

Survival strategies of community newspapers during the economic crisis in Zimbabwe: A case study of The Mirror and Masvingo Star (1999 to 2010).

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ABSTRACT: *This paper sought to expose the strategies and methods utilised by community newspapers in Zimbabwe to remain in business in a hyper-inflationary environment. The economic crisis aided with a serious political crisis between the year 1999 and 2010 makes it difficult to comprehend how community newspapers survived during that time. While the period accounts for highest newspaper mortality rate in the country, it remains a mystery as to the techniques employed by The Mirror and Masvingo Star community newspapers to remain viable. The study strives to investigate survival methods that are feasible and can be practically used by the media to maintain viability during an economic and political crisis situation. Interviews with key stakeholders that is, the owner, editors and journalists who practised during the time as well as documentary evidence were used. It is argued that community newspapers maximised on the political polarisation to remain afloat. It is also argued that content became highly sensationalised to keep reader's interest. The community newspapers maximised on the news value of proximity as the major media players closed bureaus thus becoming the best option for information that was close to the people. Though most sectors of the economy closed shop donor funded civic society remained and thus offered alternative sources of revenue. It was concluded that political diversity is health in a democracy as it allows vibrant editorial slants to co-exist as political parties associate themselves with a particular newspaper.*

Keywords- *Community newspapers, Survival strategies, Economic crisis, Political crisis, Zimbabwe.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the survival strategies and ways used by community newspapers to remain in business during the Zimbabwean political and economic crisis between the year 1999 and 2010. Traditionally, the print media in Zimbabwe perform well during periods of political and economic stability. Newspapers generally manage to break even and to survive as evidenced from 1980 to the year 2000 when the political and financial environment was conducive and stable. Newspapers that folded during this time attributed their failure to lack of adverts as in the case of *The Daily Gazette* that folded in the 1994 (Saunders, 1999, p.24). Thus newspapers in Zimbabwe heavily relied on adverts in order to break even or perform better. From the year 2000 to 2010, Zimbabwe was in a serious economic and political crisis which resulted in the closure of most business entities and a number of newspapers (Adam Smith International,2007). This affected the operations of the whole media industry and how community newspapers in a small town of Masvingo managed to pull through remains a mystery. Newspapers the world over are known to survive through advertising revenue and mostly in stable economies. It remains a mystery as to how community newspapers managed to sustain their operations at the height of the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe. With inflation hitting countless zeros after the number 1, the mystery surrounding strategies used by community newspapers to survive when shops and other sectors of the economy had closed shop is worth researching. Given the fact that community newspapers compete with national daily and weekly newspapers and other cheaper sources of news such as radio, television and social media the methods used by community newspapers to remain in a business is a case worth academic pursuit.

The year 1999 marked the turnaround of the country's fortunes as the economy of the country went into a depression and the Zimbabwean populace was to endure hardships until the year 2009 when the country introduced a multi-currency regime. While newspapers generally survived between 1980, the year independence was attained, the number of newspapers that folded between 1999 and the year 2010 became a cause for concern. This added to the mystery of how provincial focused newspapers could survive where big guns through in the towel. The problems that bedevilled the economy and the media after the year 2000 are mainly blamed on the then sole ruling party.

The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) led government is largely blamed for crafting draconian media laws that led to the collapse of vibrant newspapers such as *Daily News* in 2003. Media laws which were crafted in 2001 and 2002 when Professor Jonathan Moyo was the Minister of

Information and Publicity were described by media practitioners as the worst in the history of Zimbabwe. To put it in the late national hero and Zanu PF minister Eddison Zvobgo's words as he described one of the laws, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2001, he said it was the worst law he had come across in his 20 years in government. He said the law 'in its original form was the most calculated and determined assault on our liberties guaranteed by the constitution, in the 20 years I served as cabinet minister and as a member of the cabinet committee on legislation for 16 years of those years. What is worse, the bill was badly drafted in that several provisions were obscure, vague, over-broad in scope, ill-conceived and dangerous'.

