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Mugabe's Media War: How New Media Help Zimbabwean Journalists Tell Their Story

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Background

It is April 1995, and I've just graduated from one of southern Africa's best journalism schools, the Harare Polytechnic. It is time to put into practice what I learned over the past two years. The assignment was easy. Soon after getting a job, the beats I concentrated on were the courts and consumer issues.

Fast forward to 2000 and things have fallen apart. The honeymoon is suddenly over and my journalism training does not help me. Many other Zimbabwean journalists are thrown into the deep end as the ZANU-PF government embarks on a violent campaign to remain in office.

Leaders we once viewed as liberators had turned against the people and the independent media for "telling it like it is." They started bombing printing presses, banning newspapers, arresting journalists and detaining them on spurious charges — all because they were viewed as "enemies" of the state for daring to tell the other side of the story.

Things started falling apart for the Zimbabwe government in the late 1990s when veterans of the 1970s liberation struggle forced President Robert Mugabe to print money and pay them huge bonuses that sent the Zimbabwe dollar tumbling. The veterans also demanded a monthly allowance. Meanwhile, life was getting increasingly difficult for the ordinary Zimbabwean as the cost of living skyrocketed.

The country's umbrella labor body, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), spoke out against the opulence that characterized the lives of the few rich in the government while the masses suffered. The ZCTU would eventually lead the formation of a fledgling opposition political party, the

Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), that wrestled 57 seats from the ruling ZANU-PF party at its first attempt at power in 2000.

The MDC was born out of a consultation process under the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) that was set up to fight the imposition of a government-sponsored draft constitution that would have entrenched Mugabe's rule in 1999. The NCA argued against the draft constitution and said it was not meant to change the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans but to entrench Mugabe's rule. When the draft was eventually put to the vote in February 2000, ZANU-PF tasted its first defeat at the hands of the electorate.

Mugabe accepted defeat on national television but soon thereafter blamed the defeat on white commercial farmers, most of them of British ancestry. Mugabe said the farmers poured money into the NCA to campaign against the draft constitution because it contained a clause that would allow his government to take land from the farmers without compensation except for improvements done to the farms.

The clause was inserted after the British government failed to honor its pledge to pay for Zimbabwe's land reforms. A land donor's conference in 1998 drew only pledges but nothing more from the international community. Western countries had, at the 1979 Lancaster House conference that brought independence to Zimbabwe, promised to help pay toward the reforms. Around that time, Claire Short, then the British Secretary for International Development, wrote to Harare saying she did not see any reason why her government should pay for Zimbabwe's land reforms because the pledge had been made by the previous Tory administration that had since been removed from office. Short argued that as a person with Irish roots she had also suffered the same fate as

Zimbabweans and would only help Harare if it came up with programs to alleviate poverty in the country.

The rejection of the draft constitution was particularly painful for the ZANU-PF government, especially with approaching parliamentary elections in June 2000. The no-vote triumph had actually been a vote of no confidence in Mugabe's government, since the majority of people that voted against it had not read or seen a copy of the draft constitution.

To limit the damage in the forthcoming parliamentary polls, the full government machinery went into overdrive with state-sponsored violence visiting all those thought to have been against the draft constitution. The first targets were the commercial farmers, opposition activists and civil leaders. Things that were about to happen were unprecedented, especially for Shona people in most parts of the country. However, people in the Midlands and Matebeleland provinces already had witnessed massacres in the early 1980s by Mugabe's army seeking to weed out "dissidents."

The first shock for the media and ordinary Zimbabweans was how far Mugabe's government was willing to go in employing violence to torture, maim and kill those it perceived to be its enemies. One of the main targets was the media.

I worked for a private popular daily newspaper, the *Daily News*, which started publishing in March 1999, six months before Morgan Tsvangirai and his labor colleagues in the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) formed the MDC. We became easy targets for the government. They branded independent journalists as terrorists, mercenaries and puppets used by the British and American governments to help effect "regime change" in Zimbabwe to stall Mugabe's land grabs.

In the run-up to the March elections I traveled the length and breadth of Zimbabwe to cover the massive political violence instigated by the so-called war veterans, ruling party youth militia, and saw the torturing of opposition activists that I had never imagined in a new Zimbabwe. The assignment was changing fast — it was becoming dangerous, especially as we traveled to visit those in safe houses littered around the country. I remember one day going to an opposition safe house and seeing horrendous injuries inflicted on opposition activists. One had the acronym MDC carved into his body with a knife by Mugabe’s militia.

I couldn’t eat any meat for some time after seeing so many injuries. Some were burnt with plastics, some were beaten, others were tortured through beatings on their feet. Women, known for exposing their bodies only to those who knew them, bared all to show the cruelty of those who deemed them enemies of the state and wanted to teach them lessons for daring to support an opposition party they thought could change their fortunes. No one had ever prepared me for this kind of journalism. Even our editors did not understand the stress we were going through to cover human rights abuses.

