

## **Alternative Radio Stations and Ideological Propaganda in Zimbabwe: The Case of Voice of America’s Studio 7**

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**Abstract:** The study explored the extent to which broadcasts from alternative radio stations contribute to spreading ideological propaganda with reference to Voice of America’s (VOA) Studio 7. Arguments on the nexus between the different ideologies and politics making radio in particular a contested space where politicians seek to project their version of reality and win support for themselves were presented. The study also outlined how alternative radio stations acted as the theatre where those on the periphery seek to subvert the *status quo* through creating a counter narrative challenging the existing order. Data was gathered through key informant interviews and documentary search. The major findings of the study were that the country’s restrictive media laws have resulted in the continued broadcast of Studio 7. Although such broadcasts are key in giving alternative voices, at times these are exaggerated hence tarnishing the country’s international image.

**Key words:** ideological propaganda, radio stations, broadcasts, public media, private media

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The media has become a dominant and global communicative system which is used to articulate the standing position of the international realm at any given time (Luhmann, 2000:20). This has been aided by advancements in communications technology that have made it possible to broadcast on time from anywhere in the world through satellite communication devices and fiber optic cables. As a result of these advancements, international affairs observers

have indicated that the media has expanded its ability to affect the conduct of countries' diplomacy and foreign policy (Livingstone, 1997:3). He further posits that, different foreign policy objectives will present different types and levels of sensitivity to different types of media.

Radio broadcasting has proved to be the most dominant and most important mass medium in Africa (Ndlovu, 2015). This is due to its flexibility, low cost and its character which suit the continent's conditions very well, as it links with the aural and oral history of the land (Gunnars, Ligaga and Moyo 2011:1). This communication medium links publics, cultures and communities mainly because of its ability to overcome communication barriers such as poverty, illiteracy and linguistic diversity (Mano in Gunnars et al. 2011:103). As such, this could have made it the medium of choice for propagating important information from rulers to subjects, which is perhaps why it has been used as an ideal instrument for diffusing ideologies and policies to the masses, hence its manipulation as a tool for both state and anti-state propaganda.

In Africa, mass communication content abounds with propaganda, demagoguery, empty promises and far-fetched ideologies of dubious significance or relevance to society (Ayoob in Gunner et al. 2011:104). Zimbabwe's broadcasting environment has been heavily controlled and censored in order to ensure that only a favourable image of the government and ZANU-PF (the ruling party) is conveyed to the nation while limiting all dissent and alternative political opinion to virtually non-existent levels.

The coming in of digital communication technologies and globalisation has however, made radio continue transcending geographical boundaries than before (Luhmann, 2000:28). This has made it possess a great potential to subvert government power in the case of restrictive regimes. The radio as a means of communication has managed to circumvent state control of information flows, empower and encourage participation by marginalised groups and reduce the power of individual states through increased trans-border information flows. The resultant being the proliferation of alternative broadcast stations worldwide. Soley and Nichols (1987) argued that message restriction generates an environment in which underground communication strategies are nurtured in the form of external broadcast stations (clandestine, alternative, parallel or pirate radio). These include the Voice of Zimbabwe (VOZ) and Voice of the Revolution (VOR) that belonged to ZANU and ZAPU respectively during Zimbabwe's pre-independence era as well as those that came after independence. After independence Voice

of the People (VOP), Voice of America (VOA) and SW Radio Africa were established by exiled Zimbabwean journalists (Ndlovu, 2015). The success in the operations of these radio stations from foreign lands sending their signals into Zimbabwe came as a result of advancements in technology. The expansion of the World Wide Web has been viewed as a direct attack on states sovereignty (Moyo, 2012). A good example on this is the coming in of alternative broadcast stations whose content differs from that disseminated by public broadcast stations in terms of thrust. These stations are not only accessible to the targeted audiences in a given country but have a global reach. This study is aimed at looking at the effectiveness of alternative radio stations in broadcasting anti- Zimbabwe propaganda focusing on Studio 7 broadcast.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The role of the media ranges from being agents of international consumerism to total manufacturing of consent (Chomsky, 1992). Ranteneu (2004:4) posits that without the media and communication, globalisation cannot take place. The study uses the agenda setting and mass communication theory as the theoretical framework for the study. These theories argues that because of newspapers, television, radios and other news media, people are aware or not aware, pay attention to or neglect, play up or downgrade specific features of the public scene (Shaw, 1979). People tend to include or exclude from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from their content. The media shapes and manipulates people's public attitudes, their likes and dislikes, pros and cons regarding political, economic, and social matters. As a result, they then tend to assign an importance to what mass media include, that closely resembles the emphasis given to events, issues and persons (Shaw, 1979). Agenda setting assumes a direct, though not necessarily an immediate impact of the media on its audience. It specifies that the impact is not on people's attitudes but on their cognitions. It attributes these cognitive changes to be the result of the media performing a gate-keeping or channel role in Western democracies.