However, despite having all these harsh laws, the existence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) party helped some community newspapers to survive. The fierce fight for public sphere through the media between MDC-T and Zanu PF saw the two parties soliciting for newspapers' support thereby creating a polarisation in the media industry. This paper argues that the political tension encouraged polarisation and subsequent survival of the papers which could have long closed due to harsh media laws and poor economic conditions. To strike a balance at the accusations levelled against the government for closing newspapers a government's official position on communication and the media is vital

II. GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWE: MINISTERS REPORT IN 1990

According to the Minister's 1990 report, "The Zimbabwean government recognizes that no meaningful development can take place unless the people have ready access to the media of information and communication such as newspapers, radio and television....".

The report further states that: "... in the ten years of independence the Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications has been tasked to provide adequate and effective information and communication infrastructures throughout Zimbabwe. In this respect the ministry's short term and long term objectives were to bring the mass mediawithin easy reach of all Zimbabweans."

The report documents the measures taken by the Ministry since 1980, stating, the Ministry has taken wide ranging measures to fulfil its mandate. The right to information as guaranteed by the constitution has been its guiding principle in endeavouring to ensure free circulation, wider and better dissemination of Information through the provision of diverse information and communication sources. The ministry has at the same time tried to guarantee freedom of access to such sources.

According to the Ministers' 1990 report, in the past decade the Ministry embarked on the following ongoing programmes to achieve its stated objectives:

- 1) Established information offices and deployed Rural Information Officers and mobile cinema units throughout Zimbabwe
- 2) Established communal communication, viewing and listening centres in the rural areas
- 3) Provided radio and television transmitters throughout the country in order to receive clear radio and television signals especially in the remote rural areas
- 4) Established rural press

The ministry, the 1990 report states, continues to carry out its daunting task of informing and educating the public on government policies and programmes on the one hand, and on the other, sensitising government on the feelings of the people. In this regard according to Dr Shamuyarira, the Zimbabwe Information Services (ZIS) and the Mobile Cinema Units (MCUs) can claim some measure of success.

The government's hand in communication and the media sector has not gone unchallenged and is treated with skepticism and distrust (Mathema,2001,p.21). Rusike (1990, p.68) while making a distinction between the various ownership patterns of the media such as state owned media, party-owned and privately owned, lucidly says such media should not hide their ownership.

When the government owns a newspaper, it is quite clear about its motives: it would like the paper to promote its policies, not those of the opposition, where an opposition exists. If the editor of such a paper dares to openly oppose the government, he could find himself without a job...A government newspaper which openly says so doesn't pretend to be following the straight and narrow path of traditional journalistic objectivity is not as evil as one which pretends that it has no axe to grind (Rusike 1990:68-69).

In line with the Ministers 1990 report of establishing a rural press, this paper will question the role played by the Community Newspaper Group (CNG) owned *Masvingo Star* during the economic and political crisis as well as the methods it employed to remain afloat.

III. COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS IN ZIMBABWE

The ownership, structure and history of the print media in Zimbabwe were well articulated and as such this paper will not reiterate it (Chari 2011 p.368), (Fredrikse 1982, p.40), (Mararike ,1997, p.51), (Mathema, 2001, p.10), (Rusike, 1990, p.17), (Saunders, 1991, p.25), (Windrich, 1981,p.6). Focus shall be given on the ownership and history of the community newspapers in the country. In explaining how the government started the community newspaper project in Zimbabwe, Hollander and Stappers (1992 p.91) argue that the community newspaper concept in Zimbabwe are a territorial based arrangement where the papers are directly linked to the administratively linked territories. Lundby (1997, p.88) acknowledged the fact that newspapers which were formed for specific communities targeted different provinces. Each province therefore, would have its community newspaper servicing that area. Community newspapers in Zimbabwe are owned by the government while some are owned by individuals and a consortium of business people. The government in Zimbabwe set itself the goal of ensuring that information was suppose to be decentralised from the urban-centred mainstream newspapers to the rural communities (Mathema, 2001,p21). It thus invested in community newspapers that operate at the provincial level. The government, according to Munyuki (2006,p.7) has 100 percent controlling stake in New Ziana and the Community Newspaper Group (CNG), publisher of ten community newspapers.

