

THE STATE OF JOURNALISM ETHICS IN ZIMBABWE

J U L Y 2 0 1 3



VMCZ

VOLUNTARY MEDIA COUNCIL OF ZIMBABWE

PROMOTING MEDIA PROFESSIONALISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

THE STATE OF JOURNALISM ETHICS IN ZIMBABWE

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**A study conducted by Dr.Wallace Chuma, on Behalf
of the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe**

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ABBREVIATIONS

MDC-T	Movement for Democratic Change (Tsvangirai)
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change (Ncube)
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front)
ZUJ	Zimbabwe Union of Journalists
GNU	Government of National Unity
ZBC	Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation
ZBH	Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings
BAZ	Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe
AIPPA	Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act
POSA	Public Order and Security Act
ZMC	Zimbabwe Media Commission
MMPZ	Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe
VMCZ	Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe
GPA	Global Political Agreement
MISA	Media Institute of Southern Africa
ZINEF	Zimbabwe National Editors Forum
VOA	Voice of America (Studio 7)
VOP	Voice of the People
ZIANA	Zimbabwe Inter-African News Agency
ZMMT	Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

This study represents an attempt at taking stock of the health of the journalism profession in terms of ethical norms and practices in Zimbabwe. It is informed by the view that journalism plays a critical role in social and political processes and practices, and that despite the numerous shifts that have taken place to the profession partly because of the Internet and other information and communication technologies, journalism ethics still represent a key legitimating factor in the relationship between the profession and the broader society.

The study is based primarily on qualitative interviews with local journalists and civil society actors whose work involves journalism and the media. A secondary methodology involves close scrutiny of documentation on the socio-political economy of journalism practice in the country as well as elsewhere.

The critical aim is to get one's finger on the pulse of the ethical well-being of the profession, and doing so through dissecting the narratives that emerge from the journalists themselves. While by no means exhaustive, it provides an insightful entry point into the state of the state of the so-called 'noble profession', a situation which all the journalists interviewed agreed was far from healthy. The terminology they deploy paints a rather gloomy picture—from "intensive care" to "crisis", from "terrible" to "gone to the dogs".

Milder assessments simply refer to a profession that is facing "grave challenges".

But then, to paraphrase the late Chinua Achebe, we perhaps need to step back and establish the point at which 'the rain began to beat on us', i.e., how, when and why did the profession become what it is now. Here the accounts vary.

Older journalists who practised in the early independence days of the 1980s through to the turbulent 90s and who have lived to see the 'crisis now' paint a fairly nostalgic picture of the 1980s and early 1990s when the journalist still enjoyed significant agency vis-a-vis the constraining whims of the principals, whether political or corporate. Journalists then, they argue, could carry out their duties relatively autonomously and with minimal interference from the centres of power, and could, if it became necessary, successfully negotiate with or leverage their way around constraining power.

This journalistic autonomy, including financial autonomy given that the pay check was 'much better' then, is viewed as a central pillar to ethical practice. They point to 2000 as the *annus horibilis* of the profession, although not necessarily out of its own making. The governing Zanu PF party, facing the most serious threat to its political security from the then newly formed MDC, reconfigured the state in profoundly authoritarian ways, creating a 'military style' cabinet whose public face was a Minister of Information and Publicity with extended powers to destroy journalistic autonomy both in the public and private media sectors.

Journalists also point to the post-2000 era commonly referred to as the 'Zimbabwe crisis' as an era that impoverished both the professional as a human being and the profession as a whole. It is from this condition that both are yet to fully recover.

This study notes that the loss of journalistic agency, perhaps along with social capital, continues to present journalists with myriad and complex ethical dilemmas as they mediate the story of a society in a complex, contradictory transition.

The gap between the journalist observer and the political activist/commisariat officer has all but vanished; the proverbial two sides of the story have long given way to outright propaganda on behalf of political or other 'clients'; entertainment, sport and business journalism is largely promotional stuff because journalists are on the payroll of celebrities and corporate elites; diversity, pluralism, balance and rigour in stories are all so yesteryear, so is the old-age ethical premise of the need to minimise harm in reportage.

It gets worse at election time, when journalists follow politicians into what one of the respondents referred to as the 'trenches', fixed positions from which they fire their volleys. The bifurcated nature of national politics-and by extension most facets of public life-easily, perhaps naturally, spilled into the realm of journalism.

Journalists are all too aware of all this, and the impact these practices have on the credibility of the profession. About time, said some of the respondents, the profession did some serious introspection, an indaba perhaps. A range of factors also emerge as likely to lead to an improved ethical environment. These include better working conditions for journalists, a better macro-economic environment, a less legally restrictive and more democratic media policy environment, and a stronger and more responsive journalism union.

All these are very important factors, but probably not adequate on their own. The journalism profession is facing serious ethical and in many cases even existential challenges globally, largely because the arrival of the Internet and related technologies has spawned alternative, decentralised and de-institutionalised newsmaking practices on a scale never imagined before. News media across the world are continuously grappling with this changing terrain of journalism practice, and in some cases traditional ethical values premised on the assumption that the journalist is the (permanent) producer of content while the audience/reader/viewer is the (permanent) consumer are increasingly coming up for debate.

At the same time, there remain certain fundamental 'old school' values such as truthful story-telling, fairness and balance, accountability and independence, which remain pivotal to the profession. How the Zimbabwean journalism profession mediates between these and the demands of the Internet era, and how the profession regains or fights to regain its agency in an environment of political and economic flux, are all critical for the renewal of the Zimbabwean journalism.

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology for this study was in-depth interviews with Zimbabwean journalists and civil society actors who work closely with journalists, such as MISA, MAZ and others. The interviews were mostly done face-to-face, although in a few cases via email.

