

THE VIEW FROM BELOW? EXPOSURE TO MEDIA SOURCES AND PREFERENCE FOR DEMOCRACY IN ZIMBABWE: A PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

Ignatius Gutsa and Tafadzwa Chevo

Lecturers, Department of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between exposure to media and preference for democracy in Zimbabwe. The operating environment for various media outlets in Zimbabwe has generally been viewed as restrictive to the existence of a free and independent media effectively restricting citizens' access to alternative media voices outside of the state owned outlets. As a result Zimbabwe has scored very lowly on various media freedom scores. On the other hand many scholars have acknowledged that a free and independent media is critical to the existence of modern democracy as a democratic political system thrives where informed citizens are able to participate freely and effectively in public debate. Proponents of media freedom argue that there is need to have a free and independent media as the media helps in promoting democracy through performing such functions as watchdog, gate keeper and agenda-setter in society. To achieve the study's objectives, a sample of 2400 respondents from Round 5 Afrobarometer survey data on Zimbabwe is used to examine the relationship between access to media and preference for democracy. Findings show that there is no significant relationship between access to media and aspirations for democratic values in Zimbabwe even though Zimbabweans are in favour of democracy compared to any other form of government.

Key Words: Afrobarometer, Democracy, Media, Politics, Zimbabwe

Introduction and Background

This paper examines the relationship between access to media and democracy in Zimbabwe. The media and democracy debate is not in any way a new one as it can be traced back to early periods of the 20th Century. According to Norris (2008) the guarantee of freedom of expression

and information is recognized as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly states that everyone:

".....has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

As a result of ideas such as these, Norris (2008) observed that liberal theorists have long acknowledged that the existence of an unfettered and independent press within each nation is an essential ingredient in the process of democratization. These are the same ideas which are echoed by Moyo (2005, 110) who noted that it has widely been accepted that the media are central to modern democracy by acting as primary sources of information. The argument therefore is simply that private media can help in contributing towards the right of freedom of expression, thought and conscience in the process strengthening the responsiveness and accountability of governments to all citizens, and providing a pluralist platform and channel of political expression for a multiplicity of groups and interests. For any democratic system to survive it is therefore conditional on the existence of an informed citizenry capable of participating effectively in public debate and in the overall political process where they have to make informed decisions.

As noted by Ronning and Kupe (2000, 138), Zimbabwe like most African countries still carries media contradictions with their roots in the colonial period when media outlets mainly served the needs of the colonial administrators. For writers like Norris (2008) control of the news media is used to reinforce the power of autocratic regimes and to deter criticism of the government by independent journalists, through official government censorship, state ownership of the main radio and television channels, legal restrictions on freedom of expression and publication (such as stringent libel laws and restrictive official secrets acts), limited competition through oligopolies in commercial ownership as well as the use of outright violence and intimidation against journalists and broadcasters. In the case of Zimbabwe, the media landscape tracing back to the colonial times in Rhodesia and up to the present postcolonial and independent times has

been viewed as operating in a constrained environment due to a number of legislative instruments which have worked to muzzle the media. Present day Zimbabwe has these legislative instruments which include the Access to Information and Privacy Protection Act which was passed by the Parliament of Zimbabwe on the 31st of January 2002. This piece of legislation has been described by many as essentially working to restrict the operations of a free and independent press. In focusing on Zimbabwe and the relationship between media and democracy it is therefore important to reflect on Norris' (2008) observation that the channels of communication reflect the social and cultural pluralism within each society. Therefore in a fair, impartial and balanced media landscape multiple interests and voices should be heard in public deliberation. On the other hand if the airwaves and press overwhelmingly favor the government, this can drown out credible opponents such as the situation in Zimbabwe has been viewed as.

To be or not to be? Democracy or no democracy in Zimbabwe?

