The Broadcasting Landscape

1 The state broadcaster

The ZBC is exclusively owned by government. It operates one television channel and five radio stations: National FM broadcasting in 17 local languages; Power FM, a youth music station; Radio Zimbabwe broadcasting in Shona and Ndebele; English language Spot-FM and SW-24/7 transmitting on short and medium wave.

For more details see chapter six.

2 Commercial/private broadcasters

On 22 September 2000 the Supreme Court granted privately owned Capital Radio the right to broadcast, thus de jure ending the monopoly of the state broadcaster, although this decision did not translate into practice. The court ruled that the station had the right to import equipment and to operate a broadcasting service and that Section 27 of the Broadcasting Act, which provided for the state’s monopoly of the airwaves, violated the rights of freedom of expression and the freedom to impart information as stipulated in Section 20 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe.32

The court also declared unconstitutional sections of the Radio Communication Services Act which prohibited ownership of transmitters by broadcasting operators and provided for the allocation of frequencies by the Post and Telecommunications Corporation.

However, the court dismissed the radio station’s petition to start operating within ten days after the court decision. Instead, it ruled that the station had to wait for the government to end its monopoly through a new broadcasting law.

When Capital Radio went on air six days later without waiting for the state to amend its laws, its equipment was seized by the police.

The government then moved quickly to fill the legal vacuum created by the Supreme Court ruling. A Broadcasting Services Bill was drafted and promulgated through the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) Act and became an Act of Parliament on 3 April 2001.

The Act set up the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) as a statutory regulator and precluded anyone but the state from owning transmitters in the country. The responsibility for all broadcasting transmission was given to a state controlled company, TransMedia.

The Broadcasting Services Act made it almost impossible for private players to enter the broadcasting sector. Prospective broadcasters were frustrated in particular by Section 6 which gave the minister of information and publicity sweeping powers over licensing, to the extent that he became a licensing authority unto himself (see chapter five).

Although the BAZ had received seven applications by the beginning of 2002, including one for a community radio licence, two for local commercial licences and one for a national commercial free-to-air television licence, none of these were granted. This led to the conclusion that the Act was not intended to open up the airwaves but actually to achieve the opposite.

The organisers of Capital Radio eventually moved to London and started operating as Shortwave Radio Africa (SW Radio Africa), broadcasting into Zimbabwe from the British capital.

SW Radio Africa (SWRA) is one of the extra-territorial radio stations trying to fill the gap in the provision of independent radio voices since May 2007. The station broadcasts for two hours daily from 18h00 to 20h00 and transmits on two short wave frequencies (currently 4880 and 11745 kHz). Its broadcasts are also available through MP3 Podcasts and its news headlines are disseminated through SMS to approximately 30 000 subscribers three times a week. SWRA has Zimbabwean staff at its London offices and uses correspondents inside Zimbabwe.

Another external service is Studio 7 – a US-government funded radio programme produced by Voice of America. The station broadcasts on SW and AM bands from the US, via a repeater station in Botswana, for two hours every evening. The people involved with the project are mostly former Zimbabwean journalists forced into exile by the persecution from the Zimbabwean government after 1999.
Voice of the People (VoP) has been on air since mid-2000 and broadcasts from 06h00–07h00 every weekday morning in Shona, Ndebele and English on 11 610 KHZ. Its programmes include news bulletins and current affairs, as well as short segments on the economy, health (especially fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic), gender issues and agriculture. In August 2002 VoP’s offices in Harare were destroyed in a bomb blast set off by unknown assailants. Police are still to bring those responsible to book. In December 2005, VoP was closed down by the state after police raided its offices, seized its equipment and arrested three female journalists. VoP then relocated its production studios to South Africa. All material is sent via Internet to South Africa where the programme is put together, sent on to the Netherlands, again by Internet, and transmitted by Radio Netherlands via satellite to a transmitter in Madagascar, from where it is beamed back into Zimbabwe on short wave.

A fourth broadcaster producing programmes inside the country but also transmitting its signal into the country from abroad, is Zimbabwe Community Radio (see below).

