Ethical Fitness and the Zimbabwean Media, 1999-2008

by

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Abstract

The year 1999 saw the birth of a brand new independent newspaper in Zimbabwe in the name of The Daily News. The launch of this independent newspaper also coincided with the formation of the biggest opposition political party in Zimbabwe, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which sought to challenge the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)'s two decades of political hegemony. This led to the polarization of the media as well as all political institutions as ZANU PF sought to re-assert itself in light of this new development. The Herald, as a state funded newspaper, swiftly changed its house policy and started supporting the programmes and initiatives f ZANU PF while the Daily News became the MDC's official mouth piece. Today, it is difficult to read a news item in one of the local newspapers and pass it as the absolute truth without reading the other. Many reasons have been cited for this problem. Chief among these has been the fight for political space by both ZANU PF and the MDC. This media polarization has led to vices such as lying, deception, and propaganda. While many scholars have extensively outlined and discussed these vices, my position is that these vices can only be discussed and addressed in the context of the media's lack of ethical fitness, which should be characterized by credibility, integrity, civility, and community.

Introduction

In this essay, I discuss the link between ethical fitness and the media in Zimbabwe during the period 1999 to 2008 which is considered by many scholars as the darkest period of Zimbabwe's political and economic history. I charge that the political polarization that characterized the period was, to a larger extent, precipitated by the media that had totally abandoned their professional mandate of disseminating truthful, accurate, and balanced news to the readership. I divide this presentation into four distinct sections with the first section defining key concepts and setting the tone of the debate, followed by the section on the causes and nature of Zimbabwe's political polarization during the period under review.

In the third section, I outline and discuss the outcome of the political polarization which included fear and the usurping of the people's freedoms of expression, speech, and assembly. Finally, in the fourth section I suggest ways that the media can appropriate ethical principles in order to be ethically fit and fight against political polarization. I begin by highlighting the importance of ethical theory and ethical fitness in promoting peace media in the West and in Africa. I argue that only the appropriation of the ethic of community and responsibility or an ethic of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* could have saved the situation in Zimbabwe during the period under review where ZANU PF and the MDC were involved in a protracted dog fight to control Zimbabwe's political space. Please note that the MDC later split in two in 2005 following disagreements on whether or not the party should participate in the senatorial elections of that year. The larger formation became known as MDC-T with the 'T' representing Tsvangirai and the smaller formation became known as MDC-M with the 'M' representing Mutambara who become its first leader. Later on this smaller formation was led by Welshman Ncube and it assumed the name MDC-N (throughout this exercise I use the acronyms MDC and MDC-T interchangeably).

Media and Political Polarization: Definition and Characterization

In an work this, one cannot proceed to define and characterize the link between the media and political polarization in Zimbabwe before defining the word 'media' itself and deciphering the meaning of the phrase 'political polarization.' Thus, the 'media' refer to those devices through which both audio and visual messages are transmitted to the mass audience (Mangena, 2009: 94). This can be done through radio, television, newspapers, magazines, business journals, movies, technological gadgets such as smart phones and computer networks among others (Baran, 2002: 6). The word 'media' can also be used to refer to the communication industries themselves (2002: 6). There are two types of media, namely; print media which include, among others newspapers, magazines, business journals, books and pamphlets. The other type of media consists of electronic media which cover television, radio, videos, the internet, cable networks and smart phones (cf Mangena, 2009: 94).

Many years ago, only radio, television and the newspaper were the traditional media outlets but the advent of new technologies meant that the other media outlets such as computer networks and smart phones made the dissemination of news much easier and faster. Today, an event happening in New York in the last thirty or so minutes will, in no time, reach the whole world through these social media networks. This is a clear demonstration that the electronic media have become very powerful tools that also have the power to impact, positively or otherwise, the performance of the state and its security. The world over, politicians cannot survive without controlling the media, as they can be a source of political stability or disorder in the country.

