sometimes be dismissed as untrustworthy or drawn from the political opposition. Journalists and human rights organisations have been criticised as being selective, biased, and working to a hidden political agenda, or else naive, gullible, and easily manipulated. According to this argument, Britain—or any other colonial or imperial power—is presented as having no moral authority to judge a liberation movement that fought against racism.

Notwithstanding the plausibility of the accusations or rebuttals, it is important to understand the construction of all types of reports and images that purport to represent the Zimbabwean situation. Much as the historical context within which representative texts circulate informs their composition, it is still pertinent to analyse the basic formalist composition of such texts.

Cultural Studies, Textual Analysis, and the Problem of Representation

We prefer to use here the rather eclectic cultural studies approaches, which borrow from literary studies, critical political economy, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis, to suggest how texts constructed by civil society organisations (CSOs), NGOs, and the media can be critiqued. Texts are best understood within their sociohistorical contexts (the political economy), and the same texts affirm, are complicit, or reject positions of particular interest groups.

In Zimbabwe it is not strange, therefore, that the fate of farm workers displaced from land formerly owned by white people under the fast-track land reform programme, or the extensive displacement under Operation Murambatsvina of thousands of urban poor people who resided in informal settlements, attracted particular attention from pro-rights groups and the media. It would be impossible to ignore the framing and ideological inflections in these stories.

Texts are historically embedded; that is, they are contextual. They are framed ideologically—implicitly or explicitly, wittingly or unwittingly. Their signs and codes have ideological inflections and discursive implications. Texts are contextual sites of contestation supporting, confirming, or damning particular interest groups. This is also true of media constructions of the Zimbabwean crisis. The political economy of the media—that is, media ownership and control—influences the production or reproduction and circulation of preferred images and meanings in specific texts by particular interest groups. In most cases, the media serve the powerful societal interests that finance and control them (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

In semiotic terms, representation entails the “imagic” (image) multifarious doubles of the original object, event, or phenomenon. Representation reflects, parodies, imitates, mimics, copies, and simulates “the thing”; thus there is a notion of “the thing and its doubles” (Amin 2011, 148–9; Baudrillard 1988). All forms and genres of representation are always incomplete and inadequate (Lucy 2001). Technologies of representation such as orature, radio, film, video and TV, the internet, and print media (including panoramic novels such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*) have limited technical capacities, and hence cannot capture or represent the thing in its entirety or fullness. There is a perpetual conflict of identity between the referent (the thing) and its doubles; representation in any technology, media, or genre woefully tries to capture, contain, tame, and control (store formally) that which it can never be. This is the paradox of representation.

The media are caught up in this very conundrum, since media and mediation entail representation, implying standing for *something*. That something will always taunt its imitative doubles. Images of all sorts—ranging from the oral story, the iconic film or photograph, and so forth—can only stand for, be like, or seem, but *never* be “the thing”, in spite of the best of all formalist intentions, worst machinations, or manipulation. The lack of presence in time and space is a gap that a reproduction or an imitation can never close between itself and the original—that which it represents—as Walter Benjamin (1936) observed in his classical text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Representations hence cannot escape the biases, myopia, bigotry, prejudices, fantasies, and romances that underpin them, merely because they are imaginative and creative. Audiences are often bewildered by the imagic nature of especially film and television, which use complex visual and aural iconic signs which possess, in Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminology, certain properties of the thing that is being represented (see Hall 1993). What needs to be understood is that “visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes” (Hall 1993, 511), but

it of course cannot be the thing (referent or concept) it signifies. As Hall explains, “The dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite” (in Procter 2004, 59).

Here we bring doubt to the nature and constitution of all manner of texts, whatever their context, and even more so in the Zimbabwean crisis. Doubt makes creators, chroniclers, and interpreters pause with uncertainty before they make hasty decisions or judgements. Doubt conscious and purposive hesitation makes researchers and creators realise that perhaps honesty and sincerity are the only normative bedrock upon which expression can rest; otherwise there is perpetual distrust of intention. This is particularly pressing when representation attempts to express situations involving individuals or groups caught up in sociopolitical and historical contestation and conflict.