Writers such as Gilward (1993, 65), Berger (2002, 21) and Chemhuru (2010, 182) have acknowledged that the term democracy is a relative concept. Consequently just like other terms and processes democracy is really a contested concept becoming essentially a matter of standards of explanation and description rather than moral prescription. Zimbabwe is currently practicing a system of Parliamentary democracy. Therefore in considering the definition of democracy and furthermore whether to classify Zimbabwe as a democratic country or not this paper will not delve much into that debate. Notwithstanding the strengths and or limitations of various definitions of democracy and also in classifying Zimbabwe as a democracy, this paper is adopting the view that has been taken by Chemhuru (2010, 182) who acknowledges that democracy is a heavily contested concept in Zimbabwe. As a result of this contestation diverging notions of the concept and how it should be cherished and practiced among different individuals, social, political, economic and other institutions in Zimbabwe abound. At the same time as further acknowledged by Chemhuru (ibid) the paradox of democracy is that it is really one form of governance that most politicians, including despots the world over purport to be exercising or always aspire for.

Understanding the relationship between Media and Democracy

A number of scholars have argued that a free press is valuable for democracy, good governance and overall human development. For example Sen (1999, 9) observed that “...*in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.*” Sen’s argument helps to show how the media in independent and democratic countries provides the state with the necessary checks and balances for the benefit of the citizens. Therefore in principle a free, independent and plural media is assumed to have sufficient checks and balances available to provide a critical check on state abuse of power or corruption as well as to enable informed and inclusive public debate on issues of concern to citizens. These checks provided by the media whether reporting positive or negative news can contribute to political trust and engagement as well as satisfaction with democracy. Furthermore in instances where the media is an effective agent it can also serve to amplify the voice of marginalised and excluded groups (Governance and Social Research and Development Centre).

As noted by GSRDC the critical roles of the media in a democracy are therefore to be:

- i. ***Agenda-setter:*** Media raising awareness of social problems, informing elected officials about public concerns and needs. Issues identified by the media as important also viewed by the public as also important.
- ii. ***Watchdog:*** Here news can provide a check on powerful sectors of society and leaders within the private and public domains even though the role of the media as a watchdog can be highly political in fragile conflict-affected states.
- iii. ***Gatekeeper:*** The media as a forum for public debate and discussion of social issues as well as representing a plurality of perspectives, including those of poor and marginalised groups.

Therefore for writers such as Gilward (1993, 65) the degree to which the mass media functions as a public sphere representative of the citizenry and accessible to all serves as a key barometer of democracy in any given country. This relationship between media and democracy is acknowledged to rise from the lengthy tradition in democracies which places the media at the interface between the governors and the governed. In order to have thriving democracies it is

therefore essential that citizens have access to information for them to effectively participate in decision making and organize interest groups as these processes are key to sustaining democratic institutions (Damian, 1999, 311). However it is also important to note that the impact of different media is not uniform in different regions or countries. For example in the case of Africa, the Governance and Social Development Research Centre (GSDRC) acknowledged that recent research has shown that the media (particularly radio) is serving a growing population of young, rural, and non-literate demographic groups in Africa.

The media landscape in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean media landscape has generally been viewed as restrictive to the existence of a free and independent media. According to Mutanda (2012, 265) prior to the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) on the 13th of February 2009 between President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T), and Arthur Mutambara's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-M), the print and broadcast media were conquered by the ZANU PF government through its publications ranging from *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Chronicle* and *The Manica Post*. Broadcasting channels were the *Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC TV)*, *Sport FM*, *Radio Zimbabwe*, *Power FM* and *National FM*. Although there have been noticeable changes in the broadcasting landscape since the formation of the GNU, ZANU PF is still being accused of tactfully using the state-owned media to denigrate the MDC as an anti-land reform party ill-advised by the Western countries. In line with GNU provisions over the course of 2012 the Government of Zimbabwe has taken steps to free the media and expand opportunities for alternative voices on the media landscape for its citizens especially in the broadcasting sector. Although there have been a number of private print media outlets operating in Zimbabwe, the airwaves have been restricted up until the coming on board of two independent radio stations namely, Star FM and ZiFM radio which began operating towards the latter half of 2012. However although this partial opening up of the airwaves has been praised by some quarters, other quarters simply view this as a general window dressing as only applications from people who have been viewed by others as ZANU sympathizers were awarded licenses to operate.