To this end, the media can be a double-edged sword. In this endeavor, I attempt to show how the media have contributed to the destabilization of peace in Zimbabwe from 1999 to 2008 and what needs to be done in order to bring back the desired peace. One of the worst crimes that the media have committed in Zimbabwe is the promotion of political polarization which is here defined as the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes (DiMaggio et al, 1996 and Fiorina et al, 2008). Polarization can refer to such divergence in public opinion as a whole, or to such divergence within a particular sub-set or group (Ibid.). In Zimbabwe, there were only two broadly recognized political positions or ideologies during the period under review, namely; those defended by ZANU PF and those defended by the MDC-T.

While ZANU PF ideologies were and still are conservative, something that characterizes almost all revolutionary political parties in the world today, the ideologies of the MDC-T were and still are progressive, given their link with the interests of the workers and the marginalized. While conservative ideologies celebrate past achievements more than future opportunities, progressive ideologies are more interested in the future of the country. In this composition, I argue that there is no better way to define political polarization than to have a scenario where political parties are judged either as conservative or progressive. In Zimbabwe, this has been the order of the day from 1999 to 2008 and beyond. Probably, the question to ask is: How have the media contributed to this divergence of political attitudes in Zimbabwe? This question will be answered in the next section where I look at the causes and nature of political polarization in Zimbabwe.

The Causes and Nature of Political Polarization

In Zimbabwe, political polarization began in September 1999, immediately after the formation of the MDC. For the first time in the history of Zimbabwean politics, a serious opposition political party had emerged to challenge ZANU PF, a revolutionary party that had won the country independence from the British and had enjoyed uninterrupted rule for close to two decades. The other opposition political parties that came before the MDC, namely; the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) and the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats (ZUD) led by the late Edgar Tekere and Margaret Dongo respectively had not made the impact that the MDC made in a short space of time.

The MDC was formed at a time when Zimbabwe's economy was showing serious signs of collapse because of the effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) of 1991 which saw many people in the economically active category of the population losing their jobs as companies embarked on a downsizing exercise in order to remain viable. Thus, the rate of unemployment rose to frightening levels with the year 2008 recording a percentage of 94% (AFP: ZIMSTAT, 2009). This, coupled with the involvement of the Zimbabwe national army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) war, led a majority of the country's population to pass a vote of no confidence to ZANU PF. The MDC took advantage of this and launched their first campaign at a packed Rufaro Stadium where they promised people better conditions of living that included jobs, food, and education.

ZANU PF reacted by taking a swipe at this opposition party. In order to send its message to the people that the MDC was there to de-stabilize the peace the country was enjoying and to reverse the gains of Zimbabwe's independence, the party used the public media such as *The Herald, The Sunday Mail, The Chronicle, The Sunday News, The Manica Post* and the *Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation* (ZBC) as its mouthpiece. The MDC on the other hand, used the private media to send its progressive message to the populace and these included: *The Standard, The Zimbabwe Independent, The Financial Gazzette* and *The Daily News* and *The Tribune* among others. This marked the beginning of political Polarization in Zimbabwe.

Having identified and explained the causes of political polarization in Zimbabwe during the period under review, it is important to look at the nature and scope of this political polarization and how they are linked to the media's lack of ethical fitness in discharging its mandate. The nature of political polarization in Zimbabwe during this period was such that the public media strove by all means necessary to assassinate the character of the leader of the MDC, Mr. Morgan Richard Tsvangirai, and his party, while the private media saw the leader of ZANU PF, Comrade Robert Gabriel Mugabe, as the enemy of Zimbabwe and the reason why Zimbabwe's economy had collapsed.

During the period under review, hardly a day would pass without the media, both public and private, lampooning or villifying either Tsvangirai's party or Mugabe's party respectively. For example, *The Financial Gazzette* of 3-9 May, 2001 carried a story on its front page, headlined: "Church rebukes government on anarchy" in which Zimbabwe's Catholic Bishops were alleged to have criticized the ruling ZANU PF government for fuelling lawlessness because of its refusal to act against its supporters who were said to be raiding and attacking individuals… accused of backing the MDC. This story was not covered by the public media. On equal measure, *The Herald* of 22 March, 2000 also accused the MDC of fuelling violence. The paper quoted the then ZANU PF deputy national secretary, comrade Chen Chimutengwende to authenticate their story. Part of the story read:

So many violent situations are being created and the MDC is hiring the urban unemployed and tsotsis for the purpose. They are also recruiting unemployed farm based youths. The MDC is funded by commercial farmers and some foreign NGOs and donors and is backed by some Western interests.