The mass media and CSOs have a moral responsibility to reassure the world that all mediated messages or texts are designed to inspire hope, humanism, and social stability. The images they produce and exhibit must be justifiable based on the best values and principles of our basic humanity, such as solidarity, egalitarianism, and respect for human dignity. The materiality of lived life also means that, much as we live in a highly mediated world, there remains a “concrete” reality that is contextual. The mediated reality will only be an inevitable part of the signifying practices pertaining to the “material”/objective reality. Social and political actors, place, time, and historical context (the spatiotemporal) thus become part of the material that representation uses in its signifying practices in order to make meaning. It is worth noting that representations cannot live without audiences, without the act of “decipherment”, as Roland Barthes has termed it (Branigan 2006, 2). Once created, an image becomes many possible images, born out of the diversity of interpretations of its audience communities. This contentious relationship between the origin of texts and their destination is one worth pursuing in the framing of the Zimbabwean crisis.

Representations of the Zimbabwean crisis can feature dramatic twists, and there has been a proliferation of images of suffering, pain, sorrow, destruction, and injustice—often blamed on a corrupt and uncaring central authority. This was evident in Zimbabwe given the spread of images of suffering associated with, for example, Operation Gukuruhundi and Operation Murambatsvina, the inhuman conditions of Zimbabwean prisons, as well as political violence associated with the 2008 re-run election. In most of these cases, CSOs, which Antonio Gramsci (1971) contrasts with political society, made their submissions and representations accordingly: in support of, critical of, or opposed to the system. Theoretically, these voluntary associations, including the mass media, express interests but do not aspire to take over the state machinery in their own right.

In modern states, Zimbabwe included, the media in their representative capacity have claimed the status of “the Fourth estate of the realm”, monitoring and censoring whenever the in-built checks and balances of the executive, legislature, and judiciary are found wanting (Keane 1991). The media ideally provide spaces for public discussion and debate, monitoring the potentially over-grasping tendencies of the state and market

systems. However, CSOs, the media, and NGOs are sites of contestation in themselves and in relation to the state and political and business elites. The media can be infiltrated and used by these powerful forces, and instead of being watchdogs they are then pampered into lapdogs. For example, some Zimbabwean media were infiltrated by the country's Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) in a bid to control public opinion about the government (see Ureke 2016).

All the same, the media are discursive sites commenting on governance, justice, and regime legitimacy, and media performance must therefore always be reviewed with reflexivity, taking cognisance of the associated power dynamics that influence the construction and framing of media texts. Within the Zimbabwean context, what is published in CSO and NGO reports and in the local and international media (of diverse ownership and control) is, therefore, worthy of such critical analysis.

Ideology, Propaganda and the Representation of Zimbabwe's Conflict

The battle to win the hearts and minds of people is fought vigorously, often ruthlessly, in the local and international media and debate forums (Chan 2010; Mhiripiri 2008). Ideology explains how people make sense of their lives by internalising particular repeated images of the worldview held by those in power in a given locale. Here, the mass media operate as crucial agents in the construction of a reality which appears true and natural.

In Zimbabwe, the ideology of the liberation movement legitimised leadership by people with histories in the anti-colonial liberation movement. Until the late 2000s, huge disparate groups believed that personalities with *Chimurenga* (liberation war) credentials should “naturally” rule and dictate the dominant narratives of the nation-state. This hegemonic control, however, was shaken by a number of factors, amongst them the failure to deliver on promises to improve the general standards of living of the majority, due to a poorly implemented Economic Structural Adjustment Programme that left workers at the mercy of capital. The willingness of people to voluntarily subordinate themselves to rule by liberation movement “elites” waned, as was shown through the protest vote for the opposition since 2000.

