

SOUTH AFRICA'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS' NEOLIBERAL AGENDA IN POST-COLONIAL ZIMBABWE, 2000-2008

Introduction

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What we [the newspaper editors] reflect is a certain kind of elite consensus which is supportive of change in Zimbabwe, which is supportive of multi-party democracy and open governance, certainly, we express that¹.

Few events represent Zimbabwe's politics than the country's elections. Successive Zimbabwean elections from 2000-2008 have received maximum coverage by South African Weeklies. However, these elections were generally represented negatively, characterized by the absence of conditions that can guarantee their freeness and fairness. They were represented as fraudulent and full of malpractices, violence and intimidation which raised questions of misrepresentation and the consequences of such coverage. They also raised questions regarding the reality of elections in Zimbabwe vis-à-vis how they were covered. Conclusively, Zimbabwe was presumed to be undergoing a socio-economic and political crisis. But what would have compelled the three weekly South African newspapers to misrepresent elections in Zimbabwe?

The main reason the weekly newspapers represented Zimbabwean elections sensationally is because of spillover-effects fears of the crises. Generally, the fear was that the nature in which land questions were politicized in Zimbabwe for electoral mileage would precipitate a spillover effect of the crises into South Africa and work against the rule of law, human rights and democracy presumed to have been well grounded in post-apartheid South Africa, as one of the editors explained in the beginning of this

1 Interview Peter Fabricious. Scusi restaurant, Parkview, Johannesburg, 07 April 2010.

introduction. The main objective of this paper is to show how the South African press leaned towards a certain view of reporting the electoral crisis in Zimbabwe motivated by its own historical trajectory and desire to change Zimbabwe through “Mugabe Must Go” (featuring prominently as a news headline) discourses out of fears of a spill-over effect, and inspired by neo-liberal discourses of human rights and democracy.

South Africa’s Media Environment

Even though South African media is diverse, the ones examined in this paper fall under what would be categorized as Western media which often typically covers Africa superficially based on stereotypes about the continent. Good examples of how Western media covers Africa can be found in CNN’s “Hot bed of Terror” headline in reference to former US President’s, Barrack Obama, visit to Kenya amidst terror threats, Fox News’ headline “Pope Visits War-torn- Africa” in reference to Pope Francis’ first African tour that begun with a three day visit of Kenya² and US president Donald Trump’s “Shithole” remarks in reference to African countries that received global media attention. However, despite this typical manner of how Africa is covered by the Western media, careful analysis reveals that the South African Weeklies reported elections as they did based on genuine negative events that were unfolding in Zimbabwe as many scholars in the crises have also established. Therefore, accusations of negative portrayal of Africa should be contextualized because such coverage sometimes emanate from genuine incidences unfolding in African countries such as Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, something deeper drove the South African press’ modus operandi – Western ideologies of journalism. The latter ensured that the newspapers relied on selective memory and history in establishing the reality about Zimbabwe’s electoral crises by virtue of the attendant sensationalism that usually accompanies commercial reporting. Ideologies of news production ensured South African newspapers reported in the same fashion as would any other global media like CNN and Fox news aforementioned.

This paper argues, elections in Zimbabwe as violently represented by the Weeklies, were covered in a generalized manner echoing the manner all elections in Africa are reported. The characterization of Zimbabwe’s elections as violent through selective memory and history consequently worked to champion neoliberal views by echoing Western unipolar values of human rights and democracy in disregard of counter-discourses regarding national patriotic history, liberation solidarity and anti neo-imperialism emanating from the ‘Left’ spectrum in the country’s political-economy.

2 B. KERROW, “The West in Unwittingly Breeding Terrorists Making the World Less Safe”, *The Standard Saturday*, Nov 28, (2015), pp. 13.

The paper further argues, unlike what emerges from the Weeklies representation, that in fact, electoral crises are rooted in the country's liberation struggle anchored on national patriotic history, liberation solidarity and anti neo-imperialism yet this is an untold narrative in the Weeklies' representation. The untold narrative emerged in light of the post-Lancaster House democratic experiment in Zimbabwe characterized by an overburdened black majority regime. Liberation patriots' frustrated efforts of establishing a black social republic inspired by classical Marxism led to suspicious politics going forward where any form of opposition by moderates, who tried to inject liberal views into ZANU-PF's liberation politics, was not well received marking the beginning of neo-imperialism discourses. The latter was used to justify and mask covert government electoral malpractices such as 'sponsored' land invasions to maintain the status quo.

The paper uses critical political-economy theories of the media, theories of news production in the context of cultural studies to examine how elections were misrepresented by the Weeklies. While critical political-economy theories of the media focused on the political and economic environment in which the press in South Africa operates, theories of news productions deals with ideological questions of news values and what constitutes news. Both qualitative and quantitative content analyses, including ideological analysis, are utilized to inspect how Zimbabwean elections were represented through a superficial narrative³ that relied on selective memory and history in establishing the reality about the electoral crisis. The methodological approach examined how electoral politics is used as the entry point for a struggle between two dominant narratives; those of liberation solidarity arguing for the preservation of the status quo in Zimbabwean politics vis-à-vis those of regime change embroiled in the "Mugabe must go" discourse⁴. Findings point out the desire by the Weeklies to change Zimbabwe out of fears of spill-over effects of the "triple crisis" (election, land and immigration) into South Africa. Such criticisms were meant to set agenda for fundamental institutional reforms that would ensure free and fair elections going forward in order to create better opportunities at home for Zimbabweans "jumping" the border into South Africa. The weekly newspapers therefore raised a red flag regarding electoral reforms and championed neo-liberal ideals of human rights and democracy.