Loveless (2008:162) posits that for countries in a crisis or instability such as Zimbabwe, citizens are reliant on mass media for information and as such become more susceptible to their effects. These countries are likely to be heavy media consumers in order to inform themselves. This enforces the notion that in periods of crises, mass media can serve as a source of information to help understand political developments.

### **The power of mass media in international communication**

The role of the news media in forming and shaping public perceptions of the international realm and state actions or policy priority-setting has also attracted scholarly effort and academic investigation as well as enhancing the understanding of the role that the platform play in international affairs (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007; Entman, 2004 & Robison, 2002). Thus (2010:5) argues that mass media is a tool for political propaganda and this propaganda is termed as 'soft power'. Nye (2010:333) defines soft power as 'getting others to want the outcomes that you want'. He further states that public diplomacy is a tool which governments employ to attract people of other nations by drawing their attention to the possible resources through broadcasting, subsidising cultural exports and arranging exports among other things.

The radio is now regarded as 'Africa's medium' due to its reach and social embeddedness in ordinary people's everyday lives (Hayman and Tomaselli, 1989: 2 & Moyo, 2010). Radio remains significant in socio-cultural and political landscapes in Africa and beyond (Mudhai, 2011: 153). According to (Hungbo, 2008), radio messages, in addition to breaking the barrier of illiteracy through the use of local languages in their simplest forms, also reach different people without discrimination. Myers (1998: 2010) argued that 'radio is perhaps the most natural press for a largely non-literate audience. In many ways radio is the tangible modern extension of oral tradition'. The radio is a critical tool of communication that cuts across a number of barriers as well as borders.

### **The State's monopoly on radio broadcasting**

The state has shown to be the only source of both television and radio in most parts of the world (Moyo, 2012). This enables the state to manipulate the media in propagating its propagandistic ideologies to the audience without any external disruptions. However, over the years, state control of broadcasting has received competition from commercial operators, often large multi-national companies, which have introduced broadcasting supported by advertising (Solomon, 2009). This has led governments to introduce licensing systems as a way of reducing the number of commercial operators (Mare, 2013). The same licensing system is also being used to restrict content that can be offered by non-state broadcasters (Amnesty International Report, 2015). Restrictions in radio broadcast content maintain strict government control in preventing opposition views and opinions from being heard (Mlambo and Raftopoulos, 2010). Despite these measures, increased pressure from international opinion has reinforced the importance of broadcasting in support of the development of democracy, under Article 19 of the International

Standards Series (ISS). It further points to the fact that, free flow of information promotes the exercise of democratic rights by citizens as well as provision of adequate information.

In Zimbabwe, the country's former president Robert Mugabe was vehemently opposed to anyone other than ZANU-PF having control of and access to broadcasting (Jafari, 2005). He was against allowing pluralism in broadcasting. Just like his predecessor, Ian Smith, he ensured that no other political parties gained access to the airwaves by refusing opposition parties air-time. Whenever such parties received coverage, it was invariably damaging to them. Hence the reason why in the so called defense of its sovereignty, the government of Zimbabwe started jamming VOA's Studio 7 broadcast to the country on the medium wave frequency (Zengeni, 2010:74).

It is within this information vacuum spawned by legal and extra-legal measures that 'underground' radio emerged as an alternative platform in post-independent Zimbabwe. Ndlela (2009) posits that pirate radio stations emerged as a direct response to the state's monopoly on broadcasting as well as increased political and ideological control of programming in the country's broadcasting services. Atton (2002) concurs by stating that pirate radio is an example of alternative media which is characterised by horizontal communication, participatory practices and content that is more or less in explicit opposition to that of the dominant media.