According to Keyan Tomaselli, “where ideology services the maintenance and cohesion of an existing hegemony, propaganda operates when hegemony breaks down. Propaganda occurs in instances when the semantic grid is no longer regarded as sufficient to hold together a disintegrating social formation” (1992, 20). Propaganda is employed in an attempt to persuade large audience collectives using an obvious top-down mechanistic method. The term “propaganda” can be applied to represent truth or outright lies presented in a particular argument, and it carries both positive and negative connotations. Propaganda may involve lying, strategic selectivity, withholding

of information, affective appeals to desire, exaggeration, and sometimes the use of rhetoric (Corner 2007).

In the Zimbabwean context, dominant meanings constantly propagated and legitimated in the media are constructed through the semantic engineering of terms, words, and images which favour definitions and interpretations issuing either from the ZANU-PF quarter or their local and international detractors. The fast-track land reform programme, for example, was labelled by ZANU-PF as the “Third *Chimurenga*”, thus giving it a liberative spin, yet those opposed to it called it “*jambanja*” (chaos). Likewise, the urban displacements, dubbed Operation Murambatsvina, were framed in government circles as an exercise of restoring infrastructural order in urban centres, but presented in CSO circles as a way of punishing the urban electorate, who traditionally voted against ZANU-PF. Generally, *Chimurenga* (war) history and its postcolonial “protectors” are portrayed by the pro-government media as the only “natural” and legitimate/legitimising discourses acceptable to genuine Zimbabwean patriots. Critics, on the other hand, prefer to focus on the liberation movement’s bad governance, breach of human rights, corruption, and general culture of impunity.

Dominant ideas transmitted through the media, in conjunction with other social institutions, may shape the perceptions of audiences. In the construction of media reality, certain discursive organisation techniques are employed by the establishment and its supporting institutions. Amongst these are restriction, shielding, and repetition.

Restriction determines who may speak, on what subject, to what extent, and when. A reporter from the government-controlled Zimpapers stable, which owns *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, and *The Chronicle*, can be cautioned for writing favourably about the opposition (the MDC) or the British government, and the story will be “spiked”. This is part of an intricate control regime theorised by media sociologists as social control in the newsroom (Breed 1955; Schudson 1989). The spiking of stories is among several proprietor-driven controls that manifest in the form of editorial policies and organisational culture. Such systematic pressures ensure conformity-mindedness on the part of journalists, and automatically direct their sourcing and framing of news.

Shielding entails vigilance against potentially subversive points of view. Through authorisation, selected opinion leaders define preferred agendas. Editors and journalists convey the preferred ideas of primary definers, who are top politicians and intellectuals. The definers are selected by the media because they express support for a specific agenda. For example, in the state-affiliated media, Tafataona Mahoso, Jonathan Moyo, and others became media personalities whose opinions were preferred over those with opposing arguments. Oppositional personalities were belittled and their arguments framed in such a way as to ridicule their intelligence.

Repetition is used until political assertions become self-perpetuating and obvious truths. The mainstream media set the agenda for public discourse, making strategic restrictions (as pointed out above), shielding preferred viewpoints, and authorising opinion-makers,

and journalists eventually reproduce the preferred ideas somewhat unconsciously and mechanically. Through the repetition of chastising or self-gratifying words, such as “puppets”, “agents of imperialism”, “hero”, “liberators”, “thugs”, “dictators”, and so forth, the media reproduce the interests of a dominant section of the Zimbabwean society. It is necessary to understand the vocabulary to critique the various representations and discourses. Terms are not innocuous, but promote struggles for social justice or entail an adherence to the fundamental requirements of the dominant (capitalist) structures of reproduction (Amin 2011, 172).

The public media under ZANU-PF and state control have historicised conflict and struggle in Zimbabwe, lambasting colonialism and its ugly vestiges in the postcolony. However, the media also skirt around and avoid assigning responsibility for the post-independence nationalist government’s failures, preferring to blame powerful external neo-colonial forces and their local stooges. A streak of self-righteousness is apparent in the arguments and propaganda war. The critical private media commit the inverse sin, namely that of obsessing over the postcolony’s failures and structural weaknesses, including allegations of corruption and disrespect for human rights, thereby disregarding the colonial roots of Zimbabwe’s problems. The failure to embrace a critical pan-African discourse vigilant against the pernicious influences of neo-colonial institutions and superpowers results in an apparent ideological paralysis of the privately owned or so-called independent media.