In April 2000, several journalists were assaulted. War veterans marched on our offices, threw stones and beat up a colleague covering their protest. On April 22, a bomb shook the offices of the *Daily News*, right under the editor-in-chief’s office. Earlier on April 6, while covering the damage to farms Mugabe was grabbing from white commercial farmers, Nyasha Nyakunu and Tsvangirai Mukwazhi of the *Daily News* were held for hours by youths and veterans armed with iron bars and other weaponry. A week earlier a photographer and a journalist with Agence France-Presse and a cameraman from the British news agency Reuters were threatened by fifty men armed with machetes and iron bars.

Almost every journalist had a story to tell, either of being followed, threatened, beaten, harassed or intimidated, and some journalists' homes were raided as criticism of the independent media by the government state media increased. When some Mugabe youths approached me and my colleagues from Reuters, one of the youths recognized me and tried to assault me. "So you are Sandra Nyaira," the young man said menacingly as he came toward me, his team in tow. "So you think you can challenge a whole minister and get away with it. Who do you think you are?" A senior colleague from Reuters saw what was about to happen as these youths closed in on us. He shouted, "Run!" and we did. An alert driver jumped into the car with all of us behind and drove us out of the lion's den.

At that time I realized this was not what I had signed up for. All the rules I knew were changing; the assignment was getting more and more risky. It suddenly became dangerous to work as a journalist in my own country. Our newspaper offices received numerous bomb threats from Mugabe's party to disrupt our work of telling the world the Zimbabwean story. In the following year, our printing presses were blown up, army style, and to date no one has been held responsible.

The media landscape was fast changing with threats, beatings and arrests of journalists over stories they reported. "Telling it like it is" was our motto at the *Daily News*, and we did our best to tell the other side of the story that the Mugabe regime did not want us to tell. Our stories made international headlines as the media all over the world picked them up.

The government enacted laws to intimidate the media from doing their job; the result was a massive shrinking of media space in the country with five newspapers, including the *Daily News*, forced to close by the government.

Journalists and media houses were being licensed and paying huge amounts of money to operate. Foreign journalists were thrown out of Zimbabwe as abuses on the ground grew worse. As I write this article Zimbabwe's restricted media landscape has continued to worsen since 2000.

The repressive media laws, such as Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) and the Interception of Communications Act, are still selectively used to restrict alternative sources of information that should be freely available. The selective application of these laws, coupled with the extra-legal attacks on media freedoms, have made the situation bleak for the Zimbabwean journalist.

Since the closure of the *Daily News*, the country is still without private daily newspapers; private, commercial or community radio stations; and independent television channels. Journalists continue to be harassed and unlawfully detained with at least one media death being recorded. The country's media industry has, as a result, shrunk into a very small sector in the past seven to eight years.

Mugabe's government continues to block access to foreign media seeking to cover the Zimbabwean story, especially to those they deem hostile, such as the BBC and the American-owned Cable News Network (CNN), thus depriving Zimbabweans of virtually any choice of alternative sources of information. The government has thrown the country back into the dark ages to protect a few individuals who do not want an empowered and well-informed Zimbabwe.

Enter New Media Technologies

Faced with this sad situation many journalists left the country and went into exile. Others remained but were out of employment and survived either by freelancing or hawking. With Mugabe's government becoming more autocratic, journalists in and outside Zimbabwe started to think of other ways through which they could continue to expose the massive corruption and human rights abuses. Guerrilla journalism, as described by Nigerian journalists during military rule in their country, became the order of the day. Because of the stifling political environment, government controls and hostility toward independent views, journalists turned to new media technologies.

These new technologies were quickly embraced, and a number of news websites and radio stations were created to serve the estimated 1.4 million out of a population of 13.5 million who had access to the Internet. News could then be packaged and filtered through to those at the grassroots level who badly needed the information. At least seven news websites and three radio stations have been launched outside the country by exiled Zimbabwean journalists.

In his book *Guerrilla Journalism: Dispatches from Underground*, Nigerian journalist Sunday Dare says, "Any people with a certain conscious retention of their inalienable freedoms, including that to determine their own fate, will not sit by idly watching the very future of society go to rot."¹ He continues:

Very often the conventional media and other forms of public forum like traditional media including the pulpits, different kinds of music genres and folklores are normally the ones embraced by the oppressed society. On its part the media, if it is progressive easily picks up the gauntlet teaming up with other opposition groups and elements from the civil

society to build a critical mass and lead the struggle for emancipation. The struggle soon takes various forms and goes in different directions...²

History is replete with examples of how the media in various countries, when viciously harassed, intimidated, beaten into submission, attacked and even outlawed as in Zimbabwe, rose against such challenges by coming up with new strategies to challenge those in power. New media technologies have largely been that new tool for Zimbabwean journalists and those fighting for change in the country.