3 W. WILLEMS, "Remnants of an Empire: British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, (2005), pp. 91-108.

4 F. OGENGA, "Political Economy of the Kenyan Media - Towards a Culture of Active Citizen Journalism", *Global Media Journal African Edition*, 4, 2, (2010), pp.

Covering Africa: Neo-liberal Journalism and African Reporting

The central thesis that the elections in Zimbabwe were superficially represented, as advanced in this paper, would necessarily lead this discussion to ideas about how Africa has been represented by the Western media generally⁵. There is a common form of media representation of Africa characterized by negative stereotypes⁶. But who is responsible for this negative portrayal of the continent and Zimbabwe for that matter? Are Zimbabweans to blame for the media images about their elections? Are there external forces responsible for events in Zimbabwe? One of the reasons why Africa is negatively represented is because of genuine negative events that happen in Africa. Secondly, Western journalists seem to lack accurate contextual knowledge of the unusual social relations in terms of history that have shaped structures of knowledge regarding Africa. Most of the ways in which Africa is understood in the world is a creation or invention of the West⁷. South African journalists have simply employed caricatured and bandwagon journalism that is based on mimicking Western journalistic practices. Such journalism is hardly in tune with the practical realities in the continent⁸.

Epistemological Dilemma in Media Studies

However, the dilemma facing African media scholars, as far as such negative representations of Africa are concerned, is an epistemological concern related to the nature of journalism and the ideologies that inform the practice. A good example is captured by the indicators of what constitutes news measured through news values such as time, objectivity, fairness, prominence, novelty, proximity and extensity which almost guarantee that journalists will work under pressure resulting to sensationalism, superficiality and ahistoricism. Time pressures, for example, ensure that journalist must have fresh angles on every story even if there are no any major developments. Political-economy questions related to ways of funding the media such as advertising, media ownership and sales equally lead to sensationalism and stereotypical reporting. If there is to be a genuine

5 V.Y. MUDIMBE, *The Idea of Africa*, 1994 (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); V.Y. MUDIMBE, *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988); NYAMNJOH, F. B. NYAMNJOH, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, London & New York, UNISA Press, 2005; M. ALLIMADI, "The Hearts of Darkness: How Whites Created the Racist Image of Africa", New York, Black Star Books, 2002.

6 P.J. FOURIE, and B. KARAM, "Representation: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation", in P.J. FOURIE (ed.), *Media Studies Volume One: Institutions, Theories and Issues*, Landsdowne, Juta, 2001, pp. 469-508; T. O'SULLIVAN, B. DITTON, & P. RAYNER, *Studying the Media: An Introduction*. 3rd ed, New York, Hodder, Arnold, 2003.

7 B. G. HAWK, *Africa's Media Image*, London, Praeger, 1992.

8 NYAMNJOH, F. B. NYAMNJOH, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, London & New York, UNISA Press, 2005.

journalistic transformation at least in Africa, then alternative approaches to ideologies of journalism that enable a more nuanced coverage of Africa should be formulated given that the current ones view African realities using Western fashioned lenses. These alternative approaches should be centered on the need to provide historical trajectories and background information of events unfolding in the continent to give them a nuanced perspective. Journalism in Africa should be contextually located and not treated as an attribute of another modern and civilized society as opposed to Africa as argued in the following assumption:

Because journalism has tended to be treated as an attribute of the 'modern' societies, it is only proper that African journalism and the societies it serves, are taught the principles and professional practices by those who know what it means to be civilized [modernized]...aspiring journalists must, like containers, be dewatered from the mud and dirt of culture as tradition and custom, and filled a fresh with the tested sparkles of culture as modernity and civilization⁹.

This paper, therefore, explores how selected South African media entities structures the production of knowledge about history, causality, perceptions and misperceptions, personality of leading actors, and dynamics of the political situation in Zimbabwe. The comparative textual analysis reveals a negative sensationalism of the political situation in Zimbabwe. The article further argues that the selected South African media bought into the regime change agenda of Western powers that called for electoral reforms in that country. The first step in the reforms suggested concerned unseating Mugabe who is perceived as the epicenter of Zimbabwe's political conflict and flawed elections – a perspective that sweeps a lot of intervening variables in the Zimbabwean situation under the carpet but raises critical issues in discussions on the way forward. Even when the press is expected to be the watchdog or the fourth estate, it should not serve this role by undermining cultural nuances and authenticity of other societies.

The Watchdog Role of the Media

One critical question this paper would like to pose is related to the Watchdog nature of any liberal press in any democracy. Did South African Weeklies play a critical watchdog role as expected considering the fact that the private media in Zimbabwe is suppressed and that the state controlled media is a mouthpiece of ZANU-PF¹⁰? It is critical to note that while the media in liberal democracies act as a watchdog against state tendency to abuse power, that role was undermined by South Africa's press coverage which bought into the prevailing public discourse in Southern African

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ T. KUPE, "Media Ownership Control and Diversity", *The New Age*, TNA Media Limited, (2010), available at: <http://www.thenewage.co.za/home.aspx>, retrieved 13 March 2010.

of South Africa's exceptionalism when reporting Zimbabwe. However, this was to be expected of the South African press having been conceived out of a contentious apartheid history, dominated by white male editors who maintained a discursive position influenced by their political and ideological leanings that succeeded to construct Zimbabwe as "that mangled democracy".

In principle, the media must play a watchdog role as a condition for its very existence but problems arise when the media frames debates to suit certain interests therefore compromising its role in the society. One common way of framing issues is through stereotypes often used as language for framing issues. Stereotypes have traditionally been used by the press as a quick way of explaining events unfolding in the continent. Stereotyping featured prominently when reporting the electoral crises in Zimbabwe wherein elections were framed as just some other typically flawed and violent African elections.