Types of Texts and Representations of the Zimbabwean Crisis

Different types of texts have been produced and/or reproduced by different interest groups to communicate versions of the postcolonial Zimbabwean story. Their reception and interpretation have been equally varied and unpredictable. What needs to be outlined here are the textual representations in their generic forms that have been employed to narrate the Zimbabwean story. These roughly include the following:

1. Literary texts rely on the printed word, and they include the press (newspapers and press statements), fictional literature, memoirs and biographies, autobiographies, travel journals, historical narratives, and human rights reports.
2. Visual texts rely heavily on the iconic signs that approximately resemble the thing they stand for. These include films, video, and “cellphilms” of both fictional and documentary nature, billboards, television broadcasts and news, social media content, photographs, graffiti, drawings, and cartoons.
3. Oral texts include orature, radio broadcasts, podcasts, and public addresses such as political rallies and church sermons.

4. Self-exhibition as text includes cultural performances by cultural workers involved in cultural tourism, and public protests and demonstrations as spectacles. Other media often report on self-exhibitions, and in Zimbabwe's case demonstrations by pro- or anti-government groups are tolerated, praised and extolled, condemned, and so forth, depending on the political sympathies and ideological leanings of the media covering the event.

There is an overlap in the characteristics and uses of ICTs for the production and dissemination of these different types of texts. For example, print or literary texts can be accessed through sight or in Braille. Print can be on paper; alternatively it can be accessed on the internet or transposed on television.

Indeed, visuality is a key aspect of contemporary society. It can be argued that culture itself is associated with vision and perception—what we see and hear about ourselves and about other people. Norman Denzin (2001, 23) has dubbed contemporary human society “a spectacle society, (a) cinematic society” which knows and actualises itself through the reflective gaze of cinematic and other visual and photographic apparatuses. Martin Jay (1993) has similarly labelled modern society an ocularcentric one, where visuality dominates. As a result, knowing is equated to seeing, as evidenced by phrases such as “You see what I mean” and the tendency to get people’s “views” on a subject. The same spectacle society is also an “interview society”, where stories are compiled and constructed based on information drawn from interviews, which objectivise and substantiate the story. “Reliable” sources and informants—victims and perpetrators alike—are interviewed to justify the slant of the narrative, and make the news story, documentary, or ethnographic narrative “evidential” and a representation of actuality.

Contestations over the contemporary Zimbabwean story have resulted in the proliferation of all the abovementioned types of texts. The polarisation of the local press in Zimbabwe is notable, with sections of the privately owned media being largely anti-ZANU-PF and pro-MDC, and government-controlled newspapers being pro-ZANU-PF. Most international newspapers, especially those from the UK, the USA, and the EU have taken a stance against ZANU-PF and the Zimbabwean government, with the notable exception of the London-based pan-Africanist *New African* magazine.

Biographies on the most significant Zimbabwean politicians in the last decade—former president Robert Mugabe and his rival Morgan Tsvangirai—have been published, for example *Dinner with Mugabe* (Holland 2008) and *The Fear: The Last Days of Robert Mugabe* (Godwin 2010). *Dinner with Mugabe* insinuates that Robert Mugabe suffers from pathological problems to partly explain why Zimbabwe became a “failed rogue state”, while *The Fear* chronicles in graphic detail how ZANU-PF’s repressive apparatus unleashed terror on hapless civilians in the run-up to the 2008 election.

Mugabe’s speeches to justify the land reform programme have been published as *Inside the Third Chimurenga* (Mugabe 2001) and copious space is allocated to him in government-controlled newspapers and on the radio stations and television channels

of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). This is done to counteract the perceived detraction and vilification originating from critical quarters. Although there is plurality in press representation, the monopoly in television broadcasting is glaring, as is the dominance of ZANU-PF-related enterprises in radio broadcasting.

