

AN ASESMENT OF THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN  
PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND GOOD  
GOVERNANCE: A STUDY OF THE ZIMBABWEAN MASS  
MEDIA

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**Abstract**

Free, professional media are vital for a working democracy that promotes good governance. Citizens need media to make informed electoral choices; have effective input into public affairs; ensure the rule of law is upheld and mechanisms for checking power abuses are intact. But in nominal democracies, where key tenets of democracy exist more in the statutes than in practice, media are constrained in their work by strictures from state and non-state actors. With reference to Zimbabwe, this study explores the role of media as a requisite element in nurturing democracy and good governance. It examines key factors that influence media's success, viz. politics, legislation, ownership and business setting, besides internal capacity in respect of technology, training and tooling, all of which impact directly on media's service to society. From candid talks with a section of Zimbabwe's top media players, the study shows that the county's media are hamstrung by the existing legal structure, competing political interests, poor training and not-so-strict adherence to the canons of the journalism profession – the key requisite conditions for developing public-minded media.

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## Introduction

A free and open society subsumes a vibrant unfettered means of communication between the government and the governed. In a democratic set up, to have a quality government, the electorate needs to choose from a wide range of alternatives, basing the choice on authentic, objective and balanced information. If the government is to continue governing by consent, it requires information about the citizenry - how it feels about and views specific issues. The mass communication media act as the intermediaries in this exchange, enabling the government, its opponents and the electorate to speak to one another. A vibrant media industry is paramount in upholding freedom, and in expanding education on social reforms. Democracy and good governance confer upon the people the right, not only to know what the government does, but to participate as well in its activities, especially on State decisions that affect their life, liberty and property. Information helps people to make reasonable choices regarding their participation in the State, the market and the civil society. Sufficient information helps people to decide rationally and take the course of action beneficial to them. Media, thus, help people to know what is happening around the world, socialise them on the values of pluralism and equip them with the elements of modernity. A key criterion of a democratic system of government, therefore, is the extent to which the mass communication apparatus performs the above roles with reasonable freedom and responsibility. Africa has in the past two decades witnessed tremendous growth in democracy – if the number of multi party elections that have taken place in various countries is anything to go by. However, the jury is still out on whether the continent is moving in the right direction particularly with regard to the fundamental tenets and standards of modern day democracy and good governance. One bone of contention is the states' penchant for locking out other important players, among them the media and civil society, in the management of public affairs. The aim of this research was, therefore to assess the role of media in the institutionalisation and promotion of democracy and good governance in Zimbabwe and establish the requisite conditions for effective execution of this role.

## Objectives of the research

- i) To determine to what extent of the media's contribution to the institutionalisation and promotion of good governance;

- ii) To identify factors influencing or hampering the work of the media in promoting an open society that upholds the ideals of democratic rule and good governance;

**Conceptual framework**

This convergence can be represented in the conceptual framework below:

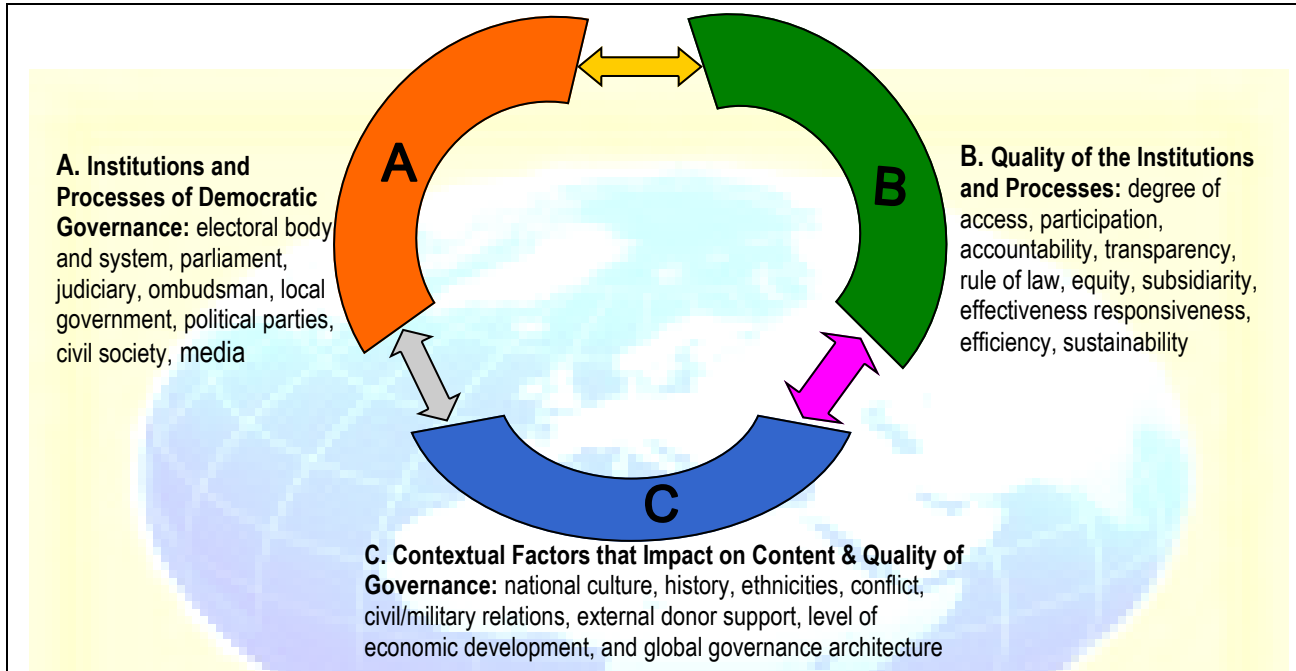


Figure 2.1: Good governance conceptual framework: Source: Shabir and Cheema ( 2003: 15)

**Communication process and mass communication media**

The process of communication is a dynamic and continuous experience. We are constantly emitting and receiving messages thus being involved in all elements of the communication process on a continuous basis. Berlo (1960) developed a model of the communication process presented in the diagram below:

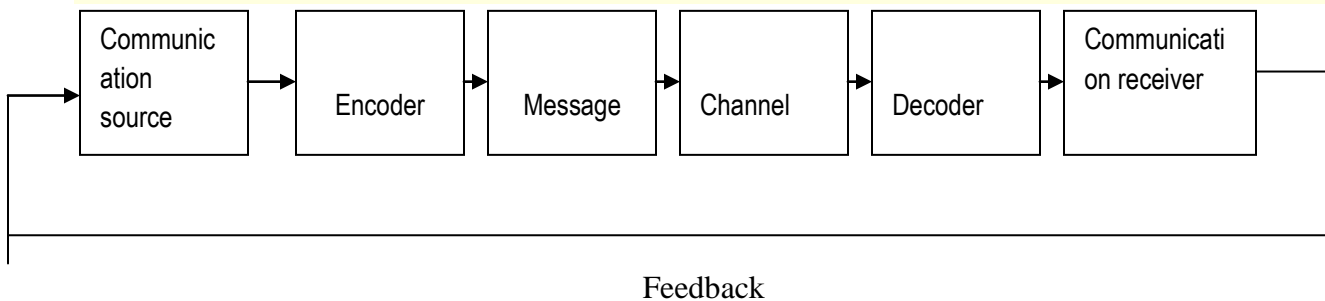


Figure 2.2: Berlo's model of communication process. Source: Wofford, et al., 1977: 24

Communication can neither occur where there is no originating source for the message, nor can it be realised in the absence of an adequate encoding process to prepare the message for transmission into the channel (Wofford, et al., 1977). Where the encoding process is defective or perhaps uses an incorrect language, serious distortion or a total breakdown in communication is likely to result. The purpose of mass media is to facilitate communication in society. In a political communication, the message may have two sides. There is message as seen by the source – encoder and the message as seen by the receiver - decoder. The selection and interpretation of messages may differ dramatically because of differences in psychology and situation for the persons who are serving as transmitter and receiver. In part, such differences can be explained as encoding – decoding failures (McQuail and Windahl, 1995).

