

FRAMING OF THE ZIMBABWEAN CRISIS IN BOTSWANA PRINT MEDIA

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When Robert Mugabe rode into power at the twilight of the Ian Smith brutal regime hope was born anew that long suffering Zimbabweans who had borne the brunt of the apartheid policies of the departing administration would be guaranteed a better lease of life. For a period, the country enjoyed relative prosperity in a continent ravaged by poverty, disease and lack. But, like the earlier independent African States, Zimbabwe under Mugabe has experienced a downward spiral and the free fall seems to continue with the country making its way into the record books as the one with the highest inflation rate in the world at 160000% and counting.

The situation of Zimbabwe has been experienced in virtually all parts of the continent. Ghana was at first a showpiece of African independence before corrupt politicians and military brass hats sent it to the doldrums and Ghanaians became economic refugees in the then more prosperous Nigeria. That was before Nigeria also experienced its own downturn and its citizens also became unwanted guests in other countries. Take a look at the African landscape and it is clear that years of mismanagement by the ruling elites have taken a heavy toll. If it is not unbearable hell in the midst of plenty given the huge natural resources in the continent, it is conflicts and wars all of which have turned Africans into economic refugees all over the world.

Each sad case of dreams turning into nightmares has its underlying reasons. In some instances it is the colonial masters sowing the wild oats of failure by hand picking and installing mediocrity - successors who have nothing to offer - or subtly pulling the strings from across the seas and even instigating destabilization if their interests and investments are threatened. This is not to shield the corrupt politicians and military adventurers that have pillaged the continent's resources in an unprecedented, immoral and primitive looting spree that made them richer than their countries. If it is not primitive acquisition then it might be complete intolerance of criticisms so much so that opponents and critics are harangued, jailed on trumped up charges or simply disappear! The Abachas, Sese Sekos, Homphuet Boignys, Idi Amins are shining examples in this regard.

From the foregoing, the feeling of *déjà vu* is clearly apparent in the examination of the Zimbabwean crisis. The Lancaster House Constitution agreement was such that perpetuated the apartheid era injustice of a mere 4500 mostly white farmers cornering the best of the productive agricultural land while the real, but dispossessed owners, were condemned to the least productive land (Mlambo 2006, p.56). The attempt and eventual tackling of this unacceptable scheme of things aroused the ire of those who had sown the wild oats in the first instance. And throw into the equation the unwise economic decisions and populist bent of policies expected of politicians instead of statesmen and women who have history in mind rather than the temporary pottage that assuages the hunger but results in the loss of the nation's birthright is what the lost opportunity called the Zimbabwean crisis is all about.

To compound the economic meltdown, enter the IMF and the World Bank and their bitter conditionalities which has spread misery across the continent and the imposition of sanctions by the West has translated to social dislocations. Freeman (2005, p. 287)

captures this internal and external angles to the sticky situation in Zimbabwe when she identifies three causes of the problem: The liberation struggle and the “unfinished business” of land reform, the legitimacy of the government in the face of contested elections and the attempt to cling on to power at all cost and, of course, the pressures exerted by the West. While her thesis does a fine job of analyzing the problem in its various ramifications, the direct consequence of the crisis has been lots of Zimbabweans flooding into neighboring countries with Botswana harboring quite a number of legal and illegal immigrants.

In situations of this nature, as has happened into other parts of the continent experiencing wars, genocide or economic downturn, an ambivalent relationship seems to develop between the host and the immigrants and the media agenda reflects this development. MEDIA TENOR,¹ for instance, found out after examining 6983 reports or articles on Zimbabwe in 17 South African national media from July 2001 – February 2003 that the reports were overwhelmingly negative across all media.

As is to be expected the Botswana media is also awash with stories of Zimbabweans involved in various crimes from crossing the borders illegally to participation in very violent crimes and, to some extent, some of the cruel, inhuman and degrading ways in which Zimbabweans have and are being treated by their host. No known study has systematically documented media portrayal of Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans in Botswana hence the rationale for this study.

Framing

The Zimbabwean crisis’, which has been defined as resting on the political, economic and social tripod with symptoms being governance, economic meltdown, disputed land reforms, drought and hunger, HIV/AIDS pandemic, exodus of professionals and the angling for regime change by the West (Mlambo 2006, p.16), reverberations are felt all over the SADC region and beyond. This study’s focus is to examine how the Botswana media frames news stories on Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans.