The “new” phenomenon of exile radio broadcasts—which ZANU-PF sympathisers predictably denounce as “pirate” radio—offer an alternative discursive space that extols respect for civil and political rights. To date, the “pirate” stations generally argue that they have been forced to operate from exile by an intolerant regime averse to broadcasting pluralism (Batist 2010).

After the dissolution in 2013 of the coalition government of ZANU-PF and the MDC (the government of national unity, or GNU), the hegemonic use of television and radio broadcasting by ZANU-PF continued. Coverage on television after 2000 has tended to support the land reform programme and anti-colonial liberation war personalities. *Chimurenga* narratives are used to legitimise the liberation movement leadership. Until his removal from office in 2017, there was obvious adoration and veneration of Mugabe and a relentless repetition of his speeches and images of him, which were presented as the epitome of nationalism. The national television station, ZBCTV, also tried to sell the “success” stories of Zimbabwe’s “new farmers” who benefited from the land reform programme. Similarly, it amplified the success stories of black entrepreneurs who benefited from the government’s economic indigenisation policies and uncritically reported on the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET), a post-GNU economic blueprint meant to improve the country’s economic fortunes. In contrast, the political opposition continue to be vilified and discredited as agents of imperialism, and they rarely get air time on television.

Social activists try to revisit areas of abuse and dramatise them so that the culture of impunity is not left to grow unfettered. The sensitive issue of the massacres in Matabeleland and the Midlands during the early 1980s often receives attention. In March 2010, the artist Owen Maseko’s Gukurahundi art exhibition started running at the National Gallery. Maseko and Vhoti Thebe, the acting director of the gallery, were arrested and the gallery section was cordoned off as a crime scene (Pambazuka News 2010). While such public visual displays are easy prey for state censorship, it is proving much more difficult to act against photo galleries placed online by exiled Zimbabweans and others in the diaspora. Websites such as www.pambazuka.com and www.sokwanele.com remain alternative avenues for the circulation of images of violence and dissent. Surprisingly, cartoons that ridiculed Mugabe and ZANU-PF were published without censure in the private press.

Also of note are documentary films. In 2003 Zimbabwean filmmaker Michael Raeburn secretly made a personal documentary—*Zimbabwe Countdown*—criticising Mugabe and ZANU-PF, before escaping into exile. This video coincided with the MDC’s unsuccessful “Final Push” campaigns, which were expected to remove Mugabe through

popular street demonstrations (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo 2014). In the same bracket as Raeburn's production is *Panorama: Secrets of the Camps* by Hillary Anderson (2004). Anderson's fabricated production, televised on BBC in February 2004, documented alleged human rights violations taking place in ZANU-PF youth camps. The production was largely discredited, as the accents of the "confessing" youths are South African with Afrikaans inflections, ZANU-PF slogans are chanted discordantly and untypically, and Table Mountain and Table Bay (non-Zimbabwean geological features) are visible in the background in part of the mise en scène. Another documentary related to these is Lucy Bailey and Andrew Thompson's (2009) *Mugabe and the White African*, a critique of Zimbabwe's land reform programme developed around the struggles of the Campbell family in Chegutu.

CSOs critical of the government have written damning reports and provided filmic and photographic evidence to represent allegations of state or paramilitary violence perpetrated against defenceless civilians. Pro-government groups rebut these allegations and, equally, provide evidence of violence instigated by forces in the political opposition, or evidence of meddling by the USA, UK, or EU in the internal affairs of Zimbabwe.

Government critics post cellfilms in the tradition of investigative journalism on social media platforms such as YouTube and Sokwanele. At one point, there was a particularly interesting documentary cellfilm circulating among Zimbabwean cellphone users depicting the training of the Zimbabwe Republic Police Force, and the violence and assaults they endure in the process (Youtube 2009). The video insinuated that this training prepares the forces to brutalise civilians in a similar fashion. This cellfilm might best be another example of the emergent Fifth Estate or alternative media, which we will discuss below. Another cellfilm was used to expose the starvation, disease, and abuse experienced by Zimbabwean prisoners. It was placed on YouTube in an investigative piece entitled "Undercover in Zimbabwe Prison" (Journeyman Pictures 2008).