The fact that the Weeklies acted as custodians of human rights and democracy cannot be overemphasized especially in the eyes of human rights groups and the civil society. However, in so doing, the Weeklies further undermined discourses of national patriotic history and liberation solidarity regarding the national question of land restitution in Zimbabwe advanced by pan-Africanists in the political and economic class in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Characteristically, the South Africa's press' nature would demand that they are interested in events in Zimbabwe since it is a press driven by human rights and democracy discourses that were now questionable in Zimbabwe. Those in 'Left' or pan-Africanists in the political and economic class both in Zimbabwe and South Africa viewed such liberal ideals, as advanced by the West, as calculated attempts for the return of neo-imperialism¹¹. In this context, the press is under obligation to serve the needs of the market by covering news that sells often compelled to become sensational. Besides that, media owners and advertisers, including audiences all have an interest that the press is keen to satisfy.

Serving the Market? South Africa's Press Modus Operandi

Theoretically, this paper underscores how economic factors such as media ownership patterns and ways of funding media, advertisers and audiences shape editorial choices, practices and thinking of journalists¹². The South African media operates in a political culture that influences

11 S. J. NDLOVU-GATSHENI, "Making sense of Mugabeism in the Local and Global Politics": 'So Blair, Keep your England and Let Me Keep My Zimbabwe', *Third World Quarterly*, 30, 6 (2009b), pp. 1139-1158.

12 J. CURRAN, "Rethinking Media and Democracy", in J. CURRAN & M. GUREVITCH (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, (London: Arnold, 2000b), pp. 120-152; B. McGregor, "Live, Direct and Biased? Making Television News in the Satellite Age", London, Arnold, 1997.

its operation. South Africa is assumed to be a liberal democratic country meaning that there is a low degree of political control of the media and a high degree of tolerance among political elites for the unwelcome and critical subjects which journalists in such systems write and say¹³. This is in sharp contrast with Zimbabwe explaining why events appeared to be covered more extensively by the South African press than the tightly controlled, mainly state owned media in Zimbabwe. The press in South Africa is largely commercial or privately owned and practices critical and pluralistic journalism as a way of safeguarding against the possibility of a return to authoritarian rule in liberal democracies and as a watchdog against the abuse of political power. However, as it has already been observed, its Western orientation emerging from a contentious apartheid trajectory makes it problematic¹⁴. The theoretical conceptualization used in this paper underscores how politicians, who are also media owners, can shape media content evident in how the media in South Africa shared the same agenda with the political class in South Africa of the need to change Zimbabwe.

The commercially nature of the South African media ensures that news is conceptualized as a commodity for sale¹⁵. Journalists construct news stories that encourage readership to sell the readers to advertisers. In a sense, media owners are in a position to control the kind of news stories that appeal to their readers' interests and at the same time does not offend advertisers. The South African media focused on election violence and incidences of vote rigging and intimidation in a manner likely to sell the newspapers and sometimes fell short of sacrificing journalistic freedom, creativity and integrity at the altar of audiences, advertisers and owners¹⁶. This explains why human rights appeared top on the agenda for *The Sunday Independent*, *The Mail & Guardian* and *The Sunday Times* as far as news values are concerned because it resonated well with the South African audience and therein the political-economy of profiteering. Human rights abuses and disregard of property rights of white farmers in Zimbabwe were of interest to South African white audiences.

13 F. OGENDA, "The Role of the Kenyan Media in the 2007 Elections", *EISA Journal of African Election*, 7, 2, (2008), pp. 124-134; B. MCNAIR, "The Sociology of Journalism", London, Arnold, 1998.

14 B. MCNAIR, "The Sociology of Journalism" London, Arnold, 1998; F. OGENDA, 'Political Economy of the Kenyan Media - Towards a Culture of Active Citizen Journalism', *Global Media Journal African Edition*, 4 / 2, (2010), pp. 151-162; F. OGENDA, "Mugabe Must Go: Textual Meanings of the Representation of the Zimbabwean Situation by the South African Press", in *Africa Conflict and Peace Building Review*, vol. n°, 1 (2011), pp. 39-70.

15 K. WILLIAMS, "Understanding Media Theory", London, Arnold, 2003.

16 J. CURRAN, 'Rethinking Media and Democracy', in J. CURRAN & M. GUREVITCH, (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, London, Arnold, 2000, pp. 120-152; K. WILLIAMS, 'Understanding Media Theory', London, Arnold, 2003; D. Hesmondhalgh, 'The Cultural Industries 2nd ed', (London: Sage), 2007; D. CHAMBERS, "Critical Approaches to the Media: The Changing Context of Investigative Journalism", in H. DE BURGH (ed.), "Investigative Journalism: Context and Practice", Routledge, 2000, pp. 89-107.

Does the SA Press Have the Moral Authority?

This paper highlights the difficulty of establishing whether or not newspapers held captive by the idea of South African exceptionalism would begin from a clean slate when criticizing events in a neighboring country and whether such criticisms would warrant a positive appraisal looked at within the context of political transformation and democratization in Zimbabwe specifically, and Africa generally. If such an establishment would be conclusively done, then it would be beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper emphasizes on the important role that the media must play in Africa given the absence of aggressive social movements and other voluntary organizations that have played a significant role in democratizing countries in regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe. There is no doubt that media has been increasingly influential in shaping the emerging but still young democratic culture in Africa but the contention is that a lasting solution to the problematic situation in Zimbabwe will require looking beyond media institutions, irrespective of the fact that the media has recently exercised increased influence in politics. Any good scrutiny of the role of the media in politics should be guided by the consciousness of understanding political, economic, technological¹⁷ and even cultural dimensions (multiple dimensions).