As a result of this restrictive space Zimbabwe has consistently performed badly on media freedom indices. For example on the Global Press Ratings compiled by Karlekar and Dunham (2012) for Freedom House for the year 2012, Zimbabwe's media landscape was seen as not free with the result that on the Global index the country was ranked 172 tied together with Azerbaijan and Russia and on the continent level index Zimbabwe was ranked 42 in Sub Saharan Africa. In 2011 Zimbabwe was ranked 117 tied together with Cambodia, Fiji, Oman and Venezuela on the Global index <http://harare24.com/index-id-News-zk-11607.html>

Methodology

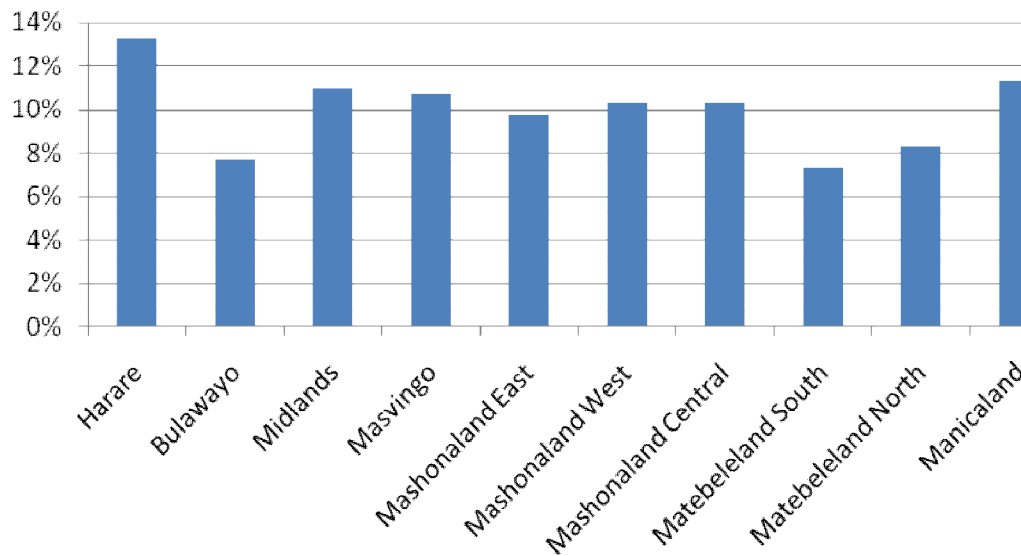
Afrobarometer Round 5 data for the year 2011 was utilized in order to assess the relationship between access to media and preference for democracy in Zimbabwe. The Afrobarometer project collects and disseminates information regarding Africans' views on democracy, governance, economic reform, civil society, and quality of life. The sampling frame which was used was based on the 2011 projected population figures for Zimbabwe. Afrobarometer surveys use a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, probability sample design. The sample is designed as a representative cross-section of all citizens of voting age in a given country with the goal of giving every adult citizen an equal and known chance of selection for interview. Fieldwork for Round 5 was conducted in Zimbabwe from 16 to 30 July 2012. The survey interviewed 2400 adult Zimbabweans allowing for inferences to national adult populations with a margin of sampling error of no more than plus or minus +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Responses that were received were then coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). For Round 5, 33% of the respondents were from urban areas while 67% were from rural areas. This also mirrors the current trend as close to 70% of Zimbabweans are living in rural areas thereby giving equal chances to interviews in the rural-urban divide regarding access to different media in the country. This study had an equal gender representation as both males and females were represented on a 50-50% basis. A majority of respondents in this research were falling within the age range of 18-34 years as this group had 47.7% of respondents followed by the 50-64 years age group which had 14.4% with the elderly in the 65 years and above category constituting 7.2% of the total sample.

The main research question for this paper was; What is the relationship between access to media and preference for democracy in Zimbabwe? The main hypothesis for this paper was that Zimbabweans who have greater access to media have higher levels of preference for democratic government than those with limited access to the media.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The table below shows the distribution of the respondents by the ten provinces in Zimbabwe.