Social media, particularly platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook, have also been fertile grounds for ZANU-PF criticism. Classified information, such as details of Cabinet and ZANU-PF politburo meetings, often finds its way onto these platforms, although observers are quick to dismiss these media on grounds of unreliability. Dumisani Moyo (2009) has noted that these alternative means of communication are a necessary "parallel market of information" where the official position is always warped or not present at all. Wendy Willems (2008; 2010) has also written detailed analyses of how comics are used to mock the Zimbabwean state under those circumstances.

Groups that deal with human rights issues often fabricate or exaggerate cases of human rights abuses by the government. In many instances, they latch on to falsified stories alleging human rights abuses. A case in point was in 2002, when journalist Basildon Peta wrote a false story claiming that he had been arrested and abused by the state. The story was picked up by leading international media, but when it turned out to be false, Peta fled into exile (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo 2014). Another closely related case

was that of Baba Jukwa, an anonymous Facebook character who emerged prior to the 2013 general elections and “exposed” ZANU-PF secrets, including assassination plots. The character grew to be very popular and became a subject of discussion on local and international media, including CNN and eNCA (Chibwe and Ureke 2016). The Baba Jukwa case shows that citizen journalism is thriving. On the one hand this is considered as expanding freedom of expression, while on the other hand it constitutes a breach of journalistic ethics and professionalism.

Self-exhibitions have been numerous in and outside Zimbabwe. Anti-Mugabe and anti-ZANU-PF demonstrations are a common feature in South Africa and in the UK. In the UK there is a performance called the Zimbabwe Vigil, usually held in the front yard of the Zimbabwean embassy. In Zimbabwe, pro-ZANU-PF groups demonstrate—mainly in the streets of Harare—against Western governments and internationally imposed sanctions, amongst other things. Groups critical of the regime are often denied the right to demonstrate in city streets through the Public Order and Security Act, which requires police licensing for public gatherings. Of interest is the case of journalist-cum-political-activist Itai Dzamara, who staged one-man demonstrations against the ZANU-PF regime. He went missing, reportedly because he was abducted by unknown assailants.

The Fifth Estate and the Contradictions of Representation

The emergence of social media and their centrality to contemporary media discourses have given rise to the term “Fifth Estate”, which is “that emergent space where ordinary people who are not necessarily media professionals nor are they working for specific media institutions publish their stories” (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo 2014, 1284). Nhamo Mhiripiri and Bruce Mutsvairo argue that the Fifth Estate is de-institutionalised, de-capitalised, and de-professionalised. It is part of what scholars have termed “alternative media” (Atton 2002). Social media ensure a multidimensional “many-to-many” communication. These platforms offer vibrant debate and discussion through blogging and social networking. However, as seen in the Zimbabwean scenario, communication on these platforms can also degenerate into trivialities and irresponsible speech, justifying the argument that the internet gives too much power to too many—and, at times, dangerous—people (Dean 2003; Hindman 2008).

The Baba Jukwa case remains one of the most topical among discussions of the uses and abuses of social media in Zimbabwe. The matter saw *Sunday Mail* editor Edmund Kudzai, who was suspected to be behind the Baba Jukwa character, arrested and tried for insurgency, banditry, sabotage or terrorism, and undermining the authority of the president (Chibwe and Ureke 2016). The case shows how central social media can be in the political domain—hence the term “Fifth Estate”. It also shows that social media participants can take advantage of the anonymity afforded on several platforms to post immoral and abusive virtual graffiti, akin to what Achille Mbembe (2001) calls “the aesthetics of vulgarity”.