The *Daily News's* founding editor Geoffrey Nyarota is one of the journalists who has taken to using new media, in particular the Internet, to continue telling the Zimbabwean story after leaving the country with state agents hot in pursuit. Now living in the United States, Nyarota started a web-based newspaper, the *Zimbabwe Times*, which he runs from his home in Worcester, Massachusetts. "If it wasn't for new media technologies — the Internet, to be precise — the *Zimbabwe Times* would not exist. Our paper is entirely web-based," says Nyarota. "Our correspondents file their copy mostly by email; occasionally they file by phone. So, indeed, while media space continues to shrink in Zimbabwe, the *Zimbabwe Times* has managed to bypass or evade stringent government controls because of its lofty position on the Internet, beyond the reach of government."³

Wilf Mbanga, the *Daily News's* founding managing director, also has started his own independent newspaper, the *Zimbabwean*, distributed in the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. Originally an online paper in London and South Africa, the *Zimbabwean* grew to become a print newspaper distributed in Zimbabwe every week, regardless of punitive tariffs and harassment by the government. "Modern technology has been a helpful partner in enabling us to

publish news about Zimbabwe from afar,” says Mbanga. “Digital media allows citizens within the country to report news and send us information. Reports received from non-journalists is perhaps the main source of the information contained in our columns.”⁴

The Zimbabwean media and activists have been innovative using new media to gather and disseminate news by and about Zimbabweans on the ground. One such method is called the Freedom Fone and is being tested by Kubatana Trust, an online community aimed at mobilizing Zimbabwean activists. The Freedom Fone, which employs both new and old technologies, will allow the poor with no access to the Internet to receive and contribute information in a practical and economical way. It gives Zimbabweans information from either their land, mobile or Internet phones through a voice database. The Freedom Fone allows people to dial specific numbers to get news and information and also to pose questions. Independent radio station content is also broadcast, along with frequently updated audio reports created specifically for Freedom Fone. It aims to allow anyone in Zimbabwe access to information as well as the ability to interact by asking and answering questions regardless of economic status.

SW RadioAfrica, a radio station based in London that broadcasts daily into Zimbabwe via shortwave, has also been using new methods to keep people informed. Gerry Jackson, formerly employed by the state broadcaster ZBC, challenged the government’s broadcasting monopoly in the Supreme Court in 1999 and won the right to set up Zimbabwe’s first independent radio station. But the government, using presidential powers to overturn the court ruling, shut it down at gunpoint after six days. In response to the court ruling, a Broadcasting Act was developed that made it impossible for anyone to create an independent

radio station in the country. “The country was in crisis, people were being killed, the rule of law had ceased to exist and government was on a major disinformation campaign and was using real hate speech,” says Jackson on what led to her set-up base in London, creating a new website and radio station.⁵ “It was vital that people had access to some form of free broadcast media to debate and discuss the crisis, and also that they had access to as much independent news, information and real facts as possible.” She tried to find a base in the region to broadcast from, but none of the governments were willing to take her team on.

Among other programs, the most efficient way the radio station uses to send news back into Zimbabwe has been through its SMS news program. “The SMS news that we send into Zimbabwe on a daily basis,” says Jackson, “ensures that news headlines reach a large audience, who also forward the SMS to an even larger audience, even when power outages mean they can’t listen to the radio, or they have no Internet access.”⁶ She adds, “The Internet has been incredibly useful in helping us all spread information as widely as possible.”

The satellite phone has also helped journalists whose organizations on the ground can afford to communicate with the outside world. The gadget is banned in Zimbabwe without a license granted by the government, but still has been used for the speedy spreading of information from the ground. Most of the officials, however, do not know the difference between the latest phones on the market and the satellite phones, so many have been able to use them in Zimbabwe.

Also using the award-winning SMS method to send news to Zimbabweans is Kubatana, the online community for Zimbabwean activists. Bev Clarke of Kubatana says her organization has engaged various methods of

reaching out to Zimbabweans — through newspaper adverts, calendars, postcards and leaflets. Even when involved in human rights work, one still needs to encourage people to “get onboard,” she says, and her organization, which is based in Harare, has played a major role. “We believe in using an integration of communication tactics — one size does not fit all and we have to be sensitive to the “digital divide” and try to share information with those who don’t have access to expensive resources such as computers and an Internet connection.”⁷

In light of this, Kubatana has used the Internet to build a major library of civic and human rights information. The online directory puts people and organizations in touch with each other by emailing newsletters to share content from its website, such as news of public meetings, scholarships, vacancies, etc. Kubatana, whose website was set up to improve the accessibility of human rights and civic information, has also established community blogs to encourage Zimbabweans to write about their local experiences.