Fig. 1. Distribution of Respondents by Province



Understanding the media landscape in Zimbabwe

Evidence on the ground is showing that the state in Zimbabwe heavily controls the public sphere and therefore has a monopoly on traditional mass media and what people read, watch and listen

to in their everyday lives. For example access to the media is mainly confined to state owned dailies like the The Herald, Manica Post and The Chronicle. In the television sector the state has a solid grip on this as ZTV 1 and ZTV 2 are all state controlled leaving no room for private players. In the case of radio services out of the six radio stations four of them are owned by the government (Sport FM, Radio Zimbabwe, Power FM and National) and the other two are controlled by newly licensed “private” players Star FM and Zi FM (Zi FM is owned by the state run Zimpapers). Therefore this shows that the government still plays a heavy role in determining the traditional media outlets options that people have access to. However this is slowly changing as some people now have access to satellite TV through subscribing to Multichoice’s DStv bouquets while others also get access through the free to air satellite receivers like Fortec and Wiztech. The free to air decoders are now of limited use considering that the popular SABC 1, 2 and 3 stations are now scrambled and no longer accessible to people in Zimbabwe. On the other hand through the rapid growth in mobile broadband services people are now in a position to at least get access to and control what they want to see and hear e.g reading other foreign newspapers online.

Access to radio

Research findings show that generally 32% of Zimbabweans listen to the news on the radio everyday with 25.7% Zimbabweans listening to news on the radio a few times a week. On the other hand 25.2% of Zimbabweans said that they never listen to the news on the radio with 9.8% indicating that they do listen to the radio a few times a month. 64.8% of survey respondents indicated that they do own a radio set while 35.2% said that they do not own a radio set. As a result of the low radio ownership and listenership rates Zimbabweans therefore have limited access to radio service. In terms of listening to radio and preference for democracy 75.2% of respondents who never listened to the radio indicated that democracy was preferable with 81.2% of respondents who listened to the radio everyday showing a preference for democracy. This indicated slight differences as even 73.9% of respondents who listened to the radio a few times a week also indicated that democracy was preferable. Based on these results it can therefore be argued that in the case of Zimbabwe listening to the radio is not a guarantee that people will show a preference for democratic values. On the other hand in Zimbabwe there is limited access

to private sources of radio news aside from the two radio stations Star FM, Zi Fm and the pirate radio station Studio Zimbabwe which broadcasts from Voice of America mainly between 19:00 and 20:00hrs everyday and of course recently liberalizing of airwaves.

A comparison of radio listenership in other African countries shows that radio in Africa is serving a growing population of young, rural and non-literate demographic groups (GSDRC). Ideally as a result of this positive influence of radio in Africa it can therefore be argued that where the media (radio) performs the roles of agenda-setter, watchdog and gatekeeper effectively, it has the power to contribute to democratic governance and accountability in Zimbabwe. Therefore from the above it can be argued that case of Zimbabwe is not consistent with the writings of Ekstrom (2008, 45) who observed that the (mass) media have an enormous influence on people's thoughts and understanding of the world, on opinions and on definitions of the political (and what constitutes a political problem).

Access to TV news

In respect of access to television news findings show that the majority of people in Zimbabwe do not watch television news at all. Only 23.9% of respondents indicated that they do watch news on TV every day, while 8.6% also indicated that they watch news on TV a few times a month. Of the 2400 respondents interviewed almost half of the respondents (44.9%) indicated that they own a TV set. 55% indicated that they do not own a TV set. Furthermore 82.1% of urban respondents said that they do own TV sets compared with 26.6% of respondents in rural areas who said they own TV sets. The low figures of respondents who watch news on TV could be attributed to a number of factors. In Zimbabwe there is limited local TV signal coverage as broadcasting services are mainly confined to the major urban areas as a result the further one is from the capital city Harare the lower the chances of receiving TV signals aside from satellite television. A result of this challenge in accessing TV signals it has therefore meant that a majority of Zimbabweans have now resorted to watching free to air satellite TV with the most popular decoders being Wiztech and Fortech while others who can afford monthly subscriptions on pay TV are subscribing to DStv bouquets.