What is particularly interesting is that the private media did not cover this story and no one bothered to verify the facts to see if, indeed, the MDC as a party was actually planning to cause violence. It is easier to notice that in the two examples cited above, ethical principles such as truthfulness (veracity), accuracy and objectivity in news reporting were substituted by lies and deception in order to appeal to the interests of either ZANU PF or the MDC.

The Outcome of Political Polarization

In this section, I discuss the outcome of political polarization in Zimbabwe during the period under review. I charge that during the period under review, political polarization forced the general populace to lose confidence in the media, both public and private. While in most economies that have enjoyed uninterrupted political stability, the media is an opinion leader and a source of truth, this was not the case in Zimbabwe during the period under review. Those who subscribed to the ZANU PF ideology hated private newspapers like *The Daily News* with passion and those who subscribed to the MDC stopped buying *The Herald* and watching the *Zimbabwe Television* which they accused of being biased against their party in favour of ZANU PF.

For the neutrals, it was difficult to buy just one of these newspapers and be satisfied that the news disseminated were a true representation of what was going on in the country. As one prominent Zimbabwean author, Phathisa Nyathi aptly summed it up:

The polarization in our society is best depicted in our press. Basically, the press is either pro-government or anti-government. Sometimes objectivity is sacrificed on the altar of expediency in order to be true to their chosen position… if you buy newspapers from one divide, you will get half the story (Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe, 2002)

While political polarization was apparent in that the media had deviated from its professional mandate of giving the public readership and listenership truthful, fair, honest, and reliable news about the country's state of affairs, political polarization also sowed the seeds of fear among the general population to the extent that there was no objective debate on national issues on television and radio.

All the freedoms that come with being a citizen such as freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, were scuttled through the enactment of repressive laws such the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) and the Access to Information for the Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). The net effect of this was that only ZANU PF programmes were covered positively by the public media which were also used to prop up the repressive pieces of legislation mentioned above.

On the other hand, the private media did not have kind words on POSA, BSA and AIPPA as it regarded them as violating citizen rights and freedoms. Thus, both the public media and the private media never at any given moment agreed on fundamental issues that had to do with the country's economy, human rights and politics.

- **Ethical Theory as a Media Function**

It is important to define and characterize the term 'ethics' before defining 'ethical fitness' for the benefit of those readers who are not trained philosophers and/or ethicists. By definition, 'ethics' refers to the scientific study or analysis of moral concepts such as right, wrong, or good and bad, permissible, ought and evil, among others (Pojman, 1993: ix). Please notice that at the more general level, the terms *ethics* and *moral philosophy* are used interchangeably to refer to the systematic endeavour to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories (Ibid.). In the West, *ethics* or *moral philosophy* have followed three different strands of theorizing, namely; virtue ethics which is represented by Plato/Socrates and Aristotle, deontological ethics which is represented by Immanuel Kant, and teleological ethics as defended by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, among others. With virtue ethics, the emphasis was on the cultivation of certain virtues within the individual such as justice and happiness, with reason being the key defining feature of this theory.

With deontological ethics, Kant has succeeded in showing that only motives or intentions define moral acts and that these motives or intentions answer to the clarion call of certain imperatives that are categorical and not hypothetical (cf Pojman, 2002: 136). For Kant, the Categorical Imperative (CI) as the supreme principle of morality stipulates that when one is acting, he is not motivated by certain returns but by the principle of duty for duty's sake (Timmons, 1990: 124). Hypothetical imperatives, on the other hand, stipulate that if one wants to get B he or she must do A. A good example is: 'If Susan wants to pass her philosophy examinations, then she must study hard' (cf Pojman, 2002: 142). Kant objects to this position as he thinks that actions are right only as far as they are within the stipulated rules of human conduct as defined by the categorical imperative which has three maxims, namely; the rule of universalibility, the rule of respect for persons and the rule of the kingdom of ends (Timmons, 1990: 125-130; Pojman, 2002: 141-142).