The newspapers are run by the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) through a group known as the CNG that is controlled by New Ziana. New Ziana also run the sole news agency in the country, the Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency. New Ziana was incorporated in July 2002 from the merger between CNG, Zimbabwe Inter African News Agency (Ziana) and the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT).

The old Ziana was formed in 1981 to serve as a clearing house of foreign news, to sell the news across the country, different embassies and government departments. The organization was neither privately nor publicly owned. However, Ziana faced several challenges and especially financial crisis and the introduction of new technology leading to its dissolution in 2001. In its efforts to revive the ailing company, the government formed New Ziana under the direct control of the Ministry of Information and Publicity.

New Ziana has three strategic business units, which are Community Newspaper Publishing, News Agency and Electronic services whose major aims are to redress imbalances in the dissemination of information between rural areas and urban areas. The company has ten weekly newspapers which are *Masvingo Star* for Masvingo, *Gweru Times* (Gweru), *Pungwe* (Mutare), *Ilanga* (Matebeland South) *Nehanda Guardian* (Bindura), *Telegraph* (Chinhoyi), *Chaminuka News* (Marondera), *Harare Post* (Harare), *City Courier* (Bulawayo), *Indonsakusa* (Matebeland North) and a printing press in Gweru for printing of the newspapers. However, *Harare Post*, *Indonsakusa* and *City Courier* were no longer published during the time of this study.

Masvingo Star has the duty of informing, educating and entertaining members of the public particularly in Masvingo province and is the main focus of this research. *Masvingo Star* managed to come out religiously every week throughout a decade of crisis while its sister papers were struggling to hit the streets even once per month. Over the whole decade of crisis, *Masvingo Star* was headed by four editors but its performance remained constant. To date, some of *Masvingo Star*'s sister publications such as *Indonsakusa*, *City Courier* and *Harare Post* among others are almost forgotten due to their inconsistency.

3.1 Privately owned community newspapers

3.1.1 *The Mirror newspaper*

The Mirror newspaper was registered as the Masvingo Mirror newspaper by the former Mayor for Masvingo and prominent businessman, Alderman Douglas Gordon Hill on 29 May 1992. Masvingo Mirror however, is trading as The Mirror and for the avoidance of confusion in this article, the paper shall be referred to as The Mirror. Alderman Hill started The Mirror as an independent voice for Masvingo. During that time, The Mirror was being printed on an A4 sized newspaper. It was mainly focusing on the interest of the local white community. The main stories that were being covered therefore included issues to do with rates being paid by the business community, city council performance, maintenance of street lights, and the promotion of theatre in Masvingo among others. It was not much focused in to politics although it would carry a political story from time to time. However, at the height of the economic and political crisis in 2007, Alderman Hill gave up on The Mirror and sold it to former Standard newspaper editor David Masunda and Virginia Holmes Takaona who is a Zimbabwean working in the United Kingdom (UK).

However, since 2007, ownership of The Mirror became a controversial subject especially among journalists throughout the country who widely believe that the paper is owned by former Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) president and now Zimbabwe Media Commissioner Matthew Takaona. Nonetheless, Matthew Takaona is on record denying ownership of The Mirror. He has also refused ownership even to the workers at The Mirror.

He, however, acknowledges that he does consultancy work for the paper owned by his twin sister. Thus it has become an open secret that Takaona from time to time can interfere with the workers giving them instructions on what to do and how. He can therefore be credited or discredited for developments at The Mirror since 2007. Takaona's wife Loice Madziyire is the board secretary and she also directly interferes with workers.