Examining the relationship between access to TV and preference for democracy shows that 76.8% of respondents who indicated that they never watched TV were in support of democracy while 81.2% of respondents who watched TV every day also preferred democracy. On the other hand 7.4% of respondents who never watched TV indicated that sometimes a non democratic government in Zimbabwe was preferable with 8.7% who watched TV indicating that non democratic government was also preferred in Zimbabwe. From these findings it can therefore be argued that there appears to be no relationship between access to TV and preference for democracy as even those who never watched TV were also in support for democracy. In discussing the above it is critical to reflect on Ekstrom's (2008, 45) argument that the media are both powerful actors in their own right and constitute an arena used by other power groups in society to control the distribution of information. In the case of Zimbabwe this is to a larger extent true as evidence on the ground shows that the media landscape in the country is not even as the state is a big player in the battle for the control of the media landscape.

Access to newspapers

In respect of access to newspapers almost half of respondents (49.4%) never read newspapers while 15.6% acknowledged that they read newspapers at least a few times a month. On the other hand only 9.1% indicated that they do read newspapers every day. Findings show that access to newspapers was mainly confined to urban areas as at least 64.4% of rural respondents never had access to newspapers compared to only 18.9% of rural dwellers who did not get access to newspapers. There is also a big discrepancy between urban and rural dwellers as only 1.6% of rural dwellers indicated that they read newspapers every day compared to 24.4% urban dwellers who indicated that they read newspapers every day. Access to newspapers on the basis of gender indicates that 41.9% of male respondents never read newspapers. This figure is slightly higher for women as 49.3% of women acknowledged never reading newspapers. Only 7.3% of women indicated that they read newspapers everyday with 10.8% men also indicating reading newspapers on a daily basis. 17.5% of men also indicated that they read newspapers a few times a month with 13.8% of women indicating that they also read newspapers occasionally every month. Newspaper readership accordingly had Bulawayo on top with 22.8% of respondents acknowledging reading newspapers on a daily basis compared with 21.1% for the capital city

Harare. Matebeleland North had the lowest readership levels as only 1% of respondents indicated that they read newspapers on a daily basis with 74.3% indicating that they never read newspapers. Assessing newspaper readership statistics show that this is heavily skewed in favour of urban areas due to the remoteness of these areas. Therefore this will heavily affect exposure to current affairs as well as affecting understandings and preferences for democracy. This is evidenced below as 77.6% of respondents who never read newspapers were in support for democracy with 84.5% of respondents who read newspapers every day also in support for democracy. 14% of respondents who indicated never reading newspapers noted that it did not matter whether Zimbabwe was democratic or not with 4.5% respondents who read newspapers everyday indicated that it really did not matter whether Zimbabwe was democratic or not.

Understanding of democracy

In measuring understandings of democracy, respondents in the study demonstrated higher levels of awareness of the essential characteristics of democracy. For example 32.2% of respondents noted that Zimbabwe was presently not a democratic country. On the other hand 34.2% of respondents agreed that Zimbabwe is a democracy with major problems. Only 8.7% were of the view that Zimbabwe was out rightly not a democratic country. In measuring satisfaction with democracy 31.5% indicated that they were not very satisfied with the level of democracy in Zimbabwe with 26.6% indicating that they were not satisfied at all with the level of democracy in Zimbabwe. On the other hand 8.8% were very satisfied with the level of democracy in Zimbabwe with 8.6% indicating that the country was not a democracy at all. In terms of selecting government leaders 41.3% of respondents concurred that there is need to allow people to choose government leaders in a free and fair election process while 24% also said in a democratic country people are free to express their political views openly. The trend in Zimbabwe in respect of support for democracy appears to be consistent with results of Round 5 for other African countries as 13 which had been surveyed by then had more than 70% of respondents preferring democracy as a form of government. Here the country which scored the lowest in terms of respondents' support for democracy was South Africa as 72.3% preferred democracy while the highest was Mauritius where 85% of respondents were in preference for democracy as a form of government. As a result of the above understandings of democracy in Zimbabwe and exposure to

media are not consistent with Gilward (1993, 65) who observed that the character of a democracy is dependent on the flow of public information.