The rule of universalibility, for Kant, states that one should act as if he or she is legislating for everyone, that is, howsoever one acts, he must allow other people to act likewise without being offended (Raphael, 1994). The rule of respect for persons stipulates that one should act so as to treat humanity as an end, not merely as means to his own ends. The point is that each person qua rational has dignity and profound worth, which entails that he or she must never be exploited or manipulated or merely used as a means to our idea of what is for the general good or any other end (Pojman, 2002: 149). Last but not least, the rule of the kingdom of ends holds that the every rational being is a member of the moral community and is responsible for coming up with moral laws. As such, he or she must not be accused of breaking or violating the same moral laws that he or she has helped to put in place (Timmons, 1990: 130).

With regard to teleological ethics, Bentham and Mill have argued that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends solely on its results or outcomes and this type of teleology has come to be called utilitarianism and it has two versions, namely; Bentham's classical or hedonistic utilitarianism and Mill's ideal utilitarianism (cf Mangena, 2012: 5). Generally, utilitarians have argued that if the results are desirable to both the actor and the majority of the group, then the act is good and if the results are bad, then the act is bad as well. For Bentham, a moral act as a function of utility whereby utility is measured in amounts of pleasure or pain (Raphael, 1994: 35). Please notice that while Bentham's classical or hedonistic utilitarianism places a premium on the quantity of the pleasurable experience – which is why it is also called quantitative utilitarianism, Mill's ideal utilitarianism which is also called qualitative utilitarianism because of its emphasis on quality, places premium on the quality of the act (cf Mangena, 2012: 5-6).

With regard to the ethics of community and responsibility or the ethics of *hunhu* or *ubuntu,* African philosophers such as Mogobe Ramose (1999), John S Mbiti (1969), Charles Villa Vicencio (2009), Fainos Mangena (2012a; 2012b), Augustine Shutte (2008) and Martin Prozesky (2003) have all agreed that the interests of the community are more important than those of the individual and that blood ties are very important when defining moral acts. This is a clear departure from Western-centred ethics that I outlined and discussed above which place an imperative on individual interests. The ethics of community and responsibility or the ethics of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* is premised on the idea that nobody can be fully human without the other person.

Mbiti (1969: 215) puts it succinctly when he remarks, thus: "I am therefore we are, since we are therefore I am." According to this ethic, moral acts are shared responsibilities, that is, if Tatenda, who is the brother of Ruvangu, commits murder, this will also implicate Ruvangu by virtue of the fact that the two share the same blood; or if Tatenda does something good, credit will not only go to him alone but to his brothers and sisters and the rest of the family as well. Against this background, virtuosity (or lack of it) becomes a function of the group or community.

One of the distinctive marks of the ethics of community and responsibility or the ethics of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* is that the ethic is itself a way of life. One does not receive any formal training in order to live a morally blameless life, that is, one learns the exigencies of life by being alive. In Shona culture we say: *Munhu haadzidziri kudhidha ari kunze kwemvura, asi arimukati memumvura* (a person does not learn to swim while on land, but in water itself).

Having defined and characterized 'ethics,' from both a Western and African perspective, I will now proceed to define 'ethical fitness' in general before linking it with the performance of the media in Zimbabwe during the period under review. To begin with, Louis Alvin Day (2003: 9) argues that 'ethical fitness' has nothing to do with comprehending all of the ethical principles and agonizing over the dilemmas posed by the various case studies. Ethical fitness is not a result of academic excellence or prowess (Ibid.). Although Day (2003: 9) acknowledges that the formal experience of agonizing over the ethical dilemmas posed in hypothetical cases, can help one to begin to cultivate his or her ethical awareness and to understand the moral reasoning process, this is not enough to make him or her ethically fit.