McCombs and Ghanem define framing as involving “construction of an agenda with restricted number of thematically related attributes in order to create a coherent picture of a particular object” (Mushert and Carr 2006, p.747). Carragee and Roefs (2004) hold that even though characteristics of frames may differ, meaningful definitions of the concept emphasize the organization of news and other discourses in terms of selection, emphasis, interpretation and exclusion. In the story of a presidential debate the micro level frame of “horse race” might be utilized to indicate the advantages gained or lost by the candidates (Aday 2006:768).

But this also raises the question of public relations ability to influence the framing of news events because all this postulation begs the question in the face of increasing sophistication of PR tools. The subtlety of this function is such that in some instances the

¹ SA media ‘unAfrican’ in reporting Zimbabwe *Media Tenor SA Research Journal* 2003 11 pp 10-11

media does not credit the sources of such information thus conferring additional credibility unlike if the source(s) was/were traced to PR (Akpabio 2005). The simplified argument of seeing the media as framing or setting agenda all by itself has no bearing with the reality of journalism practice in which rich and powerful individuals as well as big business are able to command better images. This is what Aday (2006) quoting Entman and Rojecki (1993) refers to as media framing reflecting elite interests. Carragee and Roef (2004) have contended that this isolation of frames from broader social and political context does not do justice to the subject, contending that frames do not exist in a political vacuum. When the Nigerian military, for instance, had the reins of power the press had to invent creative ways to exist in spite of the military blockade they were experiencing (Akpabio 2004a). When it was pay back time after the military brass hats had retreated to the barracks, the press came out gun blazing so much so that with the preponderance of bad press if the “military were a corporation it would have long gone out of business” (Akpabio 2004a, p.185). In similar vein, Goshorn and Gandy’s (1995) examination of racially comparative risks in the United States by 49 leading dailies discovered that the framing of the stories reflected different agendas such as the size of African Americans in the market among other reasons.

What is clear in the literature on framing is that various approaches can and are adopted. Goshorn and Gandy (1995), for instance, looked at headline, leads and stylistic variations in their analysis. Others have emphasized themes (Mushert and Carr 2006), but it is to Chyi and McComb’s (2004) two dimensional measurement table comprising time and space dimensions that we turn for the method that will be employed in this study. The time dimension would look at the focus of the stories – past, present or future - while the space aspect would look at the individual, community, regional, societal and international implications of the news stories.

Objectives of the study

One direct consequence of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe has been the influx of Zimbabweans into neighboring countries including Botswana. Based on the news judgment criteria of impact, Botswana are affected by the coming of Zimbabweans which means that such stories will make it into the media and become a part of the media agenda. The objective of this study was therefore to find out the framing in space and time dimensions of the Zimbabwean crisis and Zimbabweans in Botswana print media.