Before embarking on in-depth interviews, the researcher elicited some important insights on ethical implications of certain prevalent journalistic practices through 'informal' discussions in 'public' spaces populated by journalists, such as the Media Centre boardroom (a facility patronised by journalists for filing their stories because of its favourable rates for Internet access). In such cases, the researcher made it known that the discussion was part of a larger project on the state of journalism ethics. The importance of these 'informal' interactions is that they helped the researcher have a sense of the situation on the ground, and also helped frame the questions posed during in-depth interviews.

In addition to interviews, this study also built on a close review of literature, both journalistic and academic, which relates both to the subject of media ethics as well as the political economy of journalism practice in the context of Zimbabwe and Africa. News reports and commentary from newspapers, radio, television and the Internet were scrutinised with a view to establishing the reportorial and framing practices and the extent to which they reflected certain ethical or unethical underpinnings. The rationale for the scrutiny of this literature was not to engage in a sustained content analysis exercise, but to provide a contextual background to the study.

Twenty journalists and five respondents from civil society were interviewed for this study during a three week period between the last week of June and the second week of July 2013, and were selected largely through snowball sampling. These included journalists (both male and female) from the state and private media, freelance journalists, junior reporters as well as editors, journalists who practiced after 2000 and senior journalists whose careers date back to the 1980s.

The decision to select a diversity of respondents was informed by the need to get a range of perspectives on the state of the profession. This was particularly important in a situation where the polarised nature of national politics often played itself out in the media, and where journalists not only reported on the political contestations of the day, but also in some cases became political activists themselves in the service of their political principals.

The timing of the interviews-just a few weeks before the harmonised elections on 31 July-was a limiting factor to the number of respondents who actually availed themselves to be interviewed. Nearly a dozen journalists who initially agreed to be interviewed eventually became unavailable, citing commitments to the big story of the impending elections. However, it can be argued that while the size of the sample could perhaps be bigger, it is diverse and representative enough to shed useful insight on the subject in question. The journalists interviewed were attached to the following media organisations: Zimbabwe Independent, the *Herald*, the *Standard*, *Newsday*, *Southern Eye*, *Sunday Mail* and the ZBC.

Freelance stringers for VOA, and VOP were also interviewed. The researcher also made contacts with journalists at the *Daily News* as well as ZUJ, sent questions by email in

both cases after telephonic discussions, but received no responses at the time of writing, which was three weeks later.

Researching media practices that may be deemed corruptive and therefore morally unacceptable is inherently fraught with methodological challenges. The most obvious is the unavailability of reliable data because of the secretive nature of corrupt transactions, especially in the case of what is commonly referred to as 'brown envelope' syndrome. The other challenge is that the respondents are more likely to refer to the prevalence of corrupt practices elsewhere, for example, at other news organisations, or among other journalists they know, and not among themselves. The other challenge pertains to anonymity.

Most of the respondents in this study requested anonymity for fear of possible victimisation at their places of work, among other reasons, but some were comfortable with being cited and identified. Consistent with best practice in cases where one researches human subjects, requests for anonymity were granted.

3. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: MAPPING THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN ZIMBABWE

The Zimbabwean media environment in 2013 still, to a large extent, reflects what Ronning and Kupe (2000) characterise as the contradictory dual legacy of democracy and authoritarianism. This is manifested in the mainly liberalised print media, a state-dominated though (controversially) partially liberalised broadcasting sector, and a legal and policy environment that poses significant impediments to media freedom. The print sector is fairly diverse in terms of ownership, although the declining economics associated with the sector in the digital era have created a scenario where the state-owned Zimbabwe Newspapers group (Zimpapers) and privately-owned Alpha Media Holdings control the sector and the barriers to entry remain high to new entrants.

The former owns big national titles such as *The Herald* and *Sunday Mail*, as well as regional titles such as *The Chronicle* and *Sunday Times* (Bulawayo) as well as the *Manica Post* in Mutare. The company also owns the country's three tabloid newspapers, namely *Kwayedza*, *H-Metro* (Harare) and *B-Metro* (Bulawayo). Alpha Media Holdings owns the political-financial weekly *Zimbabwe Independent*, Harare-based *Newsday* and Bulawayo-based *Southern Eye*.

Significant players on the market outside of these two stables (Zimpapers and Alpha Media Holdings) include *Daily News* (Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe) and the *Financial Gazette*, Zimbabwe's oldest financial weekly, owned by Modus Publications.

There are also a dozen or so small-circulation regional newspapers run by private companies and by the state-owned New Ziana. Following the attainment of independence in 1980, both Ziana and Zimpapers were housed by the new government under the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) which acted as a buffer between the state and the public media, resulting in a relatively autonomous and arguably robust public press during the first two decades of independence.

Although not entirely free from the influences and caprices of the state, the public media in the 1980s and 1990s provided key spaces for critical debate around a range of national topics, from corruption scandals such as Willowgate, to governance issues such as the one-party state, and to economic topics such as whether the country should adopt the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). Some of the most respected editors and journalists in Zimbabwe were attached to the public press in during the first two decades of independence.

Alongside the public press also existed a small but vibrant private media sector that included among others the weekly *Financial Gazette* and monthly *Moto* magazine in the 80s and *Daily Gazette* and *Horizon* magazine in the 1990s. The situation was, however, different with broadcasting, which remained firmly state-controlled and, as is highlighted later in this report, only reluctantly partially liberalised in 2012.

The media situation changed significantly after 2000, following the emergence of a strong opposition and the ensuing fierce contestation for state power. Facing arguably the most serious threat to its political security, Zanu PF restructured the state in a way that made it less tolerant and open to opposition, more militarised, authoritarian

and predatory. In 2001, the state dissolved ZMMT, in effect removing that 'buffer', resulting in the Department of Information and Publicity in the President's Office assuming direct control of editorial processes and decisions at both Zimpapers and Ziana, which was renamed 'New Ziana'.