Media and Democracy in Africa

Further, studies have proved that democracy would only be feasible once society had been modernized. "Industrialization, urbanization, modern education and the spread of the market economy would provide the conditions that are congenial to growth of democracy"¹⁸. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between these features of the society, on the one hand, and democracy on the other. However, the question that remains unanswered concerns the best possible ways of modernizing Africa as explicated by neo-imperialism and the role of the media therein. For example, the free market is seen as more of a burden for Africa since developing countries are still faced with major export deficits, trade imbalances, are overburdened by loans and cannot equally compete with developed ones. Numerous African countries are now indebted to China in a non-sustainable fashion to the extent that China itself has smelt insecurity and now plans to sell off Africa's debt in the form of securities to private investors. In addition, the US has raised a red flag warning Africans over surging Chinese debt in the continent terming it "China's Debt Diplomacy" which may lead to future acquisition of Africa's critical assets and resources by China in cases of default. In worst scenarios, some

17 G. HYDEN, M. LESLIE, and F. F. OGUNDIMU, *"Media and Democracy in Africa"*, New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2007.

18 *Ibid*, p. 2.

countries presumed to be under dictatorship like pre-Mugabe Zimbabwe are recently coming out of economic sanctions post-Mugabe, and it will take them time to overcome the serious challenges presented by the absence of the democratic stimulants. Other countries like Kenya are affected by chronic corruption resulting to wastage and retrogression. Therefore, what needs to be reformed in Zimbabwe is not only the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the patterns of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of the civil society but also the structure and agency of media institution to play a more developmental and structural role going forward¹⁹.

Analytical Approach

This paper uses quantitative and qualitative content analysis including discourse analysis²⁰ to examine South Africa’s Weeklies’ representation of Zimbabwe’s elections from 2000-2008 through news stories, op-eds and cartoons. A total of 64 newspaper editions with 59 stories about elections interlinked by three related themes of politics, economic collapse and social upheavals were analyzed. Quantitative content analysis method was used to count the frequency of occurrence of the term elections under the three aforementioned themes in the larger study to pave way for qualitative analysis. Therefore, this paper singles out the political theme or textual dimension, to demonstrate the meanings of the frequency of occurrence of the term elections, the context in which the term was used in the selected stories and whether or not it was related to violence through a qualitative textual analysis to warrant demands for change as explicated by the weeklies and to find out whether the newspapers were pushing a neo-liberal agenda in Zimbabwe. The analysis focused on four kinds of elections as shown in table 1

Table 1. Type of Election, Election Year and Month

Election year	One month before election	Type of election	One month after elections
2000	May	Parliamentary election & referendum (June)	July
2002	February	Presidential (March)	April
2005	February	Parliamentary (March)	April
2008	February	Harmonized elections (March)	April

¹⁹ C. HALLIN, and P. MANCINI, *“Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics”*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

²⁰ K. N. DENZIN, *“The Research Act: Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods”*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978.

Sampling

The number of articles sampled depended upon the number of stories on Zimbabwe that appeared in a particular newspaper edition. Random sampling allowed the sampled units higher chances of inclusion in the final set of observation²¹. Random sampling or probability sampling was used in the study because the newspapers selected were not Zimbabwean but South African and therefore covered stories about Zimbabwe periodically and not every day or every week. Chances were that in some days or months, there was no coverage of Zimbabwe while more than one story appeared on Zimbabwe in other days. The time frame for the selected newspapers analyzed was five years due to fact that elections are held periodically in Zimbabwe and are perceived to be controversial. Election stories were selected in the years that coincided with elections, three months before and three month after the date of each election, as shown in Table 1.

The analysis centered on two competing discourses, those of anti-neoimperialism anchored on Pan-Africanism and national patriotism versus those that harboured selective memory regarding the history of post-colonial Zimbabwe with human rights and democracy, as exported by the West to Africa, at the core of the analysis. Elections were identified as countable units of analysis based on their controversial nature. A discourse analysis was used to inspect the thematic occurrence of the term elections and the context in which the narrative was framed after actual counting of the term “elections” in order to discuss the context in which it was used. Textual devices such as analogies, intertexts and metaphors were also counted and thereafter, the context in which they were used in stories was analyzed qualitatively. Even though discourse analysis of thematic occurrences of stories on elections pointed out that they were neither free nor fair, it revealed the application of selective memory by the Weeklies when reporting Zimbabwe’s post-colonial history at the expense of national patriotic history anchored on national solidarity regarding land restitution and reforms. A total of 25 newspaper editions with 59 stories that had 131 references to Zimbabwe elections were analyzed as presented in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2. Number of newspaper Editions per month

Year	Textual Dimension	Month	Sunday Independent	Mail & Guardian	Sunday Times
2000	June Elections	June	1	1	1
		July	1	1	1
2002	General Elections	February	None	1	1
		March	None	1	1

²¹ *Ibid.*

		April	None	1	1
2005		February	1	1	1
	March Elections	March	1	1	1
		April	1	1	1
2008	General Elections	February	None	1	1
	March Harmonized Election	March	None	1	1

25 newspaper editions with 91 election stories and 131 references to Zimbabwean Elections analyzed.