### Results

The hypothesis that was tested in this study using the interview questions was that media's role in promoting good governance is dependent upon their independence, freedom, and ability to effectively analyse, package and disseminate objective, balanced, fair and accurate information to both the government and the public. The questions discussed with key informants were thus based on the following assumptions derived from the hypothesis, that: i) Media access to information and their ability to accurately transmit such information for the benefit of the public is a pre-requisite for good governance and national development; ii) Media need to be free and independent, have the capacity and latitude to reflect on diverse views, and be able to report on various subjects while remaining accountable; iii) Higher media penetration promotes greater accountability of public agents; iv) Control of media by single or concentrated interest groups hinders their ability to play their role; v) Media can be more effective if complimentary institutions such as the judiciary reinforce their independence and quality. The discussion and interpretations of the findings is thus based on the above assumptions.

### Media access to information

The study found that the role of the media is curtailed by limited access to information. Whereas the act that deals with access to information (AIPPA) compels government official to give information to journalists on demand, this law is not fully obeyed and government officials still consider it a matter of discretion to give information to journalists. According to MISA director Nhlanhla Ngwenya, the government has instead only used sections of this law that deals with privacy. The study revealed that although public media journalists have access to senior public officials who give them information, they are hamstrung and cannot use public information for news or features that are critical of government. For, as *The Herald* editor says, “The public media have instead been lapdogs (and not watchdogs) when it comes to dealing with the executive. Except through their “moles” (people sympathetic to them) in public offices, the private media have no way of accessing information from government officials who view them as enemies rather than partners in fostering good governance.

The study revealed that access to information is not curtailed only through refusal to give it; there are also rules that ensure that “undesirable” media do not gather news in specific areas strategic to the ruling class. For instance, according to Gama of *Daily News*, the government has put restriction on areas like mines which are protected as sensitive areas. This ban apparently applies even to top government officials outside the ZANU-PF ranks. A tour by the Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai to Chiadzwa was reportedly cancelled when he realised that state security organs had been instructed to bar him from visiting people displaced by the government to give room for diamond mining (*The Standard* July 3-9, 2011). The government uses its discretion to decide which media housed to attend its functions. A case in point, according to Gama, was when the government of Zimbabwe refused to accredit private media journalists to cover the COMESA Summit held in Harare in 2005. Even after the latter obtained a court order compelling rebutting this action, state security organs still barred them from covering the function.

The key informants’ views on access to information are supported by other Zimbabwean media practitioners and scholars. According to Dumisani Moyo and Sarah Chiumbu, “recent legislation impinging on free flow of information includes: the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA), Public



Order and Security Act (POSA), Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act” (Moyo and Chiumbu, July 2002). BSA restrict flow of and access to information by giving the information minister unfettered power to determine who to license to broadcast and who not to license.

### The Legal environment and media freedom

The study reveals that the existing legal instruments in Zimbabwe generally work against the operation of free media. According to Ngwenya several pieces of legislation enacted after 2000 are all basically aimed to tame the media. He cites the AIPPA, POSA, BSA, Interception of Information Act, etc, as some of the laws that have hampered the media’s operations in the country. All the five informants argue that AIPPA has stringent provisions which put immense powers in the hands of government controlled Media and Information Council. Media lecturer, Webster Mwonwa says that both the previous and current governments have used “bad laws” to gag media. He cites the Law and Order Maintenance Act of 1970 and Broadcasting Services Act of 1957 which were used by the Ian Smith regime to hamstring the media. Then Rhodesian minister for information, PK van der Byl once said that he believed in getting as much control of the media as possible because the media were “inhabited by leftists and, so, he was remotely concerned with press freedom” (*Openspace* December 2006: 15). Mwonwa’s and Ngenya’s arguments are further supported by Andrew Moyce of Media Monitoring Project – Zimbabwe, who argues that under AIPPA, ‘the government has turned the gathering and dissemination of news into a privilege which can only be exercised by those who have been registered by government appointed MIC...Anybody “caught” practicing journalism without a license from MIC is committing an offence.’ (*Openspace*, December 2006: 61).