Although a state-issued licence has been a requirement for one to open up a newspaper or magazine since the promulgation of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (Aippra) in 2002, the print media sector has been one where private players have existed alongside the public media since independence, as outlined above. Following the formation of the GNU in 2009, several new publications were licensed, and this created more diversity on the market, although a predominantly urban-based and English-speaking one.

Of the post-2009 players, a few such as privately-owned *Newsday* and *Daily News*, as well as state-owned tabloids *H-Metro* and *B-Metro* survive, while several have either closed shop owing to viability problems or simply suffered still birth. The latter is true of a few provincial papers, which had licenses granted, but could not raise sufficient funding to begin operations. Between 2000 and 2009, the Zimbabwean economy experienced a precipitous decline, with unemployment rising to beyond 90 percent and most industries either closing down or relocating. Given the media's reliance on advertising, the decline of the economy dealt a serious blow to the operations of the media, and by extension to the general welfare of journalists.

If the print sector can be described as generally liberalised, the same cannot be said of the airwaves without some cautious qualification. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting

Corporation (later Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings) was the sole broadcaster for the first three decades of independence, and only reluctantly ceded this control in 2012 following the controversial licencing of two private commercial radio stations, Star FM and ZiFM. The licencing was controversial because one of the recipients of the licence is the state-owned Zimpapers which dominates the print sector, while the second recipient is a company whose owners are known to be Zanu PF supporters or sympathisers. The licensing authority, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), is also politically aligned to Zanu PF.

In addition to locally-based news media, the Zimbabwe media environment also consists of Diaspora-based media which report primarily on the events and processes in the country, and relies predominantly on Zimbabwe-based journalists some of whom also write for the local media. Perhaps the most prominent among this section of the media are short wave radio stations (whose critics refer to them as pirate radio stations) that include SW Radio Africa, Voice of America Studio Seven (VOA) and Voice of the People (VOP).

In an environment characterised by state domination of the airwaves, the short wave stations arguably provided alternative spaces for the articulation of voices other than the 'official' ones. At the same time they are often criticised, sometimes justifiably, for articulating a narrow 'regime change' agenda more with a view to propitiating their funders than to promote democracy and active citizenship in Zimbabwe. In addition to radio stations, there are also several websites which also carry Zimbabwean news. These include NewZimbabwe.com, Zimbabwesituation.com, Zimbabwe Online, among others.

Zimbabwean journalists operate in an environment that both enhances and impedes their work. With regard to the former, the media enjoy constitutional protections of freedom of the press and freedom of expression, thanks to the new constitution passed at the beginning of 2013. Although there are instances where journalists are subjected to forms of violence which range from harassment to arrests and detention, there are also legal avenues for them to challenge these arrests.

The policy and regulatory environment remains a key impediment to journalism practice. Despite the fairly generous provisions of the new constitution, Zimbabwe still retains a plethora of restrictive laws including Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), among others. These pieces of legislation were introduced by the Zanu PF government in the immediate post-2000 era, a period characterised by frenzied law-making by an increasingly authoritarian state as strategy to contain dissent. The more problematic aspects of these laws include the compulsory licensing of journalists and media houses, the cumbersome and expensive requirements for one to apply for a broadcasting license, the restrictions to freedom of expression and assembly, among others.

The formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2009 created hope within civil society that a process of credible media reforms would be initiated and result in the creation of a diverse and pluralistic media environment. The Global Political Agreement (GPA), the document that founded the GPA, recognised *“the importance of the right to freedom of expression and the role of the media in a multi-party democracy”* (GPA, 2008, Article 19). Under the GNU, the statutory Zimbabwe Media

Commission (ZMC) was born, with the task of licencing new and old media as well as journalists.

While the ZMC can be credited with licensing the new publications which appeared on the scene after 2009, its very legitimacy and role in relation to the need for credible media reforms can be questioned. As a statutory regulator, the ZMC is a product of a compromise between the two major political parties, Zanu PF and MDC-T, and this is problematic in the sense that the institution that is supposed to oversee ethical journalism practice is itself an appendage of political centres of power. The other tricky issue is that while the ZMC, which is in charge of a media that is otherwise in its death throes (print media) reports to Parliament, the BAZ, which handles the far more important and pervasive broadcasting sector, is accountable to the executive and therefore remains at its beck and call.

In response to the reluctance of the state to leave the profession to regulate itself, the media and civil society groups teamed up to create a voluntary media system-through the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe-to provide a self regulatory framework for the profession. This came against the background of the declining ethical standards in most of the country's newsrooms especially after 2000, and the different approaches that the state and civil society preferred as a way of rectifying the situation. Where the state-which was itself a key player in the degeneration of ethical journalism-preferred statutory control (which was often applied selectively), civil society groups and the private media preferred a voluntary self-regulatory regime.

Although the merits of statutory regulation viz a viz self-regulation remain a subject of debate globally, not least

in the aftermath of the recent hacking scandal and the resultant report by the Leveson Inquiry in the UK, self-regulation remains a generally accepted method in democracies. In countries such as South Africa, the media industry itself moved to strengthen the self-regulatory regime through “independent co-regulation” which increases the representation of ordinary members of the public in the institution of the Press Ombudsman.

4. KEY FINDINGS

As outlined in the introduction, there was unanimity among both journalists and civil society respondents that the journalism profession in Zimbabwe is currently saddled with a serious ethical and credibility deficit. The reasons for the decline of the ethical standards and the manifestations of ethical malpractices are discussed below.

4.1 The contribution of the state to the decline of journalism ethics

For most of the journalists interviewed, especially senior journalists who practised both before and after the year 2000, the state came across as a defining factor in the decline of journalism ethics. Following his party's narrow victory in the June 2000 parliamentary elections, President Mugabe appointed a 'military style' cabinet whose role was to 'fight' both the state's 'enemies' in the West who were opposed to the land reform programme as well as their local representatives or 'puppets' both in politics and in civil society, including the media.