Selection Criteria

The three Weeklies were selected because they are mainstream newspapers with high circulation rates and analytical content that readers trust. For example, they contain in depth reports on Zimbabwe since journalists had more time to research and analyze issues as opposed to the straight forward cycling of daily news in daily newspapers. Weekly newspapers with their feature articles, covered stories in-depth compared to daily newspapers. The three newspapers were also selected because of their market share in terms of circulation and readership. One of the central questions relating to politics and elections in Zimbabwe is whether the prevailing conditions were conducive for them to be ‘free and fair’ and whether the issues surrounding the elections amounted to “a political crisis.” Stories covered revolved around campaigns by the ruling party and the opposition and the actual elections. Elections received the most coverage by the three selected Weekly newspapers largely because they were perceived to be neither free nor fair. Moreover, the political crisis surrounding the elections was viewed as the main reason behind ‘economic collapse’ and social upheavals. The selected Weeklies used certain textual devices and narrative genres to represent the situation. Table 3 illustrates the forms of textual and narrative representation and frequency of occurrence of specific reference to elections.

Table 3: Elections: Forms of Textual and Narrative Representation and Frequency of Occurrence in the three Weeklies (2000, 2002, 2005, 2008)

Forms of Representation in three Weeklies	Number of Specific References to Elections	Number of References to Zimbabwe
Headline stories	91	131
Analogies and intertexts	10	14
Metaphors	7	9

Representing Zimbabwe's Elections: A Critical Perspective

Two competing discourses featured prominently in the representation of elections in Zimbabwe, those of anti-neoimperialism anchored on Pan-Africanism and national patriotism versus those harbouring selective memory regarding the history of post-colonial Zimbabwe. The idea that two prominent discourses emerged and that the former was emphasized at the expense of the latter serves to establish the conviction that the South African press was sympathetic to a Western understanding of events unfolding in Zimbabwe. Given its contentious apartheid history and the racial composition of the editors, certain political positions and ideological editorial leanings regarding Zimbabwean elections were observed evidenced in personalized headlines that emphasized the need to vote 'for change' in Zimbabwe to remove the 'tyrant' and 'dictator' Robert Mugabe. Headlines such as: "A Refugee too Scared to go Back and Vote"²², "Mugabe Must Go and he Must Go Now"²³, "Heady Rush as Tyrannized People Sense Tipping Point"²⁴, "Flawed System Must Go"²⁵, an "Elections to Quicken Zim's Sunset"²⁶, "Too Late for a Free and Fair Election in Zimbabwe"²⁷, and "Step by Step into Chaos,"²⁸ were used.

Successive elections in Zimbabwe from 2000 - 2008 were often represented critically by the weekly newspapers. The matrix of such criticisms was the conclusion that there were no conditions that would guarantee their freeness and fairness and that South Africa was reluctant to take decisive actions to push for electoral reforms in Zimbabwe (quiet diplomacy). However, such media criticism revolving around South Africa's failure to act on Zimbabwe did not spell out the approach South Africa was to take regarding resolving the situation in Zimbabwe and in some cases, fell short of prescribing violent removal of President Mugabe or military intervention through headlines such as "Mugabe Must go and he Must go Now". Interestingly, Mugabe ouster sentiments continued forcing him to resign through military intervention in late 2017. The South African media may have suggested a louder or violent protest against Mugabe then, without proposing alternative diplomatic approaches to regime change

22 M. BUNYEKEZWA, "A Refugee Too Scared to Return and Cast Her Ballot", in *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg March 30, 2008, p. 18.

23 P. GOVENDER, and R. FRANÇOIS, "Mugabe Must Go and He Must Go Now", in *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg, March 30, 2008, p. 1.

24 J. RAATH, "Heady Rush as Tyrannized People Sense Tipping Point", in *The Times*, London, March 30, 2008, p.18.

25 T. THABANE, "Flawed System Must Go", in *Mail and Guardian*, Johannesburg, April 8-14, 2005, p. 11.

26 E. WIN, "An Election to Quicken Zim's Sunset", in *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, March 3, 2005, p. 22.

27 C. KAPEMBA, "Too Late for Free and Fair Elections in Zim", in *Sunday Independent*, February 20, 2005.

28 M. MEREDITH, "Step by Step into Chaos", in *Sunday Times*, February 24, 2002.

which piled pressure locally for a homegrown solution that succeeded in replacing Mugabe.

The absence of discourses that would invent useful resolutions between the ruling party, the opposition and other stakeholders made the audience little wiser. To compensate for such a failure, the press used “othering” strategies that held the personalities involved in the electoral crisis accountable²⁹. A good example of the use of “othering” that follows revealed the ideological position of the Editor-in-Chief of the *Sunday Times*.

You know, I am being jingoistic...you know in this country [South Africa] when the government doesn't deliver be it toilets, whatever, people will be burning tires on the streets. Zimbabweans jump the border into South Africa...and Botswana and Malawi [laughing] Mondli Makhanya³⁰, Editor in Chief *Sunday Times*.

Makhanya critiques why Zimbabweans do not take responsibility of the situation in their country like South Africans by singling out South Africans as reform minded people who put their government to task while Zimbabweans are presumed to be evasive people who would rather jump borders than holding their leaders accountable (South African exceptionalism). Further, reporting Zimbabweans as “border jumping” refugees was of interest to the press because of its newsworthiness as far as South African audiences are concerned. It served the needs of the market, that is, South African whites and emerging black bourgeoisie.

Headlines

Therefore, headlines became one of the most visible ways of holding Zimbabwean accountable for events in their own country which is more of an editorial strategy. While news readers and consumers would think that what is placed on the headline is what appears in the story, and is in fact a short summary, this is not the case. “In most instances, headlines refer to selected information within an article which it highlights over others. Editors therefore signal the viewer over what is important and what is less important”³¹. He further argues that:

“In many cases, headlines actually distort what is said in an article. In more than few cases the connection between a headline and an article is almost incidental. The fact that most news consumers “scan the headlines” and do not read every word in an article underscores the significance of this criterion”³².