Education and support for democracy

4.5% of the total sample had tertiary level education while 4.6% had no level of formal education. 39.7% of respondents indicated that they had completed high school with 9.3% having some form of education. Only 42% of the respondents had completed primary education. An examination of the relationship between education and support for democracy shows that those who had no tertiary level education showed a preference for support for democracy than those with no or limited formal education and those with tertiary level education. For example 40.3% and 41.3% of those who had primary level education and also those who had completed high school respectively expressed preference for democracy compared with only 5.2% of those tertiary education.

Age and support for democracy

In relation to support for democracy and age evidence shows that those within the age range of 18-34 years were the ones who mainly supported a democratic government followed by 31.3% within the age 35-49 who also preferred democracy. The age categories with the least expectations for democracy were in the 65 years and above group. Findings show that 79.6% of respondents in the urban areas were in support for democracy while 78.4% of rural respondents were in support for democracy. 10.3% of urban respondents said that it did not matter what type of governance was practiced while 7.3% of rural respondents also indicated that it did not matter to be democratic or not.

The media and democracy in Zimbabwe

According to Norris (2008) the role of the media is particularly important during election campaigns, as balanced and open access to the airwaves by opposition parties, candidates and groups is critical for competitive and fair multiparty contests. This is so because during campaigns the media provides citizens with information to compare and evaluate the retrospective record, prospective policies, and leadership characteristics of parties and candidates, providing the essential conditions for informed voting choices. Therefore the role of

the news media as a civic forum will remain deeply flawed where major newspapers and television stations heavily favor the governing party in the total balance. Instead of the media playing a role in safeguarding democracy this role becomes compromised as the media tends to dance to the tune of the one who pays the piper (Ibid). In order to make the media responsive to its constituents' needs the power that it possesses as a swinger of public opinion therefore needs to be harnessed for national development.

As this papers has mainly focused on what has traditionally been termed "old media" (broadcast and print media) it is therefore crucial to reflect on Damian's (1999, 31) observation that in contrast with "old media" new media in the form of the internet could offer Zimbabweans the opportunity to choose what they want to have access to through self-editing and hence providing more opportunity to bypass the gate keepers. This is so because findings show that the majority of Zimbabweans are generally viewing the media landscape as not providing them with the opportunity to listen to alternative media outlets. For writers such as Damian (1999, 305) the general consensus is showing that newspapers, radio and television constrict space for democratic engagement. Therefore the emergence of what has been termed "new media" mainly based on internet are being seen as the new route for enhancing the democratic process through mainly better access to news. In the context of Zimbabwe regarding the general restrictive nature of these traditional forms of media therefore the hope for the media really playing a part in the democratic process lies in new forms of media as represented by the internet. This is critical as Haider et al (2001, 13) acknowledged that in principle, free, independent and plural media can provide a critical check on state abuse of power or corruption, enabling informed and inclusive public debate on issues of concern to poor people, and giving greater public recognition to the perspectives of marginalised citizens. Whether reporting positive or negative news, news media exposure can contribute to political trust and engagement, and satisfaction with democracy.

Conclusion

The study's main hypothesis was that; Zimbabweans who have greater access to media have higher levels of preference for democratic government than those with limited access to the media. Even though Zimbabweans prefer democracy to any other form of government findings presented above regarding the relationship between access to media and democracy in Zimbabwe

show that there is no significant relationship between access to media and preference for democracy in Zimbabwe. As a result in understanding the relationship between access to media and preference for democracy in the case of Zimbabwe it is important to reflect on the media environment in Zimbabwe and how the landscape can be altered and opened up to make alternative voices more audible. This is very critical in order to give citizens greater access to media sources so that they can take actions which are based on informed decisions as well as giving them the options to make government accountable in its actions. This can only be achieved if the media is allowed to perform some of its critical duties like being the watchdog that it is supposed to be in normal democratic system.

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