The public face of the 2000 cabinet was the newly formed Department of Information and Publicity in the President's Office, which replaced the disbanded Ministry of Information. Headed by energetic academic Professor Jonathan Moyo, the new Department tightened the government's grip over both the ZBC and Zimpapers, while also adopting both legal and extra-legal measures to discipline a critical and oppositional privately owned press. The result was the creation of a bifurcated media environment characterised by a genuflecting and 'patriotic' state media on the one hand and a vociferously 'oppositional' private press fighting on the side of the political opposition.

Former state media journalist Tapfuma Machakaire recalls how things changed for journalists after 2000:

I was among the few black journalists who came in shortly after independence. I started practising in 1982. I can tell you that we had some latitude, then, to be balanced especially when reporting politics. There was minimal interference from the state at the time. But this all changed in 2000. The new Minister of Information interfered on a daily basis. He not only phoned and gave directives to editors, but even junior reporters. During his tenure as minister, on average editors at Zimpapers lasted a maximum of 6 to 7 months. There was a frenzy of hiring and firing. Most of the seasoned editors were replaced by Moyo's appointees who in some cases had just over one year's experience. (Interview, 27 June, 2013).

At the height of the political and economic crisis, the state framed its 'struggle' in Manichean terms of patriot and traitor. As Ranger (2005) observes, the state promoted a version of nationalism that essentially saw Zimbabweans as either patriotic and therefore Zanu PF supporting and authentic, or opposition supporters and therefore enemies and traitors. The state media was mobilised to propagate this version of history and any journalists or editors who doubted or queried this narrative were swiftly offloaded from the state media.

Some of the former state media journalists interviewed spoke of how the Minister, Permanent Secretary or other senior officials in the Department of Information would phone them to dictate stories they wanted printed in the paper or carried on television. In some cases, the journalists said, they would wake up in the morning to their shock

upon seeing the day's paper carrying stories under their by-lines, but which they had not authored at all. In all these cases the stories were of a political nature, delegitimising the political opposition.

On the other side of the aisle, the privately owned media found itself locked in the embrace of opposition politics, which at the time represented a coalition of various interests including labour, capital and civil society, all brought together by the desire to change a government that had superintended over the collapse of the economy. The fact that the state's frenzied legislative interventions such as AIPPA and POSA targeted primarily privately owned media houses and their journalists did not help matters.

Privately owned newspapers such as the *Daily News*, *Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard* became the fiercest defenders of the opposition MDC, pitted against the state media such as the *Herald*, *Sunday Mail* and the state broadcaster, ZBC. In this highly polarised environment created by political principals, adherence to journalistic principles such as balance and fairness, truth-telling, accuracy and independence became impossible.

The period commonly referred to as the 'Zimbabwe crisis' therefore presented journalism with stark ethical choices that left the profession at the beck and call of power centres within the state and political opposition. As Chuma (2010), notes; "One outcome of the post-2000 media and communication policies in Zimbabwe has been the erosion of the nominal agency powers of journalistic practice, leaving the profession of journalism largely at the mercy of political and socio-economic power hierarchies. The ownership factor [has] become a much more pronounced one in journalistic practice" (2010, p. 99)

Commenting on the same politics of journalism practice during the same period, Mano (2005) argued that both public and private media owners created 'regimes' that undermined professional and ethical roles of journalists, leading to a scenario where journalists themselves "resigned to these developments, seeing them as normal." (p.76).

In an interview in 2004, former editor of the Sunday Mail, William Chikoto, explained the polarised media framing of political life after 2000 in this way: "It's not us journalists who are polarised. It is the forces behind the media that are polarised. If these forces converge, you'll find that there'll be convergence in the media as well" (Quoted in Chuma, 2010, p.99).

The polarisation of the media and the ethical deficit in the profession were identified as urgent issues requiring attention by the political principals who negotiated the Global Political Agreement in September 2008, which resulted in the formation of a Government of National Unity in February 2009. The GPA agreement, in its Article 19, called for media reform as a matter of urgency, and specifically called for an end to polarised and unethical journalism which often degenerated into hate speech.

There was consensus among journalists and members of civil society interviewed that the period following the inauguration of the GNU witnessed a thawing of relations between the private media and the state on the one hand and the state media and formerly opposition political parties (the two formations of the MDC). Reportage on both sides became more analytical, fair and balanced and there was a semblance of normalcy in the profession. It was almost as nostalgic a moment as the euphoria of the immediate post-independent era.

Said Machakaire; *“Soon after the GPA, we saw a moderation of reportage. There was a semblance of normalcy. The environment was one of optimism. But then it did not last long. Once differences among the principals began to emerge, politicians went back into the trenches and the media followed them there”* (Interview, 27 June, 2013).

This development can be explained in at least two ways; the journalists following the politicians into the trenches can be seen as a reflection of the publishing company’s editorial policies and therefore compliance was necessary if one were to keep their job, and also because politicians from the major political parties offered inducements to certain journalists to get positive coverage. Journalists interviewed explained it in both ways. What was interesting was that in the majority of cases the journalists were actually critical-often outright dismissive-of the political parties they openly supported in their published news stories and commentaries.

A *Herald* sub-editor interviewed had vivid memories of the early period of the GNU: *“During the early GPA days, we toned down our critique of the MDC. I remember we were even instructed to use those pictures of (MDC-T leader) Morgan Tsvangirai which featured him alongside President Mugabe and (Deputy Prime Minister) Arthur Mutambara, holding hands and all smiles. But then now it’s different. Any picture of Tsvangirai we publish must depict him in a state of confusion.”* (Interview, 22 June 2013).