But it is right to argue that having a regulatory system is not in itself a sign of media freedom curtailment and is not unique to Zimbabwe. What is intriguing, according to VMCZ director Zhangazha Takura (see interview excerpts), is the arbitrary manner in which MIC carries out its operations. Takura is supported by Moyce (*Watching the Watchdog: Monitoring the Media in Defence of Free Expression Openspace*, December 2006), who says that since its creation in

2002, MIC has closed down four newspapers and denied registration to dozens of journalists. The fact that all the four newspapers were privately owned does not help MIC against its critics' charge that it is a government tool for silencing perceived anti-establishment publications and journalists.

According to Njabulo Ncube, the laming of all the recently enacted legislation related to media under criminal law has dealt the most debilitating blow to media freedom. For example, in what would ordinarily be considered civil case of defamation elsewhere is treated as a criminal offence in Zimbabwe, particularly when it touches the presidency and state security organs. Ncube's view is supported by Moyo and Chiumbu, who argues that "AIPPA unduly meddles in and penalizes what are otherwise civilly actionable breaches of media ethics" ( Chiumbu and Moyo, July 2002: 48)

But, *The Herald's* Zharare argues that although AIPPA has some very good provisions which can help journalism grow in this country, it has been unduly vilified, to a point that only its bad side is known. The stipulation that government officials give information to the media is one such positive proviso, which, if adhered to, can open up the society and foster growth of democracy and good governance. According to him, there main problems with AIPPA and other pieces of legislation on media are, first, the overenthusiastic law enforcement agents, who use these laws to unnecessarily harass journalists, and second, the anti-establishment group of journalists who believe they can operate outside all the laws in the name of press freedom.

But, according to study's findings, media freedom, or lack thereof, is not discernible only from the legal prism. The political landscape is also plays an important part. The two private media managers interviewed complained about "hired goons", serving the specific political interests, who harass perceived pro-opposition journalists at will. Ncube says, for example, that private media reporters cannot set foot on Mbare, a high density suburb of Harare, lest they are killed. Gama on his part says that the security organs have further curtailed media freedom by unilaterally declaring some areas in the country as protected thus limiting media freedom in terms of access.

It is important to note that although state media are apparently free to operate, their freedom is limited to their ability to keep to the government script. Ncube call it a facade, since he say, the editorial desk of the state media has been “hijacked by the State house operatives”, something Zharare seems to admit, albeit tacitly, when he said that we “state media are lapdogs rather than watchdogs as far as dealing with the Executive arm of the government is concerned.”

### **Media ownership, control and independence**

The foregoing topic focused on media freedom or lack of it as derived from the law. Emphasis was placed on the legal structures which deal with journalists’ day to day work of gathering, analysing, packaging and disseminating information to their audiences. Under media independence, as discussed with the media managers and scholars interviewed, the study dwelt on how the media navigates the economic political and social landscapes and relate with stakeholders in these fields. The study found that Zimbabwe media’s level of independence is low. All the informants admitted that the media – state or private - are beholden to their owners. Under the question “In your observation, to what extent does the editorial slant or leaning of various media houses reflect their ownership?” all the three editors said that they do. According to Zharare “The editorial slant of all media houses largely reflects the ownership of the press in Zimbabwe both private and public.” Ngwenya put it even more ominously: “The media in Zimbabwe have been hijacked by political forces whose views they parrot everyday” (see excerpts). The state media, wholly owned by the government, have to play subservient to the latter. Private media also select and angle their news, especially political news on the basis of their owners’ inclinations. Wallace Chuma supports this argument in an article: “Media ownership and funding patterns” when he says:

Since 2000, the content in the mainstream media in Zimbabwe has been highly polarized along ownership and political allegiance lines. State owned broadcast and print media have been overtly partisan in favour of ZANU-PF...On the other hand the private press has been a vocal critic (and a major victim) of the state and an outstanding supporter of the opposition, especially