According to Mare (2013) various labels have been used to describe anti-government radio stations. These terms include 'alternative', 'radical', 'our media', 'citizen', 'activist', and 'tactical'. These names share a similar theoretical commitment 'aimed at providing representation of matters that are against those provided for by the mainstream media, functioning as 'counter-information institutions' and 'agents of developmental power' (Haas, 2004: 115).

These 'pirate' radio stations have been categorised as a 'parallel market of information' (Moyo, 2009), and as 'diasporic journalism' (Kupe, 2005). In the Zimbabwean context most of these stations were set up by Zimbabwean journalists who migrated to countries such as South Africa, the UK, and the US fleeing police harassment and deteriorating political and economic conditions. As Moyo (2010: 25) notes, 'some of these journalists set up news websites, radio stations and even newspapers that served as alternative voices on Zimbabwe'. Given the 'underground' nature of their operations as well as their audience consumption, it is difficult to measure their audience ratings, especially through 'official' audience survey channels such as the Zimbabwe All Media and Products Survey (ZAMPS) ratings (Mabweazara, 2012).

### **Mass media and information and communication technology**

The emergence of new media spaces as a result of globalisation is not only changing patterns of international communication flows but also creating contemporary cultures pregnant with new meanings and experiences (Chalaby in Garyantes and Murphy, 2010:152). Of great interest is the CNN effect which theorises that when news media broadcast emotionally driven stories of human crises, they provoke a major response from domestic audiences and political elites (Robinson, 1999). This affects political figures and their decisions on major issues such as foreign policy (Bredeson, 2011:10). Gilboa (2005) indicated that when CNN floods the airwaves with news of a foreign crisis, policy makers have no choice but to redirect their attention to the crisis at hand. This study argues that crisis coverage evokes an emotional outcry from the public to 'do something' about the latest incident, hence forcing political leaders to change course or risk unpopularity (Gilboa, 2005:29). This emphasises the relationship between media, the public and policy makers. However, without advancements in communication technology and globalisation, CNN would not have been able to cover global issues and at the same time have a global reception.

Mabweazara (2012) asserts that the convergence of technologies has clearly reconfigured the operations of both SW Radio Africa and Studio 7 on a number of levels, including widening access to the stations programming and indeed reformulating reception practices. Another study on Radio Dialogue, revealed that the station innovatively combines the use of ward committees and digital media technologies such as the internet and mobile phones to create a participatory culture that is potentially organic, bottom-up, and democratic (Moyo, 2012). Advancements in communication technology have made radio broadcast suite international distribution than being made to only suite national consumption, as was the case with traditional radio broadcast. As such, content is affected by the desire to increase the marketability of international programme distribution (Whetmore, 1993:8). This is perhaps why most of the alternative radio stations on Zimbabwe tend to major more on countering state propaganda on political stories, as they have shown to attract international attention.

## Broadcasting frameworks

The dominant policy crises affecting most African countries such as Zimbabwe include a legacy of repressive laws from the colonial era (MISA, 2001). Despite most nationalists having criticised these laws, they have remained in the statute books of African countries for too long irrespective of them being incompatible with the new constitutional protection (MISA, 2001). In Zimbabwe for instance, laws like the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) among others, violate fundamental human rights enshrined in the country's Constitution by not opening up airwaves to non- state actors without asking for prohibitive requirements.

Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) was passed by the Zimbabwean parliament in January 2002 and assented to by former President Mugabe on March 15, 2002 (Government Gazette, 2013). The Act tops other media legal instruments in repressing media operations. It governs the operations and general conduct of the media in a way that leaves the media with very little breathing space. Since coming into force the local journalists and other media personnel have continued to face harassment and threats as the media landscape narrowed when private owned newspapers like Daily News were closed in 2003 (Muchena, 2013). The establishment of the inclusive government in 2009 slightly changed this piece of legislation but its major tenets have remained.