The dissolution of Parliament and the announcement of election dates for the 2013 harmonised elections (31 July) set off a period of fierce contestation which brought

journalists back into the polarised camps reminiscent of the 'crisis' period. A freelance journalist interviewed said it was all about national politics and little else: "The big issue is politics. If you fix our politics, everything else will follow. All journalists know that they need to be ethical. None of the journalists disagrees with the VMCZ Code of Ethics." (Interview, 24 June 2013).

What emerges here is that the state contributed to the untenable ethical environment for journalists through both formal/legal and informal interventions in journalism practice as the ruling party fought to secure its political security in a context of unprecedented contestation for state power. At the same time, it also clear that the coalition of forces that sought to wrestle power from Zanu PF through elections beginning in 2000 also played its part in the degeneration of journalism ethics even if this was in response to the state's authoritarian interventions in the profession.

4.2 The contribution of poor working conditions to decline of journalism ethics

One of the issues that kept coming out during the interviews was the conditions under which journalists worked, especially in the period after 2000. The argument was that poor salaries and working conditions in an environment characterised by hyperinflation, high cost of living and pronounced social inequalities created a situation where journalists were easily vulnerable to being corrupted or engaging in unethical practices. There is no consensus in studies of corruption and bribery journalism on whether there is a correlation between low pay and susceptibility to corruption.

In his article interestingly titled; *"When your 'take home' can hardly take you home: moonlighting and the quest for survival in the Zimbabwean press"* (2010) media academic Hayes Mabweazara captures the tricky issue of the relationship between low pay and unethical journalistic practices in Zimbabwe.

He contends that a combination of moonlighting, bad treatment by editors, repressive conditions and poor salaries undermined the professionalism of journalists not only in Zimbabwe but in other African countries.

He adds: *"These conditions not only differentiate African journalists from their counterparts in the economically developed world of the North, but also illuminate how the conditions of material deprivation tend to subvert the conventionalised canons of ethical journalism such as independence and impartiality"* (2010: p. 433).

And yet other researchers on the African continent found no direct, causal relationship. In their study of Nigerian journalists, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2009) found that only 34 % of journalists agreed or strongly agreed that an increase in their salaries would curb what is commonly as the 'brown envelope' syndrome among journalists. The majority argued that a salary increment would not necessarily stop bribe-taking for journalists. Further, Lodamo and Skjerdal (2009) also question the direct/causal relationship between low pay and corruption by drawing attention to the fact that *"informal monetary incentives largely disappeared in European and North American journalism in the early 20th Century despite media workers continuing to earn very little"* (Quoted in Skjerdal, 2010, p. 388).

In interviews, Zimbabwean journalists and editors were split on this question. A senior journalist who is the Harare correspondent for an international broadcasting organisation argued that there was a direct causal relationship between low pay and the high incidence of bribery and rent-taking among Zimbabwean journalists. He said:

The main issue is definitely poor remuneration. You see, both public and private media houses have become increasingly profit-driven and are hardly investing in their own human resources. If you pay your journalist a pittance in an environment so tempting that even a priest can easily succumb, what do you expect? (Interview, 22 June 2013).

For many other journalists, especially junior reporters, the biggest source of frustration was the fact that while they were expected to behave ethically (i.e. not to take bribes) and make do with their low salaries-the average entry-level monthly pay for journalists is anything between US\$300-\$400 although the figures vary within and between institutions- their editors were generally living large and in some cases because of circumstances that were not above board ethically.

The overwhelming sentiment was one of being 'used' by the editors. They related an incident in which a reporter with one of the private newspapers got his hands on a 'scoop' involving a senior official at the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, pitched the story to his editor and, to his shock, got a call from the official he was investigating, being reminded that nobody would be a winner if that story was published. The editor was himself on the side of the RBZ official and, as expected, the story was never published.

A journalist with a state-owned daily newspaper was more forthright: “*Kana story ukasaidyira inodyirwana editor*”. Loosely translated this means that if the journalist working a story fails to ‘eat’ out of it, then somebody else will definitely do so, in this case the editor. It works like this: A person or institution being investigated by the journalist and therefore likely to receive negative coverage will either convince the journalist to drop the story altogether for a ‘fee’, or if the journalist insists, convince the editor to do so, for a much larger ‘fee’. In the latter case, the editor will not be obliged to explain the circumstances surrounding the dropping of the story to his junior.

When the matter involves editors or other upper echelons of media management, who enjoy much better remuneration than junior reporters, the argument in favour of a causal relationship between low pay and unethical behaviour becomes difficult to sustain. Dumisani Muleya, the Editor of The *Zimbabwe Independent*, dismissed the theory of low pay as a key factor to bribe-taking among journalists: “*The question of low salaries as an excuse for corruption is unacceptable. There’s no direct correlation. We can double your pay, and you can still be corrupt if you like.*” (Interview, 25 June, 2013).

One could argue that the Zimbabwe case is a complex one where a simple cause-effect model cannot explain the full story. It is fact that the general working conditions for journalists, from salaries to other incentives such as car and housing loans and the like, are not attractive, at least in the eyes of the interviewees for this study. Media organisations themselves are operating in a tough economic environment and are also having to adjust their operations profoundly to survive in the era of the Internet.

In these conditions, journalists are often faced with tough ethical choices. To augment their incomes, both bribe-taking and moonlighting-the latter a practice of clandestinely incorporating extra-journalistic paid work for third party 'clients' into their daily routines-become real options.

It emerged from interviews that some media organisations adopted policies where their full-time journalists could freelance for other, especially foreign, news organisations for as long as they fulfilled their daily or weekly 'quotas' for their home publications. This way the organisations 'formalised' a practice that was already in existence, albeit illicitly and under pseudonyms. The foregoing explanation for the lure of unethical practice clearly makes sense in the particular circumstances in Zimbabwe. But it is inadequate on its own.