There are other privately owned newspapers in other provinces such The Midlands Observer, The Dispatch, The Sun, Network Guardian, Southern Star, The Nation, Business Express, Citizen, The Weekly Times, The Business Tribune, The Weekend Tribune and Sandawana News among others. However, over half of the aforementioned newspapers have since folded due to a number of problems ranging from lack of resources, qualified personnel and initial capital. Associated Newspaper Group (ANG) which used to have a number of provincial newspapers in most parts of the country has since closed all the provincial publications.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research makes use of face to face interviews. These were conducted with key informants who consisted of the management, editors and journalists who practised during the period 1999 to 2010. The advantages of interviews are that the researcher gets first hand information from people who experienced challenges during the economic and political crisis. In order to extract accurate data in this research, editors at the two newspapers, other top managers and journalists who worked for the papers under the study during a period of economic crisis were interviewed. The main objective was to hear from them whether the tension between the major political parties helped them to continue surviving. The interviews were face to face thereby helping the researchers to have an opportunity to observe their facial reactions and other non-verbal gestures.

Interviews were prioritized since they afford opportunities to establish rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees. Furthermore a great deal of information can be obtained or collected as it allows flexibility and just in time responses. The interviewer usually gets unexpected information from respondents and there is a possibility of always probing further. Face to face interviews were used since they allow the researcher to judge authenticity of responses by observing body language like facial expressions, gestures and somewhat uneasiness.

An interview unlike a questionnaire solicits for immediate responses and as such is more appropriate when dealing with people who have busy schedules like the editors who were also interviewed.

The major disadvantage of interviews is that respondents may give false answers to corroborate with their biases or status to protect their interests. Since I know all the respondents at personal levels, they may have given me wrong answers that they think I wanted to hear from them thereby distorting the whole information.

V. DOCUMENT REVIEW AND RECORDS

Document collection is the second data gathering technique that this study uses. Documents such newspaper copies of the time that were relevant to this research were utilised. Only relevant documents to the research were sampled. The merit of making use of documentary evidence in communication research has two purposes namely: to supplement the material the researchers collect themselves; and as a primary focus of the research. Documents according to Deacon (1999: 27) are initially used to investigate the activities, strategies, decision that the organisation takes. Both purposes are significant in this research in the sense that the first assisted in supplementing and double checking of material gathered through interviews with the editors and reporters. The second was useful in the gathering of survival strategies through content analysis of the news that was published.

The type of documents was mainly decided by the research questions and other forms recommended include newspapers, annual reports, and minutes of meetings, letters, policy statements, regulations and guidelines (Gillham 2000:21; Stake 1995:68). The merit of relying on documents is that these are formal material and as such can be withdrawn any time as evidence. As Gillham states, documents can help stabilize reality by comparing it to the formal and structured one (Gillham 2000:21; Yin 2003:103).

Deacon et al (1999:26-30) warns of using documents as a method stating that when using documents, credibility has to do with checking the accuracy and authenticity and honesty of the information. In this study we took advantage of one of the researchers who worked for both organisations during the period under review to get the editorial policies as well as some in-house communication.

VI. RESULTS

The hyper-inflationary environment resulted in the reduction of both the supply and demand of newspapers in Zimbabwe. The research revealed that the sales of The Mirror and Masvingo Star newspapers were highly affected by the economic recession that was being experienced in Zimbabwe during the period under study. The major reason that contributed in reducing the demand for newspapers was lack of disposable income by the working class during the crisis period. Thus, the sales were continuously dropping on a yearly basis. According to David Masunda one of the proprietors of The Mirror and Herbert Mutugwi who is the current editor of Masvingo Star, the poor income levels affected the way people would buy their newspapers. Both The Mirror and Masvingo Star newspapers received the highest number of return copies during this period.

According to Alderman Hill former owner of The Mirror, the paper used to sell 97 percent of its copies every week before the economic crisis but the figures were dwindling every year until the company ended up selling far less than 40 percent of the printed copies in 2006. Hill therefore, sold The Mirror in 2007 after he had seen that the sales were downsizing every year. Before 2000, the paper was being received well in the market but after the economic crisis, we started to realise a sharp decline in the sales. Even workers from Masvingo Star echoed the same sentiments saying they witnessed a situation where their paper sales nose-diving from the province's best selling paper to "just a newspaper" that ended up being bought by a few individuals in Masvingo.