MDC. Parliamentary and presidential elections presented the media the opportunity to showcase their embeddedness to their owners or handlers. (*Openspace Vol. 1, Issue 5*. December 2006: 27)

Another factor that was found to considerably hamper the media independence in the country is advertising. The study revealed that media houses dare not antagonize their major advertisers. Gama said that the issue is made more serious by the now fierce competition for dwindling advertising revenue. "The papers are run through adverts and editorial decisions have to be made with the advertisers in mind...anything that may rub our advertisers the wrong way has to be given due attention. It is a dilemma we have to live with..." This dilemma is aptly captured elsewhere by Thomas Bauer thus:

Since the media requires two markets to survive economically (audience and advertising), it has to be interested in financially successful management, but at the same time it must irritate the economic status quo because of its duty to research such themes as part of investigative journalism. So it may and often does happen that journalists are challenged to research subjects that may not be in the best interests of people or organizations which are stake or shareholders in the media. Economically speaking, media ownership is not an easy position. On one hand, media entrepreneurship is encouraged in a very difficult and complex market, and on the other hand, it is the source of independence problems, often negatively impacting freedom, the open media market, and above all, media culture. Ownership is the position at which economy, quality, money, and public communication values meet and where all those factors come into a difficult crux in a democratic culture (David Brewer, "Guatemala press freedom alarm," *BBC News World Edition*, June 28, 2003, quoted in Craig LaMay, 2006).

### **Media penetration, reach and pluralism**

The study revealed that the media in Zimbabwe is concentrated in the cities and other urban centres. All the interviewees concurred that the rural areas of Zimbabwe are generally starved of media products. According to Gama, due to limited resources amid high cost of production, the media cannot afford to satisfy the entire country. They are therefore focusing only on areas with high potential sales. This scenario disadvantages the rural areas which have the double disadvantages of poor infrastructure and poor economic ability. Zharare explains further that media, as a business outfit, of necessity, will focus reach on economically viable areas. He

surmises that: “as things stand now this blackout on the rural masses may continue unless and until, deliberate efforts are made to economically empower the rural communities... people in the rural areas do not have the money to buy newspapers, leave alone advertise. Moreover, our advertisers’ target populations are the city dwellers, not the rural folks.” This brings to the fore the concern over what then is the media’s *raison d’être* in society. A media fraternity that does not serve the larger segment of the society ceases to be relevance to growth of democracy and institutionalization of good governance. It is worth noting that when Thomas Jefferson said he would choose the press over government he added a rider that “... I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”  
<http://www.techdirt.com/article/shtml>

But the rural is not just disadvantage by the fact that media products do not reach them. Due to lack of basic facilities the reporters cannot easily reach the rural area. Thus even when the newspapers reach them, their contents do not address their aspirations, their fear, and their needs. Ncube says that the media have neglected the wider Zimbabwean society; what we are reading in the papers are stories based on political and economic whims of powerful elite in the city...State media are parroting views of ZANU-PF and President Mugabe, while the private media are beholden to Prime Minister Tsvangirai’s and MDC at the expense of the villager who is very worried about where the next meal will come from.” But Gama brings in another angle: that in focusing their attention, they are following the masses’ dictates. He says that media consumers in Zimbabwe are themselves so politically minded that they want nothing but politics. “Today do a well researched articles and put it as your flash and you paper will not sell... the people now that all their problems are politically generated.”