Unethical practices in Zimbabwean journalism should also be understood as *practices* in a broader context where they are somehow considered *normal*, whether those involved earn a pittance or not. As one senior journalist interviewed put it: *"The profession needs some serious introspection. We need look ourselves in the mirror. This is not normal, and we all know that it's not"* (Interview, 25 June 2013).

4.3 The absence of moral and thought leadership

Some of the journalists interviewed attributed the decline in professional ethics to the absence of moral and thought leadership both nationally and within the profession itself. One of the effects of the political and economic crisis that beset Zimbabwe especially between 2000 and 2008 was the flight of some of the country's top journalists into the Diaspora in search of the proverbial greener pastures.

The draconian media and security laws passed after 2000 not only created an environment in which the practice of journalism became increasingly risky, but also resulted in the closure of one of the country's biggest newspapers, *The Daily News*, which had dozens of journalists in its employ. *The Tribune* newspapers also met the same fate, throwing many journalists out of formal employment. Within the state media, the new regime of control under the Department of Information and Publicity drove out most seasoned journalists and replaced them with younger, probably more pliant ones.

The net effect of these developments at both the state and private media was the creation of a generational 'disconnect' in the profession within the country. It would be naïve to look back at the pre-2000 era as necessarily the golden age of media and journalism ethics and the period thereafter as the moment where the wheels naturally came off. But what is not in dispute is that the period after 2000 presented the profession-itself now dominated by a very young crop of journalists some of whom held very high positions but very little experience-with a raft of ethical challenges which it could have arguably handled better had the rapid departure of seasoned journalists not happened.

The issue of the absence of thought leadership was not just confined to journalism. The crisis in Zimbabwe created a society where ethical behaviour in just about every other facet of life became something secondary, unrewarded, perhaps even unnecessary. The popular national lingo became '*kukiya-kiya*' loosely translating into 'survival, by hook or crook'¹. This way of doing things permeated

¹ The phrase is considered to have emanated, at least publicly, from Finance Minister Tendai Biti who used it to explain how he would raise the huge funds provided for in his 2009 budget.

national politics where elections were routinely rigged (including primary elections within political parties); state institutions which became partisan, self-serving and extremely corrupt; businesses-big and small-which became theatres of avarice and malpractice; medical practitioners who charged patients stratospheric rates for sub-standard procedures; and a general environment which rewarded cutting corners and street-wisdom ahead of everything else.

It was an environment where ordinary citizens watched as government leaders gobbled several farms each first before handing the rest over as part of the land reform, and where national leaders bought scarce foreign currency at ridiculously low RBZ rates and sold it minutes later at the so-called 'black market', and were allowed to get away with it. Interestingly, it was also an environment where former leaders of the opposition, once in government as part of the GNU, embraced the project of primitive accumulation with the same gusto as those they formerly fought against.

Some of the journalists interviewed argued that this broader environment, both in the profession and in the country, created new 'norms' characterised by the survival-above-everything-else way of doing things and where ethics were rendered inconsequential and therefore lost their social capital.

4.4 The polarised nature of national politics

Probably the most often cited explanation for the decline in the quality of local journalism is the polarisation of national politics which followed the launch of the MDC in 1999 and the resulting fierce contestation for control of the state since then. It is commonly accepted that

journalism both shapes and is itself shaped by political and social processes. The agency of journalists varies from time to time depending on the nature and configurations of power in a particular society at any given time.

In the case of Zimbabwe, as highlighted earlier in this study, the heightened tussle for control of the state after 2000 resulted in the decline of journalistic agency. The political 'war' being fought at the ballots also became a 'media war' in and outside of newsrooms as the MMPZ correctly observed in its analysis of the media coverage of the June 2000 elections. Journalism became an extension of political activism both sides of the divide. Within the state media, Minister Jonathan Moyo, perhaps borrowing from then US President George W. Bush's characterisation of the world after 9/11, framed journalism practice as being either for or against the state, journalists were either patriotic or sell-outs. The repressive state would then descend on critical journalists it deemed sell outs, often violently. In response, the private media also closed ranks with the opposition in a convenience marriage brought about by mutually shared hostility towards Zanu PF.

At the peak of the polarisation, even spokespersons of key state institutions such as the police would not speak to or comment on stories being pursued by journalists from the private media, especially the *Daily News*. This created an ethical conundrum for journalists seeking to elicit the proverbial 'other side' of the story, especially those stories that implicated the state in human rights violations.

Opposition politicians would also often refuse to grant interviews or comments to state-employed journalists because the latter consistently delegitimised them in their

news stories anyway. The acrimonious source-journalist relationship gave birth to an 'industry' of anonymous sources peddled in stories carried by new reports across the political divide, stories which clearly pushed partisan agendas.

4.5 The role of the Internet and new media

The deterioration of the economy and the escalation of violent political contestation in Zimbabwe ironically coincided with the rapid uptake of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) both in the country and on the continent. Where access to both the mobile phone and the Internet were considered creature comforts exclusive to yuppies in the 1990s, the post-2000 era witnessed the proliferation of ICTs in Zimbabwe, largely thanks to massive investments in the sector by corporates.

At the same time, the government's restrictive media policies resulted in the rapid growth of a highly critical and often polemical Internet based media operated by both journalists and non-journalists based in the Diaspora. Most of these news websites were based in the UK, US, Canada and South Africa. In addition, the closure of broadcasting space to private players in Zimbabwe also resulted in the birth of 'pirate radios' hosted from overseas and broadcasting into the country via the Internet and shortwave. The radio stations and news websites discussed earlier in this study (VOA, SW Radio Africa, BOP, NewZimbabwe.com, Zimsituation, etc) all belong to this category).