The older generation of Zimbabwean politicians are sceptical of social media. As a result, they either avoid these platforms outright or criticise their content. Former information minister Jonathan Moyo, however, broke with this tradition and opened Twitter and Facebook accounts in 2014, stating: “The bottom line that you can ignore to your own peril ... is that social media have become so ubiquitous and so pervasive that it is no longer possible to be relevant in any human endeavour without using them. ... Those who don’t use social media in one way or another and those who want to ban their use are doomed” (*The Herald* 2015). Interestingly, Didymus Mutasa, a ZANU-PF stalwart who was once expelled from the party, labelled Moyo a sell-out for embracing social media.

In 2011, the then acting foreign affairs minister, Hebert Murerwa (ZANU-PF), observed that social media networks needed to be controlled because of their influence on the youth (see Chikwanha 2011). As if to confirm such fears, a Zimbabwean social media activist, Vikas Mavhunga, was arrested over a message he posted on the then prime minister Morgan Tsvangirai’s Facebook wall, urging the prime minister to emulate the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights offered legal assistance to Mavhunga (Chikwanha 2011). Relatively younger politicians across the political divide are using social media networking, and prominent names that are found on Facebook include the late MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC), former Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Mutambara (MDC), former Minister Welshman Ncube (MDC), and former ministers Saviour Kasukuwere, Jonathan Moyo, and Walter Mzembe (ZANU-PF).

Indeed, the role of the Fifth Estate in the toppling of Mugabe cannot be underplayed. Social media were used to mobilise popular support for the military takeover. Activist groups such as Tajamuka and #ThisFlag actively canvassed support for the military operation. As people marched on the streets of Harare against Robert Mugabe, social media feeds were continuously celebrating the heroics of the military and those civilians who were taking part in the march. In the aftermath of the removal of Mugabe from power, new modes of political communication using modern ICTs, political marketing by politicians, and the demographic information of their target “audiences” are potential areas of critical research.

References

- Amin, S. 2011. *Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?* Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Ankomah, B. 2008. “Reporting Africa.” *New African* 474: 8–14.
- Atton, C. 2002. *Alternative Media*. London: Sage.
- Batist, D. 2010. “SW Radio Africa and the Challenges of Operating a Zimbabwean Exile Radio Station in London.” *Journal of African Media Studies* 2 (2): 155–71. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.2.2.155_1.

- Baudrillard, J. 1988. "Simulacra and Simulations." In *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, edited by M. Poster, 166–84. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Benjamin, W. 1936. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin.
- Branigan, E. 2006. *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Breed, W. 1955. "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis." In *Approaches to Media: A Reader*, edited by O. Boyd Barret and C. Newbold, 277–82. London: Arnold. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2573002>
- Chan, S. 2010. *Citizen of Zimbabwe: Conversations with Morgan Tsvangirai*, 2nd ed. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Chibwe, A., and O. Ureke. 2016. "'Political Gladiators' on Facebook in Zimbabwe: A Discursive Analysis of Intra-ZANU-PF Cyber Wars; Baba Jukwa versus Amai Jukwa." *Media Culture and Society* 38 (8): 1–14.
- Chikwanha, T. 2011. "Twitter, Facebook Powerful Revolutionary Weapons." *Daily News*, June 6, 2011, 19.
- Cohen, S. 1996. "Government Responses to Human Rights Reports: Claims, Denials, and Counterclaims." *Human Rights Quarterly* 18 (3): 517–43. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.1996.0028>.
- Corner, J. 2007. "Mediated Politics, Promotional Culture and the Idea of 'Propaganda'." *Media, Culture and Society* 29 (4): 669–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443707078428>.
- Dean, J. 2003. *Why Is the Net not a Public Sphere?* London: Blackwell.
- Denzin, N. 2001. "The Reflexive Interview and a Performative Social Science." *Qualitative Research* 1 (1): 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100102>.
- Freeman, L. 2005. "Contradictory Constructions of the Crisis in Zimbabwe." *Historia* 50 (2): 287–310.
- Godwin, P. 2010. *The Fear: The Last Days of Robert Mugabe*. Oxford: Picador.
- Gramsci, A. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith. New York: International.
- Hall, S. 1993. "Encoding, Decoding." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by S. During, 507–17. London: Routledge.
- Hanlon, J., J. Manjengwa, and T. Smart. 2013. *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land*. Sterling: Kumarian Press.
- The Herald*. 2015. "Prof Moyo Gets Started on Twitter, Facebook." February 10, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2018. <https://www.herald.co.zw/prof-moyo-gets-started-on-twitter-facebook/>.
- Herman, E., and N. Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hindman, M. 2008. "What is the Online Public Sphere Good For?" In *The Hyperlinked Society*, edited by J. Turow and L. Tsui, 268–88. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