This also means that Plato/Socrates' theories of virtue, Kant's deontological ethics and Bentham or Mill's teleological theories outlined and discussed above cannot alone lead to ethical fitness. So, what is ethical fitness? Day quotes Rushworth Kidder (1995: 59) who defines 'ethical fitness' as the actual practice of ethics. Thus, to be ethically fit, one has to confront the tough moral issues of everyday existence and become an active participant in their resolution, that is to say, one has got to be mentally engaged and committed through feelings as well as through intellect (Ibid.). From the foregoing, it is clear that ethical fitness has to do with putting theory into practice. The point is that it is good to learn ethics at media schools and colleges but for as long as the knowledge acquired at these schools and colleges does not positively impact on media practitioners or journalist's character and conduct, then we cannot talk of ethical fitness.

Media schools and colleges in Zimbabwe such as the school of journalism at the Harare Polytechnic, the college of journalism at the Christian College of Southern Africa (CCOSA), the departments of media studies at the Midlands State University, and at the University of Zimbabwe, have all made an effort to include a course on media ethics in their curriculum but if this does not translate into the kind of media practitioner or journalist who respects the ethics that guides his or her profession, then whatever is happening in these schools and colleges is a waste of time and resources. Perhaps, at this juncture, there is a need to identify and explain some of the defining features of ethical fitness in media communication in the West, before identifying and explaining the distinctive features of ethical fitness in the Zimbabwean context. Day (2003: 10) identifies three of these features as: Credibility, integrity, and civility. To this list, I add 'community' and 'responsibility' which I discuss later.

- **Distinctive Features of Ethical Fitness in the West**

Credibility: For Day (2003:10), credibility means that a television item, radio, or newspaper item, is believable and worthy of trust. From an ethical perspective, credibility is the point of departure in our dealings with others and our full membership in the moral community (Ibid.). This point is premised on the idea of Kant's third maxim of the CI that I outlined earlier, which calls for all members in the kingdom of ends (moral community) to treat others with utmost respect.

Applied to media practice, it means that media practitioners as members of the moral community have a duty to disseminate credible and trustworthy news to the reading and listening public so as to retain their confidence. Please note that credibility is critical in a polarized society as readers always treat every news item with suspicion. I shall clarify this point in the next section where I will look at credibility issues (or lack thereof) in the Zimbabwean media during the period under review.

Integrity: For Day (2003: 10), true ethical fitness demands integrity. Stephen Carter (1996: 7) defines integrity as (i) discerning what is right and what is wrong (ii) acting on what you have discerned, even at a personal cost; and (iii) saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong. As Day (2003: 11) puts it, people with integrity are not only committed to discovering what is good, they spend much of their time attempting to improve the moral ecology. Day (2003: 11) gives the example of an opponent of physician-assisted suicide, who he thinks should oppose legislative attempts to legalize it, because she honestly believes, after much soul-searching, that any form of euthanasia is immoral. Thus, moral agents that possess integrity practice what they preach (Ibid.). Again, in polarized societies, integrity is a cherished value that readers use to gauge whether the newspaper, radio, or television is adhering to the ethics that should define its existence. I will discuss this issue again in the next section and the aim will be to establish whether or not integrity is also an African value.

Civility: For Day (2003: 12), civility encompasses an attitude of self-sacrifice and respect for others. Whereas the value of civility can be traced back to ancient Greece, its contemporary formulation dates from the 16th century when the scholar Desiderus Erasmus wrote the first important work on the subject (Ibid.). Civility, for Erasmus, is what enables us to live together as a society. Civility embraces a set of rules, often based on convention, that provide the tools for interacting with others (Ibid.). These include respect and self-sacrifice. Civility is opposed to moral egoism, whereby one feels that self-interest should be the primary determinant in choosing which course of action to follow (Ibid.). Thus, the main motivation of media or journalism practice is to promote collective existence and selflessness rather than to push for the interests of certain individuals and institutions in any given society. This is in line with the concepts of community and responsibility which I define and explain in the next section.