These developments created opportunities for citizens to access a variety of media options, while for local journalists this presented opportunities for freelance work in an environment characterised by very high levels of

unemployment. At the height of the Zimbabwe crisis, the 'Zimbabwe story' was among the most sought-after stories for both the African and global media. For local correspondents filing for Diaspora websites and 'pirate' radio stations, the ethical implications were twofold.

Firstly, many of the correspondents were already in the fulltime employ of local media, including the state media, which did not allow freelancing for 'hostile' media. This led to moonlighting, where journalists filed stories for both their full time and part-time employers simultaneously, using pseudonyms in stories filed for the latter. Secondly, as the Zimbabwe story kept its top rankings in an Internet environment characterised by constant demand for fresh and juicier copy, there was an upsurge of half-baked, sensational and often highly partisan stories in cyberspace.

These stories were often based on anonymous sources, and the journalists who penned them hid behind pseudonyms. Located in the safe locales of the Diaspora, the editors of these websites were also free to publish these stories in the knowledge that the local laws of Zimbabwe would not affect them. Many of the journalists interviewed viewed the proliferation of these websites and pirate radio stations as a sort of double-edged sword; bringing media diversity and pluralism for citizens and opportunities for work for journalists on the one hand, and contributing to the degeneration of journalism ethics on the other.

5. MANIFESTATIONS OF UNETHICAL CONDUCT BY JOURNALISTS

Having discussed the factors identified by journalists and civil society actors as contributing to an untenable environment for ethical journalism practice, it is important to also highlight the specific manifestations of a corrupted journalistic ethic in Zimbabwe. From the interviews, the predominant manifestations emerged as the rampant practice of corruption and bribery as well as the proliferation of propaganda journalism as reporters transformed themselves into extensions of political parties.

5.1 The 'brown envelope' syndrome in journalism

The practice whereby journalists receive money—often secretly and for their own personal use—from sources in order to influence coverage for the better has been the subject of much research, academic or otherwise (see, for example, Skjerdal, 2010; Mawezara, 2010; Kruger, 2004; Lukulunga, 2012). Many studies of African journalism ethics identify this practice, popularly known as 'brown envelope syndrome' as pervasive on most parts of the continent. The practice manifests itself in different ways, and is given so many different names. It is known as *coupage* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which loosely translates into 'gift', (Lukulunga, 2012); *gombo* in Cameroon where it is likened to some form of professional prostitution (Ndangam, 2006), *gatu* in Liberia where it depicts some kind of gratuity given to buy good publicity; and *ndalama yamatako* in Zambia, which literally means 'money of the buttocks' but implies that the payment constitutes a form of 'sitting allowance' for journalists who sit through lengthy press briefings (Skjerdal, 2010).

In Zimbabwe, the brown envelope has its fair share of nomenclature. Journalists at the ZBC call it *dzudzo*, which refers to the clandestine payment one gets from the source after a doing a positive story on them. It is also known as a cut, which depicts a picture of deal-making where each of the participants gets his pound of flesh when the deal goes through. In this case the 'deal' is considered to have sailed through once the story is published.

Another term for it is *bhegi*, which simply means bag, which is presumably where the money is kept. A senior journalist working for a state-owned daily newspaper captured how the practice works succinctly: "On the very morning the story appears in the paper, you phone the guy (source) and say, '*ko mudhara story maiona here, irimo mubepa*' (have you seen the story yet? Check it out in today's paper). He will know what this means and do what he needs to do" (Interview, 25 June, 2013).

There are also names attributed to sources and journalists who excel in either demanding or giving out bribes. Journalists who gain notoriety for seeking and accepting bribes are referred to as *toll gates*, and from the interviews, it emerged that both private and state media have their fair shares of *toll gates*. Politicians, businessmen, musicians and others who are generous with bribes are known variously in journalistic circles: a government minister who generously parcels out residential stands to journalists in return for positive coverage is known as *bhiza* (horse), the code name for a musician who is liberal with his wallet is *lunch box*, while the generic term for high paying sources is *vanobuda mukaka* (literally, those who can be milked).

As outlined earlier, all the journalists and civil society actors interviewed for this study admitted that that the

profession was in terrible state ethically. While some, mainly senior journalists, would not admit to be accepting bribes themselves, junior reporters were more forthright. Said one junior reporter: "Investigative journalism where I work is definitely not what lecturers in journalism school said it was. The primary reason for investigative journalism is to swindle money from whoever you're investigating. And if you don't, as a reporter, the editor will certainly eat. And be assured you won't get a cent" (Interview, 15 July 2013).

A reporter with a local tabloid newspaper remembered an incident in which the paper was in possession of graphic sexual images of a young woman which it intended to publish the next day as they were part of a very newsworthy story. The woman's mother came up to the paper's premises and tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the reporter to drop the story, even after hinting that she was prepared to pay him up to US\$1000. The woman then approached one of the paper's senior editors, and held a lengthy meeting with him behind closed doors. The story was mysteriously dropped the next day.

The editor did not explain why. *"I know he made some cash out of this. And I was stupid enough to let him do it"*, he said. A reporter with the ZBC linked the practice to the conditions under which journalists at the institution were working. "Look, we haven't received our salaries since March (2013). And we know that our bosses are living large. How do you expect us to get by, pay our rents and so forth", she said. Politicians, businessmen, aspiring celebrities and others wanting to access television coverage somehow had to pay, she said. *"Unoda kubuda pa TV kuti waitei"* (literally, what have you done to deserve coming out on television) she said, adding that sometimes even vox pops were stage managed and featured only members of the public who were prepared to pay the reporter some kind of token.