Kubatana’s SMS news project has been aided by print newspapers that share content with websites to be distributed clandestinely to reach those who need information the most. “In order to do the sort of work that we do, courage is needed. Publishing in any form in Zimbabwe is activism, especially when you draw attention to social injustice,” says Clarke.⁸ She adds:

Much of our approach and philosophy is based on inclusion, optimism and the belief that we all have a role to play in our liberation. And that starts with not only speaking out about injustice but also to be willing to receive information about the injustice so that we don’t turn away from it.

There is no doubt that new media technologies have helped to keep the Zimbabwean crisis on the news agenda as news is gathered in the country,

published on websites or broadcast by exiled radio stations back into the country to reach those living in the dark, she says.

Francis Mdlongwa, director of the Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership at Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies in South Africa, says new media platforms, specifically the Internet, have allowed Zimbabwean journalists to continue to tell the story of the dramatic collapse of their country. "You only have to look at the sprouting of several online newspapers and news agencies which report on Zimbabwe to appreciate this point," says Mdlongwa. "Thus, we have news outfits such as ZimOnline, NewZimbabwe.com, Zimpatriot.com, etc. that are trying their best to tell the Zimbabwean story under very difficult conditions."⁹

Basildon Peta, a South Africa-based Zimbabwean journalist writing for the *UK Independent*, says that "pre-dinosaurian censorship tactics" are "futile" in hindering journalism, thanks to advances of new media. "Stories can now be filed via cell phones, and videos are being smuggled out of the most unlikely places like prisons via cell phones and loaded onto the Internet," says Peta. "Even the broadcasting policies of the regime serve very little purpose as the airwaves are being penetrated from as far afield as America."¹⁰

The Poor Are Being Left Behind

Mdlongwa says there are obstacles to bridging the information gap:

The only problem in using online media for a country such as Zimbabwe and indeed much of Africa and the Third World is that these countries are not wired enough to allow the majority of citizens, who live in poor rural areas, to access the news and be part of the public discourse on critical

events which affect them. In other words, it is the rural people who need accurate, fair and balanced news more than the already information-rich urban elites in order for the former to make informed opinions on what would be happening.¹¹

Chris Kabwato, the Head of Rhodes University's Highway Africa Program, concurs: "The evidence of new media offering Zimbabwean journalists an opportunity to publish is visible in the proliferation of online publications focused on that country."¹² But, says Kabwato, the online publications' main market is the estimated four million Zimbabweans living in the Diaspora.

Nyakunu, while commending the online newspapers for continuing to tell the Zimbabwean story, says the information divide between the rich and poor is growing as the poor get poorer in Zimbabwe's crisis. "In a country where citizens battle to make ends meet due to the economic hardships," Nyakunu says, "some even in the urban areas do not have much time to access the available Internet cafés because of the expensive fees. The Internet is therefore accessed mainly by those who have it at their respective workplaces."¹³ In Zimbabwe's case, the emergence of the digital media — online media in particular — has thus had the unfortunate effect of widening the urban-rural divide, the rich-poor divide, the info-rich and info-poor divide, and essentially exacerbated the marginalization of rural people from the urban and ruling elites.

Sadly, the pervasive use of mobile phones for the dissemination of news has not yet happened in Zimbabwe, says Mdlongwa. Legislation outlaws the transmission of content deemed political on mobile phones. Additionally, owners of private mobile phone companies in Zimbabwe are not prepared to risk their businesses. The mobile phone in Africa — and indeed in Zimbabwe — is the fastest growing communication device and could have been used more

effectively to tell the tragedy of Zimbabwe. Kubatana and SW RadioAfrica's SMS news texts are not sent in conjunction with cell phone companies but to mobile numbers they have collected over the years. Mdlongwa says a program that would have involved the mobile phone sector would have been more useful in bridging the information gap between the rich and poor in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. Jackson says her organization has a mobile phone in Zimbabwe where people leave messages — voice or text — allowing her reporters to call back from London and follow up on leads so that voiceless Zimbabweans can express their opinions.

The SMS news headlines program has been unbelievably successful, she says. The radio station currently sends texts to just under 30,000 individuals daily. "We could double that very quickly, if we had the funding," says Jackson. "That has been the only difficulty. Although each text message is cheap, when you send 30,000 a day, it adds up very quickly. We have also had to cut the SMS back from a daily service to three times a week."¹⁴

Jackson's website receives at least 250,000 hits a day — just under a two million a week. The exact radio audience is unknown because accurate research is difficult in Zimbabwe's fear-based environment. The government also jams the signals in certain areas. Some of the radio stations use cell phones to do live transmission. Studio 7, which broadcasts daily to Zimbabwe from Washington, D.C. to a much broader audience, reaches millions in rural communities but has been affected by government interference. The Mugabe government has been calling for the program to be replaced with power-sharing talks with the opposition.