All these stations take pride in the fact that they offer a range of voices, including individuals affiliated with ZANU PF as well as MDC representatives and supporters. But they acknowledge that their limited transmission time of only one or two hours a day is not enough to balance the messages carried for 24 hours a day on government stations.

Even though they are broadcasting on unattractive short wave frequencies, these stations are of great concern to ZANU PF. Before the March 2008 elections government installed equipment obtained from China to jam SW and AM broadcasts into the country.

ZANU PF also insisted that these stations be put on the agenda of negotiations with the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which led to the signing of the Global Political Agreement and the establishment of the inclusive government (see chapter two). In its Article 19, the document elaborates at length on the future of these broadcasting operators:

- **Recognising** the importance of the right to freedom of expression and the role of the media in a multi-party democracy.
- **Noting** that while the provisions of the Broadcasting Services Act permit the issuance of licences, no licences other than to the public broadcaster have been issued.
- **Aware** of the emergence of foreign-based radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe, some of which are funded by foreign governments.
- **Concerned** that the failure to issue licences under the Broadcasting Services Act to alternative broadcasters might have given rise to external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe.
Further concerned that foreign government-funded external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe are not in Zimbabwe's national interest.

Desirous of ensuring the opening up of the airwaves and ensuring the operation of as many media houses as possible.

19.1 The Parties hereby agree:-

a) that the government shall ensure the immediate processing by the appropriate authorities of all applications for re-registration and registration in terms of both the Broadcasting Services Act as well as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act;

b) all Zimbabwean nationals including those currently working for or running external radio stations be encouraged to make applications for broadcasting licences, in Zimbabwe, in terms of the law;

c) that in recognition of the open media environment anticipated by this Agreement, the Parties hereby:-

i) call upon the governments that are hosting and/or funding external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe to cease such hosting and funding;

and

ii) encourage the Zimbabweans running or working for external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe to return to Zimbabwe ...

While the commitment to the ‘opening up of airwaves’ is commendable, the frequent and extensive reference made to ‘foreign-based radio stations’ is worrying. These stations were started – as the Agreement itself points out – precisely because of the ‘failure to issue licences’ under the Broadcasting Services Act. The fact that the opposition parties should have agreed to summarily declaring ‘foreign government funded external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe’ to be ‘not in Zimbabwe’s national interest’ is odd, given that these broadcasters helped to give them a voice on the airwaves and spread their message to the electorate when there was hardly any other platform for them to do so. Also, calling on ‘governments that are hosting and/or funding external radio stations ... to cease such hosting and funding’ reveals a poor understanding of what the independent regulation and funding of broadcasting is all about. Most of the external stations are funded by non-governmental organisations, not by governments, and technical assistance is provided by radio stations licensed not by governments but by independent regulators. In any case, it is premature to demand the closure of such stations before non-state-controlled broadcasting is possible in Zimbabwe.
3 Community broadcasting

Although the Broadcasting Services Act of 2001 provides for community broadcasting, no community radio has been licensed yet.

To prepare themselves for the day when licences will actually be granted for community broadcasting, radio activists around the country have formed nine Community Radio Initiatives (CRIs), with another two in the pipeline. Together they have established the Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (ZACRAS) to lobby for their interests and seek technical assistance on behalf of their members.

One of these initiatives, Radio Dialogue in Bulawayo, has developed innovative ways of reaching its audience over the past few years even before going on air. They have also assisted and inspired other CRIs, including Community Radio Harare (CORAH), to do the same. For example, they produce programmes and disseminate them on cassette tapes or compact discs which they hand out to drivers of minibuses who play them on their runs. These tapes and CD’s are also distributed to the members of many community groups in their geographical areas.

In addition, Radio Dialogue and other CRIs carry out community meetings on matters that directly affect residents in the form of a simulated live broadcast, using this as an advocacy tactic to demonstrate the possibilities and benefits of community radio. As a result these communities are then more ready to support community radio campaigns and increase pressure on especially local and provincial MPs to lobby their parties and national government for the granting of independent community radio licences. All these CRIs, led by Radio Dialogue, also offer basic training in radio journalism and production skills, and some of them operate (or have access to) basic production studios and equipment.