The law regulating broadcasting services in Zimbabwe is the Broadcasting Services Act [Chapter 12:06]. It provides for the appointment of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe and licensing of broadcasting services and systems in Zimbabwe. The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) provides for licensing of public, commercial and community broadcasting services. The purpose and objectives of the BSA are set in Section 2A as:

*To regulate broadcasting services and provide control of the broadcasting services bands in order to attain the following objectives:*

- (a) To ensure efficient use of the broadcasting service bands;*
- (b) To encourage the establishment of a modern and effective broadcasting infrastructure, taking into account the convergence of information technology, news media, telecommunications and consumer electronics;*



*(c) To promote the provision of a wide range of broadcasting services in Zimbabwe which, taken as a whole, are of high quality and calculated to appeal to a wide variety of tastes and interests, providing education, information and entertainment;*

*(d) To ensure that the broadcasting services in Zimbabwe, taken as a whole provide,*

*(i) Programmes on matters of local, national, regional and international interest or significance; so as to foster and maintain a healthy plural democracy;*

*(e) To promote public, commercial and community broadcasting services in the interest of the public among others.*

Media regulation in Zimbabwe is hinged on threats, imprisonment, surveillance, and censorship, and blackmail, abuse of power and denial of justice to maintain a firm grip over news. As a result dissenting voices are never covered or mentioned in state media or those media in which government has an interest such as The Herald, Sunday Mail and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). The private media has little space to fulfill its public watchdog role over the government. Citizens continue to be deprived of their right to freedom of expression and right to access information. AIPPA provides for access to information in public bodies but the heads of such bodies have the right to decide what to give and what to withhold 'in the interest of the public'. It is quite ironic here that someone decides on behalf of the public what is in their interest. AIPPA allows public officials to hold on to information for thirty days after a request is made which is a real set back on the operations of journalists (MISA, 2009). Worse still the thirty days may be extended if permission is sought from the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC).

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study used the qualitative research methodology while a case study of Studio 7 was adopted. According to Yin (1984:23), a case study research method is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. He further posits that, the exploration and investigation of the phenomenon is done through a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. Key informant interviews and documentary analysis were used to gather data. Key informants were drawn from the Ministry of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), Studio 7 as well as Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and Star



FM. In addition, three Studio 7 programme stringers, five Studio 7 and mainstream radio regular listeners were interviewed.

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Information has become an important instrument of governments' power in both domestic and inter-state relations (Zengeni, 2010). As such public opinion and the media have become key elements in understanding not only domestic but international politics. This trend has been necessitated by instantaneous communication facilities that have been brought about by new technologies such as satellite, the internet as global 24 hour news channels such CNN (Robinson, 2008:138). Prior to the 1930s, radio did not end at national borders hence the creation of radio wars between states (Zengeni, 2010). By the 1930s Europe was covered by a new 'fog of war' where foreign language broadcasts and counter broadcasts that transmitted from long and medium wave stations were jammed (Cawte, 1996:8). For example in Germany where pirate radio stations broadcasted to German minorities in other countries and to groups in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia while all British wireless licenses had a clause printed on them indicating that 'it was illegal to listen to unauthorised broadcasts'. These so called unauthorised inter-state broadcasts created hatred, disharmony and to some extent strained the involved countries' diplomatic ties (Cawte, 1996:8).

The broadcast of VOA's Studio 7 in the country has continued to strain diplomatic relations with Botswana and United States of America (USA). In conducting its public diplomacy, the American Public Affairs department chose to do this through Voice of America (VOA) which initiated its Studio 7 programme for Zimbabwe in 2003. One of the respondents in the study indicated that the aim of the programme was to give Zimbabweans news information that is credible, balanced as well as objective, not necessarily to criticise Zimbabwe and its government. The respondent further said that:

“Counter to the state controlled media in Zimbabwe, Studio 7 broadcasts fair and balanced news as well as cultural programmes in the three major languages which are, English, Shona and Ndebele”.

The respondent however, pointed that programming concentrate on what the target audience seeks the most which is news on domestic issues and the state of political affairs. However, another respondent who participated in the study mentioned that:

“The programme is being driven by the regime change agenda efforts to the country. Reports broadcast on Studio 7 programme are tarnishing the image of the country to the international community and are retrogressive to the country’s developments”.