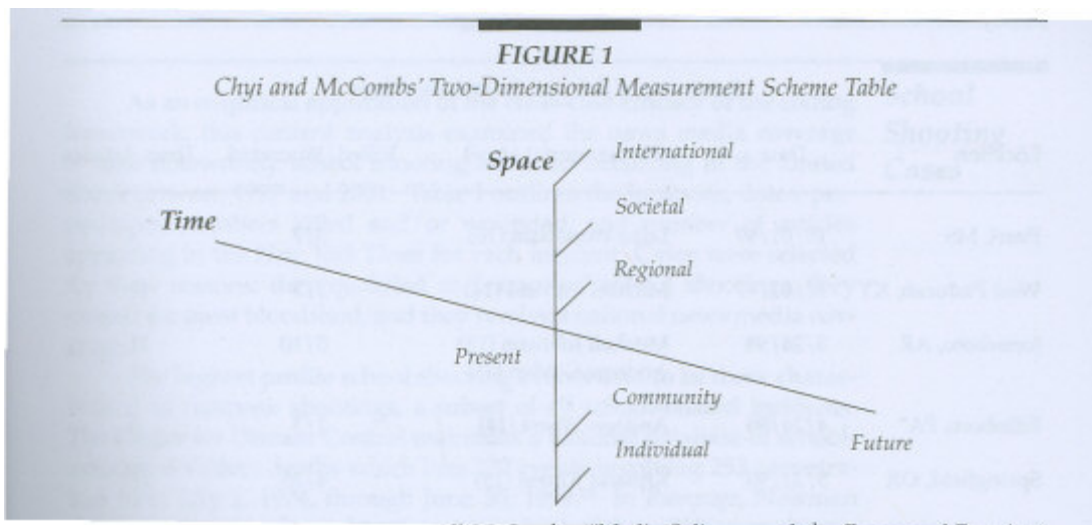
Significance of study

While there are professional, decent and law abiding Zimbabweans in Botswana, there are also many illegal immigrants with no visible means of livelihood and or fixed address. Many Botswana believe that the rising crime rate in the country is a direct result of the influx of Zimbabweans. To compound matters, instead of the Robin Hood approach of robbing the rich to give to the poor, Zimbabweans are said to target the very poor. It would be interesting to find out if the popular sentiments against Zimbabweans will be reflected in the various news stories to be studied.

The findings of the study will contribute to existing literature on an African perspective on framing which is presently slanted in favour of the West.

Methodology

Chyi and McComb's two dimensional measurement scheme table suggests an analytical framework for studying frame changing across incidents but the authors used it for a single event – the Columbine school shootings (Mushert and Carr 2006:749). Muschert and Carr (2006) applied the schema across incidents. This paper while adopting the schema uses it for a single event over a six-year period. Another area of departure from earlier studies involves analysis of four newspapers instead of one (New York Times) utilized in the two above-mentioned studies.



The study period was six years from 2002 to 2007. The Year 2002 was chosen as commencement of the analysis because in 2001 the United States passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) which opposed aid for Zimbabwe from multilateral financial institutions and excluded the country from AGOA and one believes the sanctions regime would have started biting then. The Year 2007 was chosen because the crisis has persisted and news reports would give a more up to date picture. And, in any case, a six – year period is ample time for one to obtain a clear picture of Botswana media portrayal of Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans.

Four newspapers were studied: the two dailies – *Daily News* (government owned) and *Mmegi* (Privately owned) were purposely selected because they provide daily intelligence on issues including the Zimbabwean crisis. Two weekly papers – *Midweek Sun* and *Sunday Standard* were randomly selected. Due to the fact that this involved a longer period each article was coded by spatial focus and time frame.

Categories for the space frame included (1) Individual - focus on individual participants such as Botswana and Zimbabweans (2) Community - when the article focuses on the

particular communities feeling the impact of the Zimbabwean crisis and Zimbabweans immigrants (3) Regional – when the article focuses on the impact of the Zimbabwean crisis and Zimbabweans immigrants in the (Southern African Development Community) SADC region (4) Societal – when the article focuses on the national impact, concern or discussion about the Zimbabwean crisis and Zimbabweans (5) International – when the article focuses on the international impact (other than SADC region), concern or discussion of the Zimbabwean crisis and Zimbabwean immigrants

Categories for the time frame were (1) Past - Discussion of events in Zimbabwe’s past such as being a food basket, shining example of development, Ian Smith, Rhodesia etc. (2) Present – When the article focuses on the event (Zimbabwean crisis, Zimbabwean nationals) being reported, the immediate consequences or current social trends (3) Future - Focus on enduring effects of the crisis and possible solutions

Two coders, undergraduate students of Media Studies, were contracted to do the coding. The pilot study returned an intercoder agreement of 65% using Holsti’s formula. After some refinement, the study proper had an intercoder agreement of 74%. The process involved some level of interpretation hence the low level of reliability (Wimmer and Dominick 2003, p. 159).

Research Questions

1. Will the framing of Botswana media coverage of Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans in the index of time be slanted in favour of past cordial relations between the two neighbours, the present crisis or the future?
2. Will the framing of stories focus on individual, community, regional, societal or international implication of the Zimbabwean crisis?