"Having access to new media allows the many journalists who have had no choice but to leave, to continue plying their craft and telling the story of their

country,” Jackson says. “Many would be unable to work as journalists in other countries and would have had to move into other lines of work. So a huge skilled resource would have been lost.”¹⁵

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) has been instrumental in helping Zimbabwean journalists as media space continued to shrink. Rashweat Mukundu, director of MISA, believes the advent of new technologies has assisted Zimbabwean journalists, especially with the use of new technology gadgets such as mobile phones, laptops, Internet and recorders. This means that journalists do not have to be in a newsroom, Mukundu says. They can be virtually anywhere and still manage to do their work. The closure of newspapers and the high numbers of journalists on the street has been mitigated by the freelance work that these journalists do with foreign media organizations that are banned from reporting from Zimbabwe. “This has been made possible by new technologies and the virtual newsrooms that ICTs have afforded the media industry,” says Mukundu. “New technologies have also meant that journalists are less likely to be harassed as they are less likely to be doing their work in public...one can work at home, call sources, compile stories on a laptop, serve on a flash disk and send out at an Internet café.”¹⁶ New technologies with regard to Internet security also mean journalists can protect their information and sources, he says.

Threats Still Exist

One former *Daily News* journalist now relying on freelancing for online publications says Mugabe’s secret police are everywhere and watching. “One day I covered a very important press conference by a top government minister at a local hotel. Such places are infested by plain clothes security agents,” she said.

“When it was over I hit the road to go to an Internet café, but they were hot on my heels. So I did the rounds until I ultimately left without filing. Meanwhile my editor abroad was waiting for that story, but I could not send him an email, worse still a text message because there was no electricity and my phone had no battery.”¹⁷ Says Nyarota: “Our correspondents obviously take a great risk when they file regularly from Internet cafés. State agents are obviously aware where the bulk of filing for Internet-based publications takes place. While it is our wish that our correspondents remain anonymous, in reality this can only be an ideal in some cases.”

On a regular basis, adds Nyarota, correspondents are obliged to seek the comment of government officials, some of them hostile. “When this happens they obviously blow their cover. One of my major concerns as editor of the *Zimbabwe Times* is that I cannot in any way guarantee the security or safety of our correspondents. I pay tribute to the preparedness of the correspondents to take personal risks in order to keep the population of Zimbabwe as adequately informed as possible on matters of public interest in a politically volatile situation,” he says.¹⁸

Mbanga, on the other hand, says his correspondents work on the assumption that their phones are tapped and that their emails are intercepted. He says he has tried to provide those who write for him from Zimbabwe with laptops to make sure they avoid public cafés, which are used by the majority of journalists and ordinary people. “By simply being in Zimbabwe and reporting what is going on there means that our correspondents are at great risk of being arrested, beaten or worse,” says Mbanga.¹⁹

Safety of correspondents writing from Zimbabwe has been a major issue for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), which publishes an online

Zimbabwe bulletin regularly. Along with most online publications, IWPR prefers to use pseudonyms to protect reporters, but this raises issues of credibility. A few outrageous stories have been published by online publications, largely due to the fact that standards of journalism have gone down in Zimbabwe with the political and economic crisis. Also because of poverty, a few journalists have thrown ethics out the window, cooking up stories, as Maureen Kademaunga said at the 2007 MSI Zimbabwe seminar, to make them appealing. The standards of journalism have also declined due to fear, lack of training, restrictive media laws and lack of equipment. Fear within the Zimbabwean media fraternity has resulted in massive self-censoring by journalists in both independent and state newsrooms. "There is no professional pride among journalists because doing what is necessary to survive is greater than ethics," AP correspondent, Angus Shaw explains.²⁰

Such "bad apples" have played into Mugabe's hands by raising the issue of credibility, especially as most journalists writing for online news sites do not use their names. Many journalists brush it aside, saying the most important thing right now is to target those abusing the people of Zimbabwe. Indeed, information and pictures of abuse continue to surface on the Internet daily as publications lead the way in breaking Zimbabwean stories. "It's important to be non-partisan and to be as professional as possible when publishing," said Clarke of Kubatana. "When we aggregate information on Zimbabwe, we are selective about what we publish and we try to include all sides of the story. Consistency is extremely important — you build solidarity and loyalty."²¹

The Zimbabwe government, which is far behind in embracing new media technologies, unlike its neighbors in South Africa, has, as a result of the flourishing of online publications, started monitoring web-based Zimbabwe

newspapers. The government has just issued a stern warning to state journalists working with the online newspapers and international media.

On December 12, 2008 in his weekly column in the state-controlled daily newspaper, the *Herald*, Nathaniel Manheru, believed to be Mugabe's spokesman George Charamba, threatened former *Daily News* staffers, saying they were running "ghost sites" to spread lies about the situation in the country. "This Anglo-American operation is running a whole host of ghost sites and ghost reporters...buttressed by a phalanx of cameramen," said Manheru.²² He also threatened state journalists working with online publications. He alleged that money was being used to lure these journalists to pass on information. "There is huge, dirty money involved, part of it flowing into public newsrooms," Manheru said. "The line between these journalistic misdeeds and espionage grows thinner and thinner by the day. I happen to know that the authorities are about to place a price on those concerned, and let no one cry."