Zengeni (2010) indicated that Western media platforms escalated their campaigns of vilification against the ZANU-PF regime and the economy of Zimbabwe. Other scholars like Ndlukula (2009) pointed that most global media channels not only confined to VOA, show that reportage on Zimbabwe is biased against the ZANU-PF regime and designed to shape international opinion against the regime. Willems (2007) indicated that tourism was severely affected by unfair media coverage by alternative radio stations and the Western media in general.

In Zimbabwe the media has little space to fulfill its public watchdog role over the government as citizens continue to be deprived of their right to freedom of expression and right to access information. AIPPA provides for access to information in public bodies but the heads of such bodies have the right to decide what to give and what to withhold ‘in the public interest’. The Zimbabwean government has shown its unwillingness to let people choose their favourable radio broadcast platform through restrictive laws that limit the operations of private radio stations locally. One of the respondents in the study indicated that:

“We have always been bombarded by information that is not true at all times by mainstream radio, therefore, we have resorted to listening to both Studio 7 and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio stations and then deduce the truth from there”.

### **Media instruments guiding operations of broadcast institutions in Zimbabwe**

Broadcasting institutions are always guided by media instruments in any given country and Zimbabwe is no exception. The country’s Constitution is the masterpiece of all legal frameworks that guide the different activities in each and every country. The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) as one of the pieces of legislations guiding the operations of a public broadcaster clarifies on the role of the public broadcaster which is that of promoting unity and national building among others. In its operations, radio services are expected to operate within the law. In addition to this there are also other pieces of legislation that makes it mandatory for a public broadcaster to draw the line in terms of security issues, that is, the Official Secrets Act (OSA). State-run radio stations are not supposed to perform acts that are harmful to the

economy, security of the nation, and undue disclosures over issues that are protected unless permission is granted.

The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) was established through an Act of parliament, which is the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) in 2001. Section 3 of the BSA states that BAZ is the regulatory and licensing authority for the sector mandated to license all broadcasting players. The BSA is the guiding act to the operations of radio stations. Radio stations are not supposed to be involved in disseminating information that does not meet the objectives of the government's guiding framework, hence sift of information that promotes hate speech. In the allocation of licenses, BAZ is guided by the BSA with specific reference to Sections 8, 10, 20 and 22. Section 20 states that no political party or organisation shall hold or have control of any broadcasting license or signal carrier license, while section 22 indicates that 'no person other than a citizen of Zimbabwe shall be a director of a licensee'. On the procedure of applying for a license, the BSA stipulates that applications to BAZ will only be considered once they have been invited in the Government Gazette and a national newspaper. Once invited, the application is accompanied by details of the applicant, a proposal and a non-refundable application fee. BAZ has been castigated for being partisan. (Ndlovu, 2015) argued that BAZ only given licenses to people who are aligned to the ruling Zanu-PF party and no independent applicants have been given licenses to operate a radio station outside the party circle.

Studio 7 operates from Botswana but targeting audiences from Zimbabwe. The frequency used by Studio 7 is Botswana's frequency which it gave to Voice of America (VOA). Zimbabweans access VOA studios to run the slot called Studio 7 to broadcast into Zimbabwe. VOA does not have a licence to operate in Zimbabwe. It has by-passed national licensing procedures. Its operations are against the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) instruments which give countries the sovereign right to regulate communications in their territories.

### **Alternative radio stations and the establishment of pluralism in radio broadcasting**

In as much as external broadcast may give alternative views to what is being aired by mainstream radio, Zimbabwe needs to encourage the setting up of more private radio stations so as to support pluralism in the broadcasting industry. The existence of a number of laws and specific provisions that are not in tandem with the current constitution are restrictive to broadcast media plurality. The same sentiments were also echoed by one respondent who mentioned that the political environment should allow people to have freedom of speech.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although the magnitude of the operations of parallel radio stations maybe under- estimated locally, their effect to the country has proven to be very costly. Zimbabwe is currently battling a number of challenges among them, a non performing tourism industry, reduced foreign investors, non performing economy, Western imposed sanctions and accusations of human rights abuses among other issues of international concern due to negative reports that have been circulated in the international media and alternative radio stations. Foreign policy determines a state's interaction with other states in the international political system. This interaction is spearheaded by mass media communication channels and it is being used as an instrument of soft power. Therefore, the media has the ability to shape or manipulate foreign policy.

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