It is, thus, not a question of reach and penetration; rather what must be addressed are the multiple problems of reach, affordability, content relevance, language and orientation. But, as the study found out, all these are lacking. The following statement by a veteran South African journalist, Mathatha Tsedu, about his country some time back perfectly depicts the situation in Zimbabwe today:

Since 1994 the news media in his South Arica have gone for well-off blacks and forgotten the poor. They no longer serve as watchdogs for the weak and the poor. The poor are not a market, but a liability. Nobody covers them. It is the same in the United States, but here the poor are a minority and the middle class is the majority. In South Africa, the poor are the majority. If no one is interested in them, how do we represent them? How are they part of our democracy? It is the dilemma of existence versus the need of the media to survive.... (Mathatha Tsedu, remarks at the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, March 7, 2005, quoted by Craig LaMay, 2006)

According to the interviewee, there is a void which could only be filled by community media. With the advent of modern technology, community radio is cheap to set up and run. They aver that the government has been the greatest stumbling block to growth of community media in the country. Community media outlets established by the government under the state owned news agency folded up due to lack of funding. Moreover these outlets ceased to serve communities' interests as they were controlled by the government. According to Takura, the stringent broadcasting regulations, as they stand now, cannot allow community radio to operate in the country. Mwonwa says that the government's reluctance to free airwaves has ensured that there is total lack of pluralism in the country. The people are therefore fed on one-sided views of only a section of the unity government. Ngwenya argues that the government is so scared of truly community media, especially radio that unless pressure is brought to bear, it will not allow them.

Due to this neglect by the mainstream media, and, apparently, because of lack of appeal by the state radio ZBC, the rural people have now turned to tuning to Voice of America in Zimbabwe which broadcasts in short wave frequency. Other radios (popularly referred to as "pirate radios"), operated by Zimbabweans journalists and entrepreneurs in neighbouring counties are also becoming increasingly popular.

### **Internal capacity: tools, equipment and remuneration**

The study reveals a general lack of important facilities and equipment in the media houses. Zharare says that newsrooms of the State media lack facilities like lap tops and vehicles. Ncube says that although private media newsrooms appear better, there is general lack of facilities. Gama concurred saying that the situation is made more grave by the fact that most equipment

like recorders are not available locally and have to be imported from South Africa, making them expensive hence less affordable to most newsrooms. Takura said the problem is that media owners do not want to invest in the business. He compared the media to a cow which their owners want to just milk without feeding. The lack of equipment was also reported in training institutions. Mwonwa revealed that most training institutions do not have enough modern facilities like computers, a fact that has compromised the quality of their graduates.

On terms and condition for journalists the study discloses that the average Zimbabwean journalist is poorly paid. All the interviewees agreed that poor pay is the main reason for journalists' involvement in unethical conduct such as getting compromised by newsmakers for money and other favours. Mwonwa said that the poor pay in the media has pushed the best brains, who could have made a positive mark in the field of , to seek better deals in related areas like public relations or to work outside the country. The result of this is lack of serious journalism.

There is also general agreement among all those interviewed that the prevailing poor economic situation is responsible for the low morale among journalists. But Mwonwa also attributes the woes in the media today to mistakes of the past. He notes that while the new government set out to bring up all sectors of economy the media was not even considered part of the country's economic agenda. This, in his view was a serious mistake because "a country's media is an important tool of development."

#### **Internal capacity: Journalists' qualifications and suitability**

On media education and training the study revealed that the sector has a good number of mid level qualification holders – certificates and diplomas - as well as those trained on the job. However, all those interviewed said the media industry is today impoverished at the higher levels of training and experience. The scarcity of qualified journalists at the bachelor's and master's levels has deprived journalism in the country of analytical minds that can tackle issues of democracy and governance and hold the ruling elite to account.

Two major factors have contributed to this scarcity. Ngwenya says that the harassment of non conformist journalists by the government has forced many out of the country. At the same time, according to Takura, the media sector is not attractive due to poor pay. Whatever the case, the departure of veteran Zimbabwean journalists from the local media scene has deprived the young

practitioners of would be valuable mentors. Mwonwa blames journalism institutions for poor quality in the media today saying that they focus on training journalists at artisan level and not as critical thinkers. He says that at diploma and certificate levels, a journalist is trained to merely report events as they occur; not to reflect on the critical issues in society. His view is similar to that of Professor Jeanne Prinsloo, who, writing on journalism training in Southern Africa, said: What counts as journalism education has been argued to have by and large abdicated its vision as watchdog over to one of conduit for maintenance of power by elite groups in society. The curricula tend to focus on certain literacy practices, like learning to write an inverted pyramid story, to acquiesce to a particular set of criteria of news values that privilege elite people and nation, to accept a particular version of objectivity, to seek only opinions from particularly people at the top...The existing curricula rehearse existing hegemonic patterns of thought and knowledge and are simply not adequate as a design for journalism for they reproduce a conservative imagination that is ill-suited to the challenges that are faced” (Critical Media Literacy, Openspace, Vol. 1 Issue 5, December 2006:19)