29 W. WILLEMS, “Remnants of an Empire: British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe”, in *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 2005, pp. 91-108.

30 Interview: Mondli Makhanya, in *Sunday Times* Offices, Johannesburg, 7th April 2010.

31 Media Monitoring Unit, “Reading Between the Lines. A Palestinian-Israeli Guide to Critical Media Consumption”, in *The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy*, (MIFTAH), 2009.

32 *Ibid*.

For example, a contradicting headline appearing in the *Sunday Times* March 30 2008 is an example of the aforementioned distortion. The headline titled: “Zimbabweans Trek Home to Vote” and sub-titled: “If you are Zimbabwean you should go Home and Vote for Change, it is Our Only Weapon Against Tyranny and Repression” alleged how scores of Zimbabweans were going home to vote while others were arguably making their way into South Africa illegally fleeing chronic food and fuel shortages presenting a contradiction. It is nonsensical for the journalists to source from government officials who seemed concerned with the ‘increasing’ number of those going home to vote pointing out how they (the officials) had to send extra immigration officials at the border, yet this would be good news to a press that wants regime change in Zimbabwe. It would be good news for the press because those going home would be presumed to be going to vote out Mugabe and therefore vote for change.

Framing through Images and Metaphors

Sourcing from government officials is one way in which editors frame issues to suit certain interests. They often add words and images or metaphors that help create an emotional effect. News is colored in a certain way that stems from an editorial decision, not from reality. The other editorial decision relevant to the Weeklies' coverage, is the formulation of responsibility. The media does not only describe fact but makes determination about responsibility of events. It talks about who causes something to happen by using an active or passive voice. The story “Mugabe Strikes Back,”³³ for example, argued that Mugabe was responsible for the crisis in Zimbabwe. In this type of framing strategy, news rarely report on facts that are accepted without questioning both sides. “In most cases, information is presented as a claim, a forecast, an assumption, and so on. Therefore, there is great importance in how editors frame the Zimbabwean elections that influences meaning that this article is arguing for. Evidently, the three editors interviewed successfully framed Zimbabwe as that mangled democracy that is incomparable to South Africa.

I think we have a view that ZANU-PF, as led by President Robert Mugabe, has damaged Zimbabwe very seriously. I don't think balance in reporting means that you think that everybody is equally right, it means that you make a fair assessment based on the facts (Peter Fabricious, Editor in Chief *Sunday Independent*).

Photographs: See for Yourself

Photographs were used to help tell stories. Photos are often used by editors and reporters for emphasis and for reinforcing the “see for yourself”

33 *Mail & Guardian*, March 22 to 27, 2002 story.

argument. It is often said a picture is worth a thousand words. One of the photographs³⁴ for example, showed President Mugabe at a public rally waving his traditional liberation solidarity fist. The story accompanying the photo jumps to page four where another photograph is equally used. The latter was of a police officer next to a television journalist at an explosion scene in Harare. What was interesting about this photo was its caption which stated: “No Press Allowed – Zimbabwe Police Remove Reporters and Onlookers from the Scene of an Explosion Next Door to the Offices of the *Daily News* in Downtown Harare Last Saturday.” A deeper analysis of the photograph revealed no convincing evidence that the police were actually removing reporters, but from the scene, it appeared as if they were merely restoring law and order in the wake of the explosions as they routinely do in the aftermath of security threats. Therefore this photo was not good enough to corroborate enough scholarly evidence that suggest the lack of press freedom in Zimbabwe³⁵. It is widely known that the Zimbabwean government still holds large sections of the media. Their constitution often just guarantees freedom of expression which does not obviously mean freedom of the media. Peter Fabricious, senior editor of the Independent Media Group foreign desk, explains such restrictions:

“Covering Zimbabwe is, generally, just difficult because of very restrictive media regulations. Such difficulties forced the newspaper to smuggle reporters in when they could soon after the crisis erupted. However, they did smuggle them reluctantly because of the few episodes where journalists had to flee the country in a hurry because they felt that the security police were moving in on them”³⁶.

... The trouble is the restrictions in reporting and the limitation that our reporters face makes it very difficult³⁷.

Othering Strategies

With such restrictive media laws, it would be easy for the South African media to reduce the problems in Zimbabwe into personalities. Mugabe was the *de-facto* leader of Zanu-PF and therefore presumed to be the author of legislation that restricted press freedom. Mugabe was accused of having presided over a “flawed electoral system which must go”³⁸ through the intervention of the UN Election Team. However by representing him as the epicenter of Zimbabwe’s political conflict and flawed elections the newspaper revealed occasions where the use of selective memory and history of Zimbabwe’s post-colonial narrative became conspicuous. The question is

34 “Zim’s Mob Get License to Intimidate,” *Mail & Guardian’s*, April 28 - May 4, 2000.

35 T. KUPE, “Media Ownership Control and Diversity”, *The New Age*, TNA Media Limited, 2010, available at: <http://www.thenewage.co.za/home.aspx>, retrieved 13 March 2010.

36 Interview: Peter Fabricious, Scuci Restaurant, Parkview, Johannesburg, April 7, 2010.

37 Interview: Nick Dawes, *Mail & Guardian*, Head Office, Rosebank, June 01 2010.

38 *Mail & Guardian*, April 8 to 14, 2005.

why was Mugabe previously celebrated as one of the key stakeholders in the Lancaster House Agreement that ushered in black majority rule that performed relatively well before the introduction of Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in Zimbabwe? This would make anyone wonder if Mugabe's self-rule agenda is solely to blame for the economic collapse and social upheavals in Zimbabwe or there are other forces, some of them alien.