Findings

There were a total of 2734 news stories in the four papers that were the focus of this study. The breakdown of the news stories per paper is as follows

Table 1

Newspaper	No. & Percentage of stories
Daily News	1401 (51.2%)
Mmegi	708 (25.9%)
Midweek Sun	547 (20%)
Sunday Standard	78 (2.9%)
Total	2734 (100%)

Yearly breakdown of the stories indicated some variability (see table 2)

Table 2

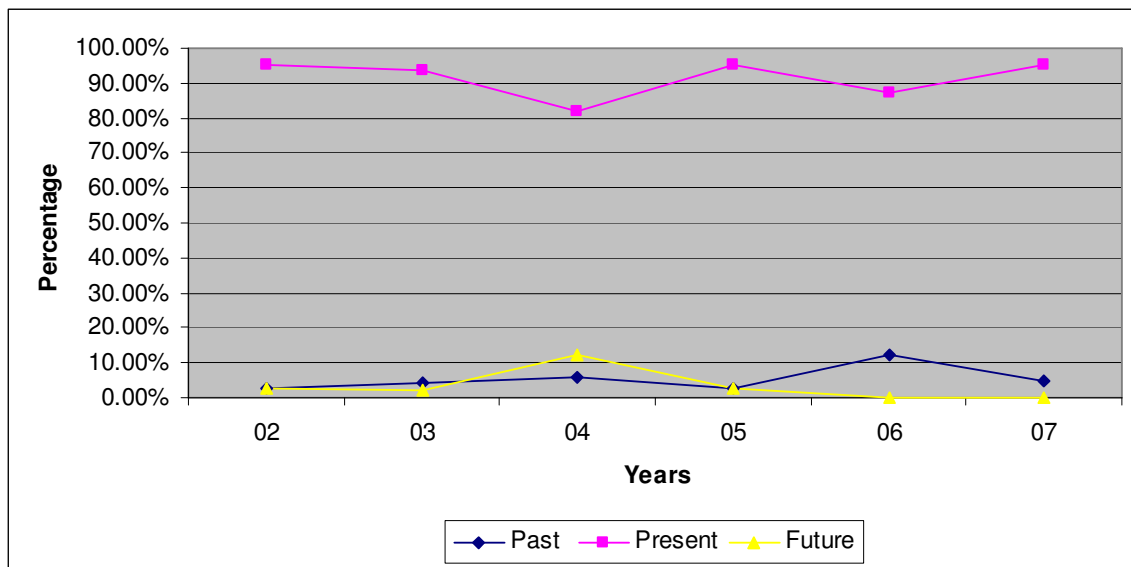
Year	No. & Percentage of stories
2002	377 (13.8%)

2003	437 (16%)
2004	585 (21.4%)
2005	490 (18%)
2006	445 (16.3%)
2007	400 (14.6%)
Total	2734 (100%)

Time frame

The result of the study indicates an over emphasis on the present dimension over the six year period. The only periods in which the present dimension dipped below 90% was in the years 2004 (82%) and 2006 (88%). Framing of the news stories in terms of the past and future were almost negligible with a finding of over 13% in 2006 for framing in the past orientation and 12% in the future orientation respectively. The past and future orientations were consistently below 10% in subsequent years.