### Conclusion

The study reveals that the media in Zimbabwe are to varying degree incapacitated in performing their three fundamental duties to society, namely the watchdog role, the agenda-setter role and the civic educator role. Because the media are not free, they cannot properly scrutinize the government on whose hands the people have placed the instruments of governance.

The political polarization means that the media have clearly defined camps from which they operate. Those in each one's camp are prejudged as good, while those in the opposing one are bad. Both the state and private media have ceased to be neutral observers and guardians of the public good. There is clear lack of allegiance to the public but to other forces, a fact that may be inimical to the nurturing of good governance. They are now watchdogs for political camps. The state media lie in wait to see what wrongs – according to ZANU/PF - MDC camp is committing either as minister or party operatives. The private media on their part are working at the behest of the anti-ZANU-PF forces waiting to pounce on the earliest opportunity.

Ordinarily, this arrangement would not be altogether bad, since, after all, there is some means of keeping tab on the leaders. However, the media houses run the risk of credibility crisis. It is not



good for their image and professional standing when specific media houses acquire such labels as: “anti-establishment,” “pro-government or “opposition bashers” etc.

The watchdog role of the media also suffers when they lose their freedom and independence to other forces outside the legal and political spheres, as has happened in the case of the Zimbabwean media. Such forces often dictate behind the scenes what the media carry or do not carry for favours that come in the nature of advertisements or other forms of patronage. This category includes media owners, advertisers and other influential members of the society.

It is not only the government and political leaders that are crucial in the quest to nurture democracy and governance. The business community, the civil society, the NGO fraternity, the donor community, etc are all crucial in a holistic approach to national development – which is the concern of good governance. Thus, when the media remove the spotlight from this class for expediency, the society stands to suffer.

Although the media can still be seen to set the agenda for society, this role is not adequately executed due to various factors. Firstly, the media have themselves become agents of partisan agents of political players. They are thus not setting agenda based on society needs; rather, they are merely amplifying those of their political mentors. The trend is that political parties will orient the media towards their own political agenda and have them harp on that at the expense of pressing society-wide issues.

Secondly, the study finds that the level of media penetration in Zimbabwe is too low for them to make a meaningful impact on the public’s psyche. For the media to influence the public thinking there should be widespread readership and viewership across the various sections of the society. In Zimbabwe today, the most widespread segment of the media, which is broadcasting, reaches, at best, only 40% of the country’s population, the multiplying nature of information notwithstanding.

Thirdly, in addition to limited media reach, there is the other challenge of pluralism. The situation in the country today is that there is limited diversity of media ownership, particularly when it comes to electronic media, where the state is the sole player. An important component of the agenda setting role of the media is that there should be a wide variety of competing opinions; with the people being allowed the unfettered opportunity to weigh them and take what resonates with them.

The biggest impediment to the institutionalization of good governance in many African and other developing countries is the level of ignorance among the people on the basic functions and functioning of government. Policymakers complain that part of the challenge of communicating about development issues with the public is how little people understand the structure or responsibilities of the various government agencies working on important policy issues like health, education, agriculture, or trade.

Few people know about key elements of the policy process including the decision-making process, budgeting, and actual implementation phase. Civic education is also lacking in important areas like health, education, social welfare, culture, etc, where community workers in those sector can engage in dialogue with the populace in widespread media. Unfortunately for the Zimbabwean public, this role of the media is largely neglected as the mainstream media engage in politics. The situation is aggravated by the fact that community media which have become an effective tool of civic education in many developing countries are virtually non-existent in Zimbabwe.

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