In one of the opinion and analysis stories called "Heady Rush as Tyrannized People Sense Tipping Point"³⁹, anonymous sources are used to construct anti-Mugabe sentiments through analogies to push for 'change'. The idea of South African exceptionalism further emerges from how Zimbabwe's elections are compared to other typically flawed elections in Africa using analogies and intertexts. This particular story, for instance, compares Zimbabwe's polls to polling situations in Zambia and Malawi wherein suggestions are made on how the two countries could provide useful lessons for reforms applicable in Zimbabwe as evidenced in the following excerpt:

The first time I felt this was in 1991, waiting outside the polling station in a Zambian Village of Mazubuka and asked wrinkled little men and women coming out if they felt better. Yes, they all said. We want change. Within days, President Kenneth Kaunda was gone, after several years of bumbling, benign dictatorship that brought nothing but poverty was gone. Two years later, I felt it in the wet, lightless street of Blantyre in Malawi at 4am, where cues coiled around the buildings. I asked the people waiting in silent determination what they were going to do. Change, they said. And before long, Hasting Banda, the 100-year-old life President of the land of silent fear, was no longer president. [...] now I am feeling the same thing with Zimbabwe. Everyone I speak to says change⁴⁰.

The reason behind personalization is however a time pressure constrain. Faced with editorial pressure that demand that news is released on a timely basis, Weekly South African newspapers are forced to personalise events as evident in the story titled "Will SA's Poll Observers in Zimbabwe be Free and Fair?"⁴¹. The 2005 election in Zimbabwe, for example, is represented as neither free nor fair with a loud cry for Mugabe to Go. The spirit of personalization continued with some stories like "SA Should Help Save Zimbabwe, not Mugabe"⁴² arguing that the electoral malpractices and economic hardship in that country is as a result of President Mugabe's failure to live up to the promises he once showed. The story argued that:

39 *Sunday Times*, March 30 2008.

40 *Ibid.*

41 "Will SA's Poll Observers in Zimbabwe be Free and Fair?", in *Sunday Times*, March 20 2005.

42 "SA Should Help Save Zimbabwe, not Mugabe", *Sunday Times*, February 20, 2000.

The seeds of Zimbabwe's future economic-hardship were planted just after independence in 1980, when Mugabe boldly announced his desire to turn Zimbabwe into a one party state guided by Marxist principles. Mugabe, once acclaimed as Africa's most popular leader – in 1988 he won the Africa Prize for leadership and was lauded for having the vision to lead his country to self-sufficiency – has failed to live up to the promises he once may have showed.⁴³

Could the editors be using such a narrative of “the good award winning Mugabe in the 80's” with the optimism that such a narrative could have convinced Mugabe to change his ways or it was just another occasion where the editor was drumming up support for Western neo-liberalism at the expense of pan-Africanism and liberation solidarity? Tensions between the two competing discourses, those of pan-Africanism and liberation solidarity versus those of Western liberalism that employed selective memory and history anchored on human rights and democracy is evidenced in suggestions that Mugabe is solely and personally responsible for the economic crisis in Zimbabwe. However much this argument may have seemed like an analytical stretch then, recent accusations by war veterans that Mugabe is responsible for the economic problems in the country eventually meant that, Mugabe had to go. Therefore, personalization is not necessarily a negative thing if it helps achieve the desired results anyway.

The Sunday independent newspaper editor in chief for instance argued that as the leader of the ruling party, Mugabe was largely responsible for the economic hardship that hit the country following chaotic elections. However, a more nuanced analysis would reveal how the policy shift from corporatism to neo-liberalism, done hurriedly without the necessary institutional capacity and expertise to accommodate such a radical micro-economic change is the greatest contributor to Zimbabwe's crises. Looked at from this perspective, then it is easy to see how a previously regulated market economy ‘opened up’ to new challenges such as unfair competition compounded by the structural adjustment requirements by International Financial Institutions (IFI's) under the Washington Consensus⁴⁴. The new policy shift received mixed reactions from different stakeholders, especially given that the Zimbabwean economy was controlled by private corporate companies resulting to a flight of capital to Europe and South Africa. This situation was followed by low investor confidence due to suspicions regarding how the new black majority regime would handle property rights leading to a clash of ideologies.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ E. A. BRETT, “From Corporatism to Liberalization in Zimbabwe: Economic Policy Regimes and Political Crisis, 1980-97”, *International Political Science Review*, 26,1, (2005), pp. 91-106; P. BOND, & M. MANYANYA, *Zimbabwe's PLUNGE. Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice*, Pietermaritzburg, The Merlin Press, 2002; O. EDIGHEJI, *A Democratic Development State in Africa? A Concept Paper* Johannesburg, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.

Ideological Clash

The *Sunday Independent's* perspective that solely blames Mugabe as the cause of economic problems in Zimbabwe does not shed light into how institutional policy shift further polarized Zimbabwe's political-economy. The shift led to a clash of ideologies with the Left and Right clashing on how to best handle the economic situation, an ideological conflict that later conceived discourses of liberation solidarity, national patriotic history and neo-imperialism from the Left-wingers that the press failed to represent⁴⁵. Hence, the three newspapers, which are largely inclined to "the Right," argued in a manner critical to "the Left" where it became clear how Mugabe lost his legitimacy to steer Zimbabwe into economic prosperity ESAP notwithstanding. Therefore, one of the main reasons why the three newspapers wanted change through headlines such as "Mugabe Must Go" was because they feared a "regional bubble."