Figure 1

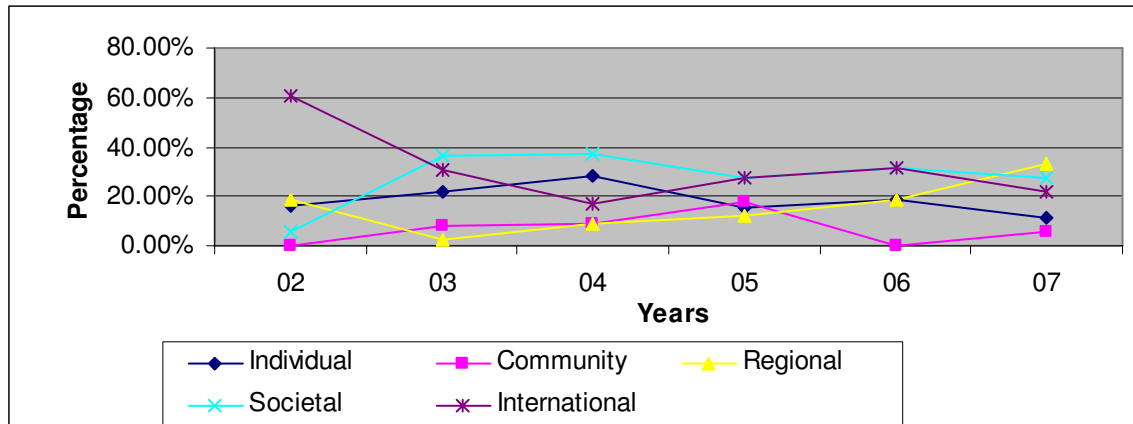


Space frame

There was variability in the distribution of frames across the spatial dimension over the six year period. At the beginning of the crisis the international frame rose sharply to 61%. The societal framing of the crisis singularly dominated the news for two years 2003 (36%) and 2004 (37%) and was at par in terms of dominance with the international dimension in 2005 and 2006 at 27% and 31% each. The effect of the crisis in the region dominated coverage in 2007 with 33% of coverage by the four papers under

investigation. The news stories neglected the individual and communal dimensions of the crisis.

Figure 2



Discussion

The time orientation of the findings in which the present dimension dominated the news stories on the Zimbabwean crisis is consistent with news judgement criteria of timeliness but it also embraces other aspects of the news judgement criteria such as prominence, magnitude, conflict and oddity. Zimbabweans, while providing much needed skills in Botswana also dominate the news as regards violent crimes and fraudulent practices. In “Zim aliens set up shadow government in Botswana”² the Sunday Standard report alleges that Zimbabwean nationals are able to forge the Botswana national identity card hence conferring citizenship on illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe. Also news stories in which Zimbabweans commit crimes plays up the nationality of the offender.

In the spatial dimension, the international aspect of the news stories would gradually give way to the societal framing of the stories in the next two years of the study period. It would be at par with the societal for the next two years while by 2007 the regional dimension would take over. The societal framing reflected the concerns among Batswana about the steady stream of Zimbabweans coming into the country on a daily basis. The increase in the regional frame reflects the concern by SADC about the crisis.

The Chyi and McCombs two dimensional measurement table has proven quite useful in giving spatial and time dimensions of the crisis in that the slant of the news stories on the crisis can fit into the identified categories. However, the categorization system fails to account for the institutional roles, epistemologies and ethical ideologies (Hanitzsch 2007) of media professionals and in this case particular case Botswana journalists. It fails to account for stereotypical portrayal of Zimbabweans as law breakers which becomes part of “common knowledge” (Ramasubramanian 2007, p.251). And which may have xenophobia as one of its spin offs.

² Sunday Standard December 19-25 2004 p.1

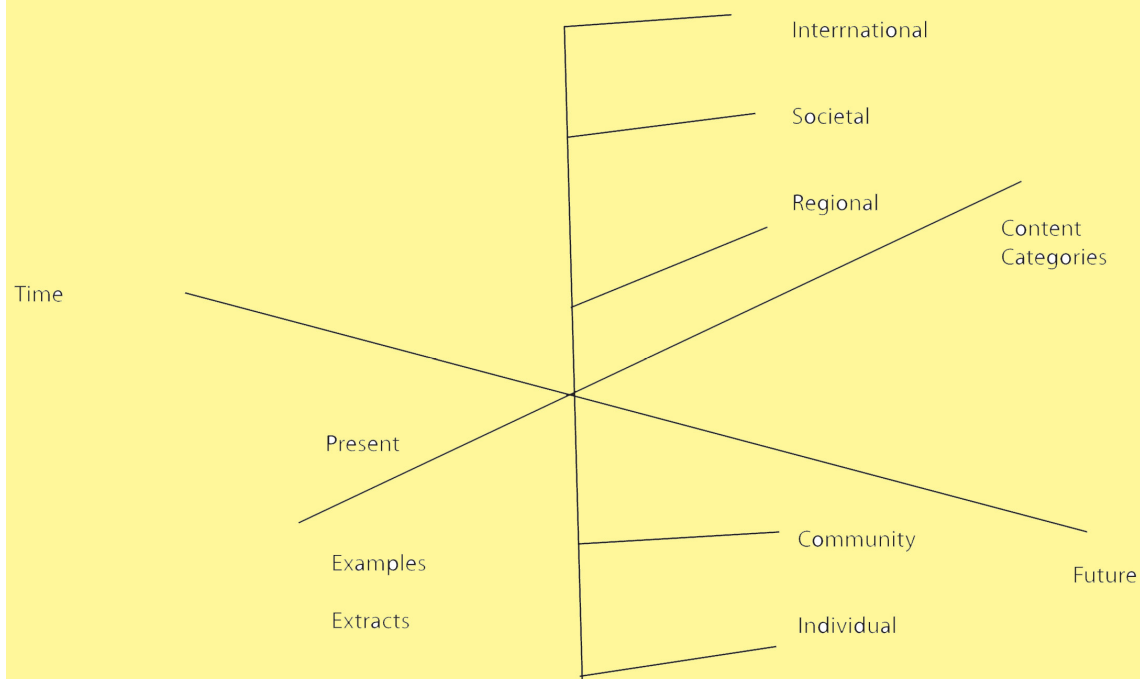
As a direct result of the identified weakness, the measurement table gives no specific indication of portrayal of Zimbabweans so that remedial measures can be taken to procure better images for Zimbabweans. This is because the context does influence framing. However, in this particular case the continuing toll the crisis is taking on Botswana may not be assuaged by public relations as there are also limits to the fires that PR can put out. If the fire in question is a conflagration in the mould of the Zimbabwean crisis in Botswana, the predisposition, biases etc of media gatekeepers would determine the way such stories are framed.