Due to poor sales that were witnessed by newspapers during the period between 2000 and 2010, *The Mirror* director described the period under study as the worst decade in the history of community newspapers in Zimbabwe.

The major reason attributed to the highest number of sales was the fact that people were no longer able to spare money for newspapers. In order to overcome this challenge, both newspapers under study went on a vigorous subscription campaign around the province. They engaged schools, non-governmental organisations, local authorities among other stakeholders to buy newspapers in bulk quantities as well as to buy newspapers in advance. Various schools in Masvingo province complied with the appeal from the two newspapers and agreed to subscribe. Also the local authorities in Masvingo subscribed a huge number of newspapers every week.

VII. DISCUSSION

Even though copy sales were low during the economic and political crisis, the media in the province maximised on the political polarisation that was existent at the time. The two newspapers chose to align themselves to two major political parties the MDC and Zanu PF with each associating and informally partnering with a political party. The Mirror associated itself with the then opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which enjoyed the support of the civic society that could afford to advertise using United States dollars. By associating itself with the MDC, The Mirror was able to maintain a customer base from the civic society who could afford to advertise using foreign currency. This enabled the newspaper to break even and to sustain its operations.

The Masvingo Star though wholly owned by the government also resorted to selling its copies in foreign currency thereby managing to remain afloat. It also associated itself with the then sole ruling Zanu PF party and by associating itself managed to attract advertising revenue with companies associated with the party. The mining community in the province is generally controlled and linked to Zanu PF thus the Star maximised by aligning itself to potential advertisers who referred to it as "our paper".

The content written by the newspapers at the time became heavily sensationalised so as to arouse human interest and thus attract customers to buy the newspapers. The community newspapers maximised on the news value of proximity as the major media players closed bureaus, the community papers remained the best option for information that was close to the people. Though most sectors of the economy closed shop donor funded civic society remained and thus offered alternative source of revenue.

The two newspapers maximised on the 2010 world cup preparations as the province saw an increase in the number of visitors who could afford to buy copies of their newspapers. The business community in the accommodation and tourism industry advertised their services through the two newspapers thus it could be said that the two media organisations benefited from economies of scale arising from pre-South Africa 2010 World cup preparations.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS.

The provincial press in Masvingo used an array of strategies to remain in business. The newspapers took advantage of the political polarisation in the country to maximise returns by associating and aligning themselves with a given ideological and political party position. The Mirror associated itself with the MDC while the Masvingo Star supported and relied on the government of the day or ZANU PF. It can thus be asserted that political diversity is health in a democracy as it allows different vibrant editorial slants to prosper. Political parties aim to associate themselves with a particular newspaper and would do everything in their power to ensure that they are given favourable media coverage. In other words where there are several political parties no single newspaper can monopolise information and the divisiveness of political players is favourable to the media. Apart from maximising on the political organisations, the media in Masvingo benefitted from partners of the political parties in general, in particular The Mirror maximised on the relationship between the MDC and non-governmental organisations. The Masvingo Star also benefitted from mines and business people associated with the ruling ZANU PF.

Apart from aligning themselves with political parties, the two newspapers benefitted from the economies of scale emanating from the preparations of the 2010 South African World cup. The tourism sector in the province was vibrant and it advertised with both papers thus the proximity of Masvingo to South Africa benefitted the two newspapers thereby giving them a lifeline.

News during the period under review became highly sensationalised and convincingly led readers to keep on purchasing copies of the two newspapers. Despite the harsh inflationary environment, the early introduction of the multi-currency regime in newspaper costs led to the financial stability that ensured the continued survival of the two newspapers.

The closure and withdrawal of bureaus from the province by the mainstream media was a blessing for the two community newspapers as they maximised on the proximity to the people as a reliable source of news.

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