Two days after Manheru's article, a freelance photojournalist was abducted after receiving a call from someone to meet with him. Journalists in Zimbabwe believe the photojournalist knew the person who was used to arrange the meeting. His house was later ransacked by state security agents who took his laptop, cameras and other work-related items. His whereabouts remain unknown. The photojournalist's crime: sending pictures perceived to be against the Mugabe government to news organizations outside the country. Many journalists in the country are already on the run as Manheru's threats start to come true. One former state cameraman who was believed to be working with international news organizations by passing on video tapes to colleagues at the state broadcaster was abducted in March 2008 and later found dead. None of the

media organizations he was working with came out in the open to denounce his death, and this angered many in the journalism fraternity in Zimbabwe.

In August 2007, the Zimbabwe government blacklisted 41 online publications, including websites for CNN and the United States Embassy in Harare. The government claimed the embassy had launched a cyber war to promote a regime-change agenda against Mugabe's government. The list of websites was tabled at a politburo meeting during a heated debate on the media, according to a report in the private weekly, the *Zimbabwe Independent*. Downloaded printouts from the websites were distributed at the meeting.

This development came against the backdrop of Mugabe's remarks at the Langkawi International Dialogue summit in Malaysia aimed at fostering closer ties between Asia and Africa and between governments and business. He alleged that journalists lacked objectivity and were writing "subjective views" in their reports. "The press and journalists, are they driven by the sense of honesty and objectivity all the time?" Mugabe asked. "Or are they swayed from objectivity and truth by certain notions arising from their own subjective views?"²³

Mugabe's government has been struggling over the years to counter what it terms "negative publicity" by Western media organizations and online newspapers, and it keeps threatening journalists contributing to the sites. Startled by the March 29 election results that saw the opposition MDC winning more parliamentary seats than its party, Mugabe's government has arbitrarily detained at least 15 journalists and media workers this year, intimidated sources, obstructed the delivery of independent news and tightened its grasp on state media.

ZANU-PF's secretary for science and technology, Olivia Muchena, has since presented a report on the role and importance of information and

communication technologies (ICTs). She argues that Mugabe and his party had no choice but to embrace the new technologies to remain “politically relevant.” “Comrades, we are all aware that ZANU-PF is at war from within and outside our borders,” Muchena says in her report. “Contrary to the gun battles we are accustomed to, we now have cyber warfares fought from one’s comfort zone, be it bedroom, office, swimming pool, etc. but with deadly effects.”²⁴

Muchena warned her colleagues to pause and think about who was behind the creation of “these websites,” the target market of the websites, the influence and impact they have on Zimbabweans and what the image of ZANU-PF and its leadership looks like “out there as portrayed.” She said the Internet and cell phones had become weapons used daily to fight Mugabe, and she added that ICTs were now rogue platforms for high-tech espionage — hardware, software and infrastructure that peddle “virulent propaganda” to delegitimize “our just struggle against Anglo-Saxons.”²⁵

Cyber warfare plans by the government of Zimbabwe against online publications have been discussed since last year, but as Mugabe increasingly is cornered and caricatured by the public as never before, many live in fear that someone may soon be made an example. The Zimbabwe government reportedly has started sponsoring some of its journalists to start their own online publications supporting Mugabe. Reporting on Zimbabwe on December 14, 2008, the UK *Observer* alleged that one such website was being run from London by Zimbabweans. At home, government officials continue to threaten those making sure the world gets independent news from Zimbabwe.

Most of the correspondents freelancing for online papers and other news organizations scattered around the globe live with the threat that their houses might be searched or that they might lose their equipment and property as the

government continues to try to muzzle independent reporting. But Zimbabwean journalists refuse to be silenced by those in power. They bravely continue to record and report events shaping their country as a largely bankrupt government fails to keep up.

Many journalists who spoke on condition of anonymity have developed survival strategies when reporting in Zimbabwe. They know the dangerous areas to avoid, they move in groups especially at night, they stay in touch with others and they minimize being picked out in a group. They also have important numbers on speed dial so that in case something happens, lawyers can find out if there has been an abduction and can act before anything worse happens.

But independent news people accuse journalists freelancing for online publications of sending their best stories to these publishers and depriving local publications of quality stories which would guarantee them higher incomes. Raphael Khumalo, the chief executive of the *Zimbabwe Independent* and the *Standard* newspapers, at the 2007 Media Sustainability Index (Africa) seminar, said journalists were depriving local publications when they chose to give quality stories to online publications. Abigail Gamanya, the coordinator of the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ) concurred, adding that low salaries for journalists in the country had also led to the rising number of scribes writing for online newspapers. On December 16, 2008 for example, the online newspapers broke a story that Mugabe's close ally and Zimbabwe's Air Force Commander, Perence Shiri, had survived an attempt on his life, but none of the local publications had the story. The story was later confirmed by the government and then written for the local newspapers.