So pervasive is the brown envelope syndrome in newsroom that journalists who do not practise it are viewed by some of their counterparts as downright silly. One senior journalist who said her religious convictions forbade her from taking bribes said she was often derided by her colleagues. “*Unonzwa vachitaura kuti anoita kunge ndiye akaivamba (newspaper name given), manje achabva pano asina chaakabata...*” (literally, you hear them saying she behaves as if she’s the one who founded this paper, the day she leaves this place she’ll leave empty-handed).

In the cycle of corruption, even sub-editors who are normally bound in newsrooms are not immune, said one reporter. In circumstances where the editor insists on publishing a negative story on a personality or institutions which normally bribes well, the journalist said it was normal practice to wait until the editor knocked off late at night and then convince the night-duty sub-editor laying out the story to place it on the inconsequential pages of the paper where it attracts very little public attention. The subject of the story would, of course, pay and the proceeds would be shared between the reporter and the sub-editor.

The other interesting anecdote given by journalists involves diamond mining companies operating in the Chiadzwa diamond fields. These companies would from time to time organise press tours of the diamond fields, and invited journalists from both the state and private media. “At the beginning of each tour”, said one journalist, “you sign up for a *per diem*, usually something like US\$ 350 per day, and normally you’re there for two days. The tricky thing is that you can only get the cash after returning from the Chiadzwa tour. You would be foolish to come back and file a negative story and risk the *per diem*. Doesn’t quite make sense”, he said.

5.2 The entrenchment of propaganda journalism

Besides the 'brown envelope' syndrome in journalism, the degeneration of mainstream journalism into propaganda was cited by respondents as a manifestation of the decay of ethics in current journalism in Zimbabwe. As highlighted earlier, the co-option of journalists into political camps happened under conditions of extreme political polarisation occasioned by contestation for state power. What this means is that propaganda journalism on both sides of the media divide became an expression partly of a profession in ethical decay and partly a manifestation of the bifurcation of national politics.

Propaganda journalism takes manifests itself in different forms in Zimbabwean media. It includes editorialising stories with the result that facts and opinion are recklessly collapsed, the instances where journalists openly write as if they are a publicity wing of the political parties, and so forth. Said Misa director, Nhlanhla Ngwenya:

We have lots of instances where stories journalists' own opinions are presented masquerading as national sentiment. Then there's the disease of labeling those whom the media regard as enemies of their own political principals. We have clearly made the abnormal the standard. Once you entrench non-professionalism, it becomes the norm. The problem is so serious that it makes it difficult for us as media reform advocates when we approach state authorities to lobby for self regulation. They remind us of just how rotten the profession and justify their reluctance to endorse self- regulation. (Interview, 24 June 2013).

The respondents noted that propaganda journalism was not confined to the realm of politics reporting. Because many of the journalists have become embedded to corporates and to celebrities, both business and entertainment journalism also degenerated into promotional publicity. Where one would expect of journalistic rigour and balance, one would be confronted with fawning appraisal of personalities and institutions based not on evidence provided but on who is paying which journalist and how much, said the respondents.

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

There are very serious and grave violations of ethics now, there's no question about that. I think we all need serious introspection as journalists. To have a frank discussion about the state of our profession. (Dumisani Muleya, Interview, 25 June 2013".

This study used as its entry point the premise that ethics in journalism still constitute a key legitimising factor in the relationship between the profession and the citizenry, both in Zimbabwe and globally. Through a series of interviews with media practitioners themselves and some actors within civil society, the overwhelming picture which emerged was one of a profession in a state of moral and ethical degeneracy. The factors cited for this state of affairs vary, from the role of the authoritarian state to the crisis in the economy, from the proliferation of the Internet-based new media to the absence of thought leadership in the profession.

What was probably encouraging is that while acknowledging the messy state of affairs in journalism ethics, the respondents were optimistic that the situation could be salvaged. Nearly all the respondents argued in favour of the initiation of profession-wide dialogue about the state of journalism as a starting point. Some referred to this as a process of 'introspection', others simply called it a 'stock-taking exercise'.

There is no doubt that the Zimbabwean media have played and continue to play important roles in narrating the multifaceted story of a country going through multiple, difficult and often contradictory transitions. The press has not only been mediating these transitions; they have also

been key players in the shaping of the same, and, as highlighted in this study, in ways often deficient ethically. To reclaim lost ethical ground, journalists need to go beyond just introspection. They need to follow this up with creating and fully subscribing to self-regulatory mechanisms which have 'teeth' and therefore effective.

The profession needs to demonstrate that it can clean the ethical mess itself and use that as a strategy to leverage the state to fully accede to self-regulation. Related to the above, the state needs to be convinced that it has no business running an arsenal of both electronic and print media and deploying it for partisan projects especially at election time. The experience of the post-2000 period shows that the manipulation of state media to serve the ruling party agenda creates a dichotomy where the private press embraces oppositional politics and adopts a 'fight back' strategy to contest the 'official' state-sanctioned narrative of political life, and the ethics fall away on both sides in the process.

One of the sore points of the journalism profession in Zimbabwe has been weak unionisation. The Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) replaced the Rhodesian Guild of Journalists-known for being pliant and ineffective-after independence, and largely maintained the same tradition. Although respondents pointed to a few initiatives undertaken by ZUJ, initiatives such as mid-career training opportunities, procurement of residential stands for journalists and so forth-there was unanimity around the general weakness of the union.

Currently riven by legitimacy issues, including allegedly rigged elections, and dependant on donor funding for day to day operations, the union has not been able to stamp its authority on ethical matters for journalists. And yet,

because of the numbers it commands in its ranks, ZUJ can play a key role in bringing the issue of journalism ethics back onto the professional agenda at a national level. Its position would in principle allow ZUJ not only to wield the moral-ethical card on the journalists, but also to mediate between its members and employers-both state and private sector-on issues of improved working conditions, issues which were cited by respondents as partly contributing to unethical practices.

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