Between 2007 and 2008, Radio Dialogue addressed various issues such as the mealie-meal (maize) shortages, the Zimbabwe Electricity Distribution Company (ZEDC) and its demand that each household install a metre box that would measure the amount of electricity consumed in each household, thefts in neighbourhoods, or the lack of refuse collection, among others.

The successes of such meetings include the reversal of ZEDC’s planned introduction of metre boxes. Residents formed action groups against the plan, citing that they could not afford the boxes, drew up a petition and letters to relevant authorities, and set up committees to meet with their members of parliament. Generally, these meetings give the community of Bulawayo the opportunity to come face-to-face with representatives of the authorities, to get answers to questions they have and give their opinions as well.

33 www.radiodialogue.co.zw
Radio Dialogue records the proceedings on cassette or compact disc and strategically distributes them to the community – an alternative form of broadcasting.\(^{34}\)

As a means to put pressure on the new government to live up to the commitment made in the Global Political Agreement to ‘ensure the immediate processing by the appropriate authorities of all applications’ for broadcasting, Radio Dialogue initiated a new ‘foreign-based’ radio station in April 2009. Zimbabwe Community Radio (ZCR) started broadcasting on short wave from the United Arab Emirates – with this introductory message: ‘At present we are broadcasting from the United Arab Emirates. But we are happy to respond to the call in the political parties’ agreement to return and broadcast in Zimbabwe. Just tell us when we will be welcome home.’\(^{35}\) So far they have only managed to move a little closer to home: from September 2009 ZCR has been broadcasting from South Africa for an hour from 19h55 to 20h55 every day in English, Ndebele and Shona.

\section{Technical standards and accessibility of services}

\subsection{Transmission infrastructure}

Dating back to the colonial era, the transmitter system in Zimbabwe was basically designed to serve the urban areas where most white people lived.

Most parts of the country are therefore still not covered by television transmission because the network follows the country’s urban road grid. The main transmitters are in Harare, with others located in the major cities and towns around the country. According to the principle director in the ministry of media, information and publicity there is between 20 and 25 per cent coverage for television transmission and 30 to 35 per cent for radio.\(^{36}\)

According to the director of engineering and technical services at TransMedia – the government-owned sole signal transmission authority – transmitters along the transmission chain are still linked through telephone lines.\(^{37}\) The use of optic fibre technology is still in its infancy. As a result television picture quality is extremely poor and grainy.

Failure to repair broken down equipment especially during the rainy season has resulted in the radius covered by some radio stations being reduced to as little as

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\item \(^{34}\) Interview with Henry Masuku, Radio dialogue advocacy Officer, 22 April 2008.
\item \(^{35}\) Flyer issued by initiators of Zimbabwe Community Radio in February 2009.
\item \(^{37}\) Interview with Hilda Mutseyekwa at TransMedia, 24 February 2008.
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10 km, whereas the technology was initially designed to cover 100 km.

The transmission zone thus excludes most rural areas and small towns that struggle to get any video and audio feed – these areas remain ‘dead zones’. Most people in the border areas have been forced to live without radio and television transmission either because of poor or extremely intermittent reception of ZBC stations or the absence of transmission centres in some of these areas. Many depend on foreign television and radio transmissions from neighbouring South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique.

The chief executive officer of TransMedia, Alfred Mandere, says: ‘The country’s radio and television transmitters are antiquated, as most of the equipment dates back to 1974. Nearly all our equipment is now beyond its useful lifespan and we are even surprised that broadcasters are still on air because the situation is really bad.’

Mandere says the organisation does not have enough money to buy modern equipment and is actually in the process of appealing to government to help harness the needed foreign currency for the plan. The money would be used to purchase antenna systems and transmission equipment for both radio and television, and for the refurbishment of obsolete machinery. This plan has, however, been on the cards since 2006 and because of the economic difficulties that the country is facing, TransMedia has not been able to obtain any form of funding from the government.