Difficulties

Most of the online news organizations are based outside Zimbabwe which creates the problem of editors running with copy they cannot reconcile with events on the ground. Nyarota says his biggest frustration in running a daily news site from afar is the distance and the resultant time differences. "Running a daily newspaper thousands of miles away from home is a tremendous challenge. The judgment or assessment of events can easily be impaired by distance. The editor relies on the professional judgment of a team of correspondents on the ground, some of them unknown to him," he says.²⁶

Contact with correspondents is hampered by the poor state of communication, especially telephone services, in Zimbabwe. It is not always possible to contact correspondents to clarify issues or to seek more detailed information. "I live in eternal fear of having false stories planted on the website to discredit us," says Nyarota. "There must be a situation of total trust between the editor and the correspondent. We receive a good number of contributions from persons unknown to us. We accept and publish them in good faith. That kind of situation is fraught with risk. Being seven hours behind the epicentre of the events that we cover further complicates issues."

Nyarota says journalists covering Zimbabwe on the ground for him faced insurmountable risks even though they had the use of new media as a reliable partner in telling their story. Mukundu says regardless of risks, the Internet has largely worked to the advantage of Zimbabwean journalists. But despite all the good work that journalists have made through the use of the Internet, there still is room for improvement. Internet research and usage skills are still low among Zimbabwean journalists, and gadgets are only used to the minimum of their potential.

Journalists operating in an environment such as Zimbabwe can afford to be linear and narrow in how they work, but they have to be versatile in taking on many different roles. They must be ready to become the photographer, video maker, online writer, radio reporter and television reporter as well. This takes a combination of skills that Zimbabwean journalists need to improve on. Recording the Zimbabwean story has meant going into the relatively new areas like web publishing that captures not only word but sound, images and video.

MISA, which works closely with training institutions such as Rhodes University's Highway Africa program, has been able in the past two years to send 35 journalists who work in the line of fire for training. Mukundu says this obviously is not enough, but the media advocacy group is always talking with media practitioners in Zimbabwe and southern Africa to see how journalists could be protected from dangerous regimes. He says MISA has set up a resource center in Zimbabwe so that journalists can work in a safe environment.

At an advocacy level, MISA has a broadcasting and ICT desk that advocates for improvements in ICT usage and positive policies in the region. For example, MISA notes that taxation on computers, telecom equipment and mobile phone handsets is an impediment to ICT usage and affects not only the media but the general populace. The organization is advocating the lifting of such taxes and calling for policy improvements not only in Zimbabwe but the whole region.

MISA is also training community radio stations throughout the region in the use of new technologies to record programs. In conjunction with colleagues at web-based newspapers, news is packaged and distributed in the rural communities where people listen to the news in groups. The radio stations also go into communities and record interviews which are packaged on discs and

then distributed with current issues so communities are not left behind. Because these community radio stations operate on the run, it has been difficult for government agents to identify them.

In Wales, former *Daily News* journalist Mduduzi Mathuthu led the way in setting up a vibrant online newspaper, Newzimbabwe.com. Many more such as Zimbabwejournalists.com, Changezimbabwe.com and Zimdaily.com have since followed, all tapping into new ICTs to gather and disseminate news about Zimbabwe and by Zimbabweans. Community stations and individuals print out stories from these websites for friends and family, thereby providing information to those without access to newspapers. The websites have also given rise to citizen journalism as those outside the country use gadgets to post pictures of human rights atrocities to the international community instantly.

Local and foreign journalists are using volunteers to help relay information from volatile rural areas where pro-government militants crack down on independent journalists and opposition supporters. According to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), South Africa's e.tv, for example, has used reliable volunteers from the border town of Beitbridge to help gather and relay information. These volunteers, who can collect information less conspicuously, are "the unnamed heroes and heroines" of this ongoing story, journalist Peta Thornycroft said.²⁷

Besides mobilizing for television stations and newspapers, some citizens are taking risks to get the story out to the world by using new camera technologies and sharing on social websites such as Facebook. YouTube, the video-sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips, has seen a large number of uploaded videos from Zimbabwe, thanks to simple cameras that well wishers sent to Harare ahead of the March 29 elections. The

cameras enabled recording of atrocities and alerted the world to the carnage that was happening in the country. Award-winning photojournalist Tsvangirai Mukwazhi, with the AP news agency, says new technologies have made it possible for pictures to be transmitted in less than a minute to London, the United States or anywhere in the world. "New technologies have really helped us a lot. It has made our life much easier," says Mukwazhi, who has been arrested for doing his work and beaten many times. "Where a person used to take your film out of the camera and destroy it, technology now makes it possible to set up and send pictures in less than a minute once you get a signal."²⁸