While the South African press remained critical of events in Zimbabwe through selective memory, the ruling party continuously re-appropriated such representation in articles that asked Mugabe to go. Anti-neoimperialism discourses featured prominently in the *Sunday Times* more than the other papers perhaps due to the fact that the Editor in Chief was a black South African emerging from a history of apartheid which made him relate well with black solidarity movement in Zimbabwe. In one of the stories, Mugabe is reported to have rallied against the UK, the USA and the opposition, claiming he would deliver a heavy blow against them at the polls. The ruling party thus countered the manner in which elections were represented through the idea that Zimbabwe is fighting neo-imperialism as pushed by Britain through MDC. The argument received backing from Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) leaders triggering support from sections of the South African society. While former South African President's, Mbeki, speeches supporting President Mugabe featured prominently in state owned broadcasters on one hand, Zimbabwe media had messages of liberation solidarity on the other⁴⁶.

President Mbeki's argument was a Leftist ideology which posited that the problems facing Zimbabwe is as a result of British support and protection of the property rights of their 'kith and kin' and not a result of unfair land seizure by the government. However, the Rightists, led by the opposition MDC, would argue that British concerns were genuine concerns about human rights and democracy and it was believed that the opposition would instil democratic practices in Zimbabwe. President Mbeki's support for Mugabe was a tactical move designed to protect South

45 O. EDIGHEJI, *A Democratic Development State in Africa? A Concept Paper*, Johannesburg, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.

46 I. PHIMISTER and B. RAFTOPOLOUS, "Mugabe Mbeki and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", in *Review of African Political-economy*, 31, 101, (2004), pp. 385-400.

Africa's strategic position and sub-imperial role in the SADC region as a continental hegemon through Africa renaissance and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) than genuine liberation solidarity and pan-Africanism. South Africa's major concern was the likelihood that events in Zimbabwe concerning human rights, democracy and good governance would frustrate its ambitions on the continent especially if the events were to spill into South Africa⁴⁷.

It would seem that since the idea of entitlement and land rights is complicated, the best the West could do is to criticize human rights and democracy as applied in Zimbabwe and the chaotic invasions of white owned farms, slap the country with targeted sanctions with the hope that things will change than to abandon the country as revealed in the *Sunday Times* story titled "Don't Abandon Africa Because of Mugabe."⁴⁸ The report was an edited version of a speech delivered to the German Council of Foreign Affairs in Berlin by Tony Leon of South Africa's opposition Democratic Alliance (DA). The report argued that the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) does not ask for some inferior version of democracy or lesser standard of human rights to apply in the SADC region and Africa. On the contrary, NEPAD states: "Africa undertakes to respect global standards of democracy, of which the core components include political pluralism [and] open, free and democratic elections to enable the populace to choose their leaders". The report rubbished Zimbabwe's elections and warned Leftists in South Africa of the danger of reducing all issues to race or invoking misplaced solidarity to trump principles of democracy and freedom.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the three South African Weeklies employed selective memory and history in establishing the reality about Zimbabwe's electoral crisis. This is due to the fact that the Weeklies coverage of Zimbabwe were driven by Western unipolar values of human rights and democracy in disregard of counter-discourses regarding national patriotic history, liberation solidarity and anti neo-imperialism emanating from the 'Left' spectrum in the country's political-economy. However, this was to be expected of local South African press which is generally driven by Western ideologies of journalism coupled with genuine incidences of electoral violence in Zimbabwe that make for news that sell.

47 S. J. E. OBE, "Point Man' on Zimbabwe: South Africa's Role in the Crisis", *The Roundtable: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 95, 384, (2006), pp. 191-199; M. PRYS, "Developing Contextually Relevant Concepts of Regional Hegemony: The Case of Zimbabwe, South Africa and Quiet Diplomacy", Hamburg, GIGA; German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2008; M. PRYS, "Regional Hegemony or Regional Bystander: South Africa's Zimbabwe Policy 2000-2005. *Politikon, South African Journal of Political Studies*, 86, 2, (2009), pp. 193-218.

48 "Don't Abandon Africa Because of Mugabe", *Sunday Times*, March 24 2002.

The three South African newspapers examined in this paper used ‘othering’ strategies to represent the Zimbabwean elections as violent, sponsored by President Mugabe’s ruling party. Even though the country’s elections are usually characterized by violence, their representation by the weeklies underscored how Western media represents events unfolding in Africa. Events happening in that country were often personalized wherein Mugabe was “the tyrant” blamed for virtually all socio-economic and political problems. The representation of elections is centered on events as they are and their consequences without any critical look at historical trajectories that have contributed in shaping them. However, this paper also argued that not all forms of personalisation by journalists are negative especially if they make way for the much desired result like in the case of Zimbabwe where eventually, Mugabe had to Go.

Even though this paper concedes that the situation in Zimbabwe merits some degree of negative coverage based on the general consensus among South Africans and Zimbabweans about the chaotic nature of elections in Zimbabwe, the press could have done more to give proper context of the situation for more nuance. The press missed such an opportunity leaving the audience little wiser. Often, the events as reported lacked historical contexts that may have enriched the readers’ understanding and knowledge of the situation. Having missed such an opportunity, the South African newspapers, like many other mainstream Western newspapers succumbed to political-economy pressures that demand they satisfy needs of South Africa’s political and economic lass, their owners and readers’ expectations to fulfill market objectives/demands at the expense of more nuance and informative reporting. The Weeklies should have done better by giving historical contexts of the political situation in Zimbabwe for the readers to properly locate trajectories that inform different stakeholders’ point of view regarding politics and elections in Zimbabwe irrespective of market forces, institutional demands and audience interests. ■