The findings of the present tense framing of the Zimbabwean crisis finds support in the study by Muschert and Carr (2006). The societal/community-present combination also constituted the findings by Chyi and McCombs (ibid). There was some departure in the findings of this study from the purview of the spatial dimension in that while Muschert and Carr found out that the communal dimension was a concern that was soon to be replaced by the societal aspect at both the present and future time frames, this study records changes from international to societal while temporal present dimension remained constant. In any case that the present tense would feature so well in these findings indicates a continued fixation by the media about episodic coverage that does not situate the story in an historical context nor is there a concern about making projections into the future as regards implications of a story of this magnitude on the region, the continent of Africa and the world.

A way of dealing with the weakness of the measurement schema is to incorporate content categories (see figure 3). This would serve a number of purposes other than the one highlighted above to the effect that it would provide tangible evidence of the slant of the stories so that remedial action can be taken. It would also serve to humanize academic writing and move it away from the fixation with data presentation without a soul. To give academic writing a soul would require that even after identifying content categories other than the spatial and time dimensions some indication or example/extracts be incorporated into the reporting of findings. The nature of the content categories cannot be prescribed here as each study is unique and it must be left to the researcher(s) to determine. Simply going beyond providing graphs and percentages to factor in the content being studied is also an avenue to showcase the creativity, grasp of language and efforts that went into the creation of the piece(s) and will make for a better appreciation of the authors, journalists etc

Figure 3

Adding more value to Chyi and McCombs measurement schema table



Some examples will suffice. Russell, Hume and Sichler (2007) study of Elizabeth Custer’s restoration of her husband’s image makes for interesting reading not because they identified 265 newspaper and magazine articles that showcase the effort the widow had put into the project over the years. Rather the study grabs and holds attention because of the numerous quotes from these articles that underline the care, creativity and effort she put into the campaign. As a result one can look for local examples of her campaign strategy if one were to use same for pedagogical purposes among other uses.

In another study (Akpabio 2004b) of rejoinders, examples of mild and adversarial rejoinders were provided to supplement and explain the identified content categories thus giving the findings “soul”. In response to the news story titled “FRSC ([Nigerian] Federal Road Safety Commission) sacks officer for taking bribe”, the Public Relations Executive of the Commission in an example of a mild rejoinder “expressed his dissatisfaction with the slant given the story” [and explained] “that it was actually motorists that were charged to court for offering bribes to road marshals” (p. 195). Examples of adversarial rejoinders documented were accusing fingers being pointed at the offending publications for being “unprofessional and highly misleading”, libelous and tendentious” as well as a study in “imaginative reporting”. Stories were also said to be “literary collections of idle gossips”, containing “innuendos and gross misrepresentation” (p.196). Just providing data of the findings would not have done justice to the deep contempt in which journalists are held by the writers of the adversarial rejoinders nor would it have captured the depth of their emotions.

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