- Holland, H. 2008. *Dinner with Mugabe: The Untold Story of a Freedom Fighter Who Became a Tyrant*. Johannesburg: Penguin.
- Jay, M. 1993. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Keane, J. 1991. *The Media and Democracy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lucy, N. 2001. *Beyond Semiotics: Text, Culture and Technology*. London: Continuum.
- Mamdani, M. 2008. "Lessons of Zimbabwe." *London Review of Books* 30 (23): 17–21. Accessed 20 February 20, 2018. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n23/mahmood-mamdani/lessons-of-zimbabwe>.
- Mbembe, A. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mhiripiri, N. 2008. "Zimbabwe Government's Responses to Criticism of Operation Murambatswina/ Operation Restore Order." In *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatswina*, edited by M. Vambe, 146–55. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Mhiripiri, N. A. and B. Mutsvairo. 2014. "Social Media, ICTs and the Challenges Facing the Zimbabwe Democratic Process." In *Crisis Management: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications*, edited by Information Resources Management Association, 1281–301. Hershey: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-4707-7.ch065>.
- Morley, D. 1992. *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Moyo, D. 2009. "Citizen Journalism and the Parallel Market of Information in Zimbabwe's 2008 Election." *Journalism Studies* 10 (4): 551–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700902797291>.
- Mugabe, R. 2001. *Inside the Third Chimurenga*. Harare: Department of Information and Publicity – Office of the President & Cabinet.
- Pambazuka News. 2010. "The Truth Shall Set You Free." June 17, 2010. Accessed August 13, 2010. <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/books/65249>.
- Procter, J. 2004. *Stuart Hall*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496985>.
- Ranger, T. O. 2005. "The Rise of Patriotic Journalism in Zimbabwe and Its Possible Implications." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (Special Issue) October: 8–17.
- Schudson, 1989. "The Sociology of News Production." *Media, Culture and Society* 11 (3): 263–82.
- Tomaselli, K. 1992. "Communication or Propaganda: What's the Difference?" *Innovation* 4: 17–23.
- Ureke, O. 2016. "State Interference, Para-politics and Editorial Control: The Political Economy of 'Mirrorgate' in Zimbabwe." *Journal of African Media Studies* 8 (1): 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.8.1.17_1

Willems, W. 2008. "Mocking the State: Comic Strips in the Zimbabwean Press." In *Dilemmas of Development: Conflicts of Interest and Their Resolutions in Modernising Africa*, edited by J. Abbink and A. van Dokkum, 151–63. Leiden: African Studies Centre.

Willems, W. 2010. "Beyond Dramatic Revolution and Grand Rebellions: Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Zimbabwe Crisis." *Communicare* 29: 1–17.

Filmography

Anderson, H. 2004. *Panorama: Secrets of the Camps*. BBC One.

Bailey, L., and A. Thompson 2009. *Mugabe and the White African*. Youtube, uploaded September 27, 2017. Accessed December 6, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KpliA-oWAU>. 2:35:21.

Journeyman Pictures. 2008. "Undercover in Zimbabwe Prison." YouTube, uploaded July 5, 2008. Accessed June 13, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UrpeiPVOdk>. 11 min.

Raeburn, M. 2003. *Zimbabwe Countdown*. Filmmakers library. 55 min.

Youtube. 2009. "Violence a Part of Training Police Recruits in Zimbabwe." Uploaded June 2, 2009. Accessed June 13, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiXZfwto3D8>. 2:13 min.

Copyright of Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.