Mukwazhi says the new technologies, however, do not keep the journalists safe in an environment such as Zimbabwe after filing. "There's that constant fear, and you are always looking over your shoulder and worse for those who use Internet cafés. That method of filing is not quite secure, though it still gets the message out there. Some are lucky, their offices have high-speed Internet access unlike the ordinary poor freelancing journalist. But we have coped and survived, largely by the grace of God and the help of new technologies that don't require a darkroom, especially for me."²⁹

Innocent Madawo, a Zimbabwean journalist based in Canada, says:

New media has really benefited us immensely...just imagine that in the late 1990s, you either had to fax a story or call it in. It was not always easy. Fast forward to now and the Internet and all its accessories has definitely shrunk the world. It is so cheap anybody can start a newspaper in a minute without paying anything. But one thing that amazes me is how, through the Internet we get stories from people on the ground in Zimbabwe and we send back the news to them because they are deprived

by the government through its control of news on channels and newspapers.³⁰

Another journalist working for a news wire service in the country, who did not want to be named, applauds the advent of new media for helping change the Zimbabwean media landscape. He says:

Just think of the production and distribution of powerful human rights abuse pictures through to the world in a matter of minutes of finding the victims, and how easy it is now for journalists to go into controlled environments and come out with top stories. New media has enabled us as journalists working in such a tight environment to come out on top — that is the power of new media in a society whose media and people are suppressed.³¹

Citing dreadful pictures of a murdered opposition activist discovered after being abducted on the eve of a G8 meeting in June 2008, the journalist says it was the use of new media technologies and guerrilla-type journalism that helped mobilize international pressure against Mugabe and his government. The picture of the murdered opposition activist was used by the British prime minister to rally G8 leaders to condemn Mugabe, leading to a failed UN bid to slap international sanctions against the Zimbabwe regime.

Blogs are also setting the pace and informing the world about events in Zimbabwe as they happen. The Internet has made it possible and inexpensive for the oppressed to publish their thoughts in blogs that attract visitors from all over the world, much to the chagrin of Zimbabwe's censors. Journalists, teachers, engineers, lawyers and students are blogging and keeping daily diaries of their lives in and outside Zimbabwe.

Like Nigeria's guerrilla journalists, Zimbabwean journalists continue to use every avenue at their disposal: online newspapers, blogs and radio stations to tell their country's sad story. Access by ordinary Zimbabweans is critical as they seek to develop a new democratic country, empower the masses through many difficult obstacles and ensure the country never again will have a government that does not respect human rights.

These dedicated journalists face risks every day but have vowed to continue in their quest to try and keep a free press alive in their country. They no doubt are true patriots, rising at a crucial time in their country's history to report and write the truth. Zimbabwean scribes are generally insecure as many crimes against them continue to be recorded — unlawful arrests, intimidation, abductions, assault, closure of their newspapers and illegal detentions — making journalists fear executing their duties openly. "Even with this big suppression... the news is still getting leaked out," says South African cameraman Sipho Moses Maseko, who spent close to two weeks in Zimbabwean prisons, including one meant for hardened criminals, before being acquitted on obsolete accreditation charges in June 2008.³²

And so the Zimbabwean story continues to be told as independent journalists choose to devise new strategies to continue reporting and holding those in power accountable to the people, an idea abhorred by those in authority. The outposts created by the Zimbabwean journalists are reaching into Zimbabwe and making the government sweat regardless of all its repressive laws and autocracy.

In founding the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University nearly a century ago, publisher Joseph Pulitzer observed, "Our republic and its press shall rise and fall together,"³³ and so Zimbabwe's targeted journalists still

call on their responsibility to serve as the fourth estate, that proverbial watchdog role on government and those in positions of authority, to provide information and analysis hence creating an informed electorate and eventually a better Zimbabwe where everyone is equal before the law.

Endnotes

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- ³ Interview with Geoffrey Nyarota, *Zimbabwe Times* editor, December 15, 2008
- ⁴ Wilf Mbanga, *The Zimbabwean* editor, quoted in the Nieman Reports, Fall 2008
- ⁵ Interview with Gerry Jackson, SW RadioAfrica founder and editor, October 24, 2008
- ⁶ Gerry Jackson interview
- ⁷ Interview with Bev Clarke, co-founder and administrator of Kubatana Trust for online activists, October 15, 2008
- ⁸ Bev Clarke interview
- ⁹ Interview with Francis Mdlongwa, head of the Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership at Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies in South Africa, November 10, 2008
- ¹⁰ Interview with Basildon Peta, South Africa-based Zimbabwean journalist
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- ¹⁴ Gerry Jackson interview
- ¹⁵ Gerry Jackson interview
- ¹⁶ Interview with Rashweat Mukundu, director for the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), November 4, 2008
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- ³¹ Innocent Madawo interview
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