- *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu*: **Ethical Fitness and the Media in Zimbabwe**

With regard to the feature of community and responsibility or *hunhu* or *ubuntu,* I argue that if all our media houses – both public and private – and their employees could do whatever they do in order to promote the interest of the community, then the value of ethical fitness will be realized. The biggest advantage offered by the ethic of community and responsibility which is subsumed under *hunhu* or *ubuntu,* is that this philosophy is a lived experience. One does not need to be taught at a formal media school or college that violence is wrong. It is something that one knows through intuition.

The ethic of community and responsibility stipulates that one learns the vagaries of life by being alive. Against this background, I argue that the idea of ethical fitness is closely aligned to the ethic of community and responsibility than it is aligned to the Western theories of ethics such as those defended by Plato/Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Bentham and Mill as discussed earlier. The distinctive features of ethical fitness as outlined and discussed by Day above will only apply to Zimbabwe if the emphasis on the individual or self is replaced by the emphasis on community and responsibility. For example, one can argue that for a news item to be credible and worthy of trust, both the media organization and its employees (media practitioners or journalists) must be selfless. They must be motivated by the desire to be servants of the communities they are serving; knowing fully well that without these people their standing and well-being as media organizations is incomplete.

It is important to note that there were many instances in Zimbabwe during the period under review when a similar event would be reported differently by *The Herald* and the *The Daily News* leaving the public readership wondering which of the two newspaper stables was believable and worthy of trust. For example, in 2003, *The Daily News* carried a story to the effect that ZANU PF youths had beheaded a Guruve woman in front of her children, a story which the public media disputed. Later on, the editor of the publication was told to retract the story. This story left many readers puzzled given that the media were divided on whether or not this had actually happened. I would say that this spirit where the media disagree on virtually everything is against the spirit and letter of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* which as Prozesky (2003: 10) put it – in apparent reference to the place of *ubuntu* in South Africa – says:

> *History has given South Africa a diversity of peoples. We come in a range of colours. We speak different languages. We follow different faiths and profess different philosophies. Our cultures and life styles vary. We do not all like the same kind of music and we do not really enjoy the same kinds of food. Diversity like this is not a problem. It is a blessing, just as nature's forests with their diversity of trees are more beautiful than any plantation. But we turned this blessing into a problem – the problem of people who do not know or understand one another, who fear one another, have fought, hated and killed one another.*

Here Prozesky is alluding to the fact that differences in the way we see things should not translate to enmity. What this means when applied to the Zimbabwean scenario is that as a people, we can have different political affiliations and still be united by the fact that we are all Zimbabweans. The question then is: Why were the media dividing people along political lines during the period under review? Why were the public or private media celebrating the downfall of fellow Zimbabweans either from ZANU PF or from the MDC? These are hard questions, but my position remains that the problem of political polarization in Zimbabwe can be dealt with once and for all if media organizations can live according to the stipulations of the ethic of community and responsibility and/or *hunhu* or *ubuntu* whereby they have a duty to respect readers despite the fact that some of these readers could be opposed to their political affiliations. Thus, the politics of alienation must be discouraged.

Conclusion

In this essay, I looked at the performance of the media in post-colonial Zimbabwe during the period 1999 to 2008. I argued that the media during this period violated all ethics in the book in order to satisfy the interests of politicians representing two political parties in Zimbabwe, namely; ZANU PF and the MDC and the outcome of this was political polarization which saw the country's population being divided into two camps, those that supported ZANU PF and its mouthpieces: *The Herald, The Sunday Mail, The Chronicle, The Sunday News* and ZBC among others as well as those that supported the MDC and its mouthpieces: *The Daily News, The Standard, The Zimbabwe Independent and the now defunct Tribune.* These media outlets sow the seeds of hatred between ZANU PF officials and supporters and officials and supporters of the MDC which later bred political violence which led to the death of many people. I argued that a lack of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* based ethical fitness in the media was the major cause of this political crisis and I suggested ways ethical fitness can be promoted through incorporating *hunhu* or *ubuntu* values in the training of media practitioners in Zimbabwe.

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