TransMedia’s financial position is worsened by the fact that it is unable to charge the ZBC commercial rates for their services. In order to generate revenue to sustain its operations, TransMedia has resorted to providing services like webcasting to other organisations in the country.

4.2 Access to electricity

Less than 50 per cent of all households have electricity. Urban areas are better off in this regard. Out of all households with electricity, 80 per cent are in urban areas and only 15 per cent in rural areas.

Batteries are thus the main means for the majority of rural households to power their television and radio sets. However, due to economic difficulties these have become increasingly unaffordable and unavailable.

Since 2006, Zimbabweans have been experiencing frequent power cuts, ranging from five to ten hours a day. The capacity of the country’s aging power plants has been declining because there has been very little investment as Zimbabwe battles severe foreign currency shortages.

38 Interview with Alfred Mandere, chief executive officer of TransMedia, 28 March 2008.
40 Ibid.
4.3 Production equipment

Currently, the basic tool for collection of television news at ZBC is the Electronic News Gathering (ENG) camera and the digital audio recorder, with the broadcaster using mainly Digital Video Cassette (DVC)-Pro format. Television production uses state-of-the-art digital technology, installed in 2004 with the assistance of Iran, for post-production and studio-based work, with a fully equipped studio available for news and news-related productions. The pre-production process is now computerised for both audio and video.\(^{41}\)

According to ZBC’s (former) chief executive officer, Henry Muradzikwa,\(^{42}\) the broadcaster is trying its best to adopt new technologies so as to remain competitive and relevant to the industry.

‘We will adopt new technologies to keep in league with other broadcasters in the quest to meet customer requirements, tastes and expectations. One of the major projects that we are currently undertaking should see the complete digitalisation of the broadcasting technology for both pre- and post-production purposes,’ Muradzikwa said.

Audiovisual material from outstations is brought to Harare through microwave links with feeding points at Bulawayo, Masvingo, Mutare, Gweru and Chinhoyi. Microwave capability is also available at Kariba, Victoria Falls and Marondera, but is not being used at the moment due to lack of equipment. Audio material is collected through audio recorders and over the telephone from bureau correspondents and news sources for broadcasts from headquarters in Harare.

At the Montrose Studios in Zimbabwe’s second largest city, Bulawayo, the technical situation is slightly different to that in the capital. In general, Bulawayo, which is situated in the Matebeleland province, has been neglected in terms of development. The studios still operate semi-digitally, meaning that they only use digital equipment in the editing of programmes produced for the Harare studios. For all other programmes they still depend on analogue technology.

\(^{41}\) Interview with Moffat Phiri, regional engineer for the ZBC Matebeleland Province based at the Montrose Studios in Bulawayo, 21 April 2008.

\(^{42}\) Henry Muradzikwa has, since the interview in March 2008, been replaced by Happisson Muchechetere, a known ZANU PF sympathiser.
5 Conclusions and recommendations

Clause V(1) of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa says:

States shall encourage a diverse, independent private broadcasting sector. A State monopoly over broadcasting is not compatible with the right to freedom of expression.

It is obvious that Zimbabwe is in breach of this principle. The same goes for the one expressed in Clause V(2)(4):

... community broadcasting shall be promoted given its potential to broaden access by poor and rural communities to the airwaves.

The following recommendations are made:

- The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) should issue broadcasting licences to commercial and community broadcasters so that the three-tier broadcasting system envisaged in the Broadcasting Services Act is realised.
- The ZBC television transmission system needs an urgent overhaul. New transmission towers should be constructed in strategic places across the country so that the whole population can be served by the ZBC.
- The state-owned signal company, TransMedia, should be supervised by the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (once a new Broadcasting Services Act is in place). It should be restructured to enable it to deal effectively with transmission problems facing the national broadcaster and to meet the challenges posed by digitalisation.
- The Broadcasting Services Act must allow for more than one additional signal carrier company and for commercial/community broadcasting services to operate their own transmitter network if they wish.