

## Chapter 8

# ‘Wiring’ African Newsrooms: The Internet and Mainstream Print Journalism Practice in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter uses a qualitative case study approach to critically examine the appropriations of the Internet by Zimbabwean mainstream print media journalists. It draws on social constructivist approaches to technology and the sociology of journalism to highlight the impact of the Internet on practices and professionalism. The chapter argues that the deployment of the Internet by Zimbabwean journalists (and indeed in Africa at large) is relative and contingent upon the ‘internal’ newsroom context(s) and the wider socio-political and economic circumstances in which the journalists operate. Among other functions, the technology shapes the mainstream press’ news agenda as well as avails information often censored by government. However, as the chapter shall demonstrate, the use of the Internet is replete with ethical and professional implications.*

### INTRODUCTION

The advent of new technologies (ICTs) in Africa in the 1990s “sparked celebratory, almost utopian bliss” (Banda et al. 2009, p. 1) among its proponents. It was accompanied by the “hype

about the continent’s possibility of ‘leapfrogging’ some stages of development” (ibid.). From the outset, the adoption of ICTs in various sectors was largely motivated by ideas of bridging the divide between the rich and the poor and promoting socio-economic progress. In the context of journalism practice, new technologies were also seen as having the ‘potential’ to increase

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journalists' work efficiency and thus overcoming the barriers associated with 'traditional' means of journalism practice. However, the realisation of such over-hyped mono-causal explanations of the perceived potential of new technologies that disregard contextual realities which shape the processes of ICT adoption and appropriation in Africa has always remained elusive.

This study takes a critical view of what Slack and Fejes (1987) describe as the "optimistic naïve" (p. 202) perspective, which sees the economically developing countries as having the most to gain from new ICTs. It is premised on the view that to understand the impact of new technologies on journalism practice in Africa, we must put journalists into a critical and analytical context and begin to question the immediate and wider social context in which they deploy the technologies. This approach finds root in the collective strengths of two broad theoretical concerns: the *sociology of journalism* and *social constructivist* approaches to technology. Although these theoretical bodies were conceptualised before the 'new media age' – in the 1970s and 80s – together they provide a basis for conceptualising the interplay between journalists, their everyday practice and the wider social factors that coalesce to structure and constrain the deployment of new technologies.

The early newsroom studies whose work crystallised in the *sociology of journalism* offer enduring insights into the working practices of journalists and thus provide a default setting against which most news production studies have been rooted. As Paterson (2008) contends, without these "early ethnographic investigations of news production, our understandings of journalism would be limited to what little we are able to glean from the observation of news content, or from what journalists say they do" (p. 2). Similarly, *social constructivist* approaches to technology, whose work emphasise the 'social shaping' and 'interpretive flexibility' of technology offer a key guiding frame in terms of which technologies can be understood as not necessarily replacing

existing social realities and dynamics in which they are appropriated, but rather as continuous with and embedded in them (Bijker, 1995, p. 6; Miller & Slater, 2000, p.5). In deploying these influential theoretical frameworks therefore the chapter acknowledges that journalism (and research about that work) is not performed in a vacuum; independent of the 'shaping impact' of contextual influences.

Against this backdrop, this chapter departs from 'deterministic' approaches to the social function of technologies and reinvigorates traditional sociological approaches to journalism and technology to closely examine how Zimbabwean mainstream print journalists across the divide of state-controlled and private press deploy the Internet in their everyday professional practices. It specifically seeks to highlight patterns and trends in the appropriation of the Internet and its impact on the professional normative ideals of journalism as a social practice.

## **BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Although Zimbabwe, like most sub-Saharan African countries faces major challenges of socio-economic development that manifest in poverty, disease and low level access to social services, including political turbulence (Kupe, 2004, p. 354), it nonetheless provides a good case for a close examination of the deployment of new technologies by mainstream journalists in sub-Saharan Africa for two key reasons. First, while the Zimbabwean media scene can not be generalised to scenarios in individual African countries, its mainstream press remains a central and vibrant platform for the struggle for control of public discourse between the opposition and the incumbent elite.<sup>1</sup> Second, relative to other sub-Saharan African countries, new technologies have proliferated and permeated key facets of social life in the country (see Moyo, L. 2009).

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