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READERS' PERSPECTIVES: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL NEWS IN ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study using the concept of accessibility and applicability of knowledge to analyse readers' perspectives on the influence of political news in Zimbabwe. A qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse political articles from two main newspapers, The Sunday Mail and The NewsDay. Focus group discussions were conducted in Harare to collect readers' perspectives on the effect of political news and print media. The findings revealed that readers choose what to believe as true or false determined by affiliation, knowledge and experience. Readers as individuals can block political messages dissonant to pre-conceived ideas and accept that which is consonant to pre-existing beliefs depending on personal experience, knowledge and affiliation.

Keywords: journalism; Zimbabwe; media studies; political news; accessibility; applicability; experience; knowledge; affiliation

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of the media audience plays a vital role in journalism. Online newspapers have advanced a culture of interaction with the audience which was previously limited through letters to the editor. With the development of new communication technologies, the gap between the media and the audience has been bridged, integrating the audience as the third integral part of journalism. The development of active media audiences proceeds from the rise of civil society, which the mass media intends to serve.

Fortner (2011) argues that the mass media serves the interest or orientation of the audience. Responsible journalism has a mandate to produce "truthful" discourse, which should benefit the society it intends to serve. This means that the media has a crucial role in a democratic and diverse society to educate and inform, to construct legitimacy, and mobilise the trust of the audience (Chari 2008). This study questions the influence of political news frames (media political discourse) on the audience in Zimbabwe by studying readers' perspectives or patterns of reference to political news stories.

Readers' patterns of reference to political news can be associated with the issue of accessibility or applicability of knowledge. Higgins (1996: 134) notes that "knowledge cannot be activated or brought to mind unless it is present in memory". Thus, the study uses the concept of accessibility and applicability of knowledge to analyse readers' perspective with regard to media discourse in order to determine the influence of a political frame. Framing as a concept is the "idea that people use sets of expectations to make sense of their social world and media contribute to those expectations" (Baran & Davis 2009: 282). Entman (1993: 52) views framing as "selectively emphasising some certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described".

Given the above, this study aimed to establish if political news frames influence perspective. Previous studies in Zimbabwe concentrated on media discourses between the state and private media (Makumbe & Compagnon 2000; Moyo 2005), but little has been done to study media audience orientation. Some scholars argue that the media in Zimbabwe has been misrepresenting the facts, which interests group, decision-makers and the public look to for information, and these misrepresented facts leak into non-political domains influencing opinion (Graber & Smith 2005). This study analysed political news frames and the influence of these frames by studying readers' perspectives. The analysis of political news content and readers' perspectives assists in aligning audience reaction with content.

PRINT MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ZIMBABWE

Unlike the monopolised broadcast media, there are a number of newspapers in Zimbabwe, both state-owned and private. Some scholars opine that the government of Zimbabwe has monopolised the state-controlled media (Zimpapers) for its political communication and influence (Willems 2004; Rønning & Kupe 2000; Mungwari & Vhutuzza 2016: 116; Chibuwe 2016). Since 1980, public media has been under the grip of the state. Former President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) government maintained this grip on the state media for its political communication. Although the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) was set up as a buffer between the government and public print media (Rønning & Kupe 2000), Zanu-PF dominated and used *The Herald* and *The Chronicle* as its apparatuses.

It is said that Zanu-PF exercised control over the political public sphere from 1980 to the 1990s, but in the 1990s, civil society opposed the government. This led to the bifurcation of the press, which became further polarised by taking an editorial stance of being pro-government and anti-government (Chuma 2006: 54). Chari (2008: 4) writes that the ruling party could "launch a virulent media campaign whenever they suspected the possibility that its hegemony can be eroded".

In 1999, *The Daily News* entered the newspaper market and practised oppositional journalism by exposing corruption and criticising the government (Moyo 2005). Chuma (2006: 49) argues that "the private press assumed by default, the role normally played by the opposition". *The Daily News* criticised Zanu-PF and attracted government

indignation. It is also played an oppositional role in the 2000 constitutional referendum, when the government faced defeat to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Moyo 2005).

Thus, *The Herald's* coverage of political news promoted the ruling party, while *The Daily News* denigrated the ruling party and gave a voice to the MDC. *The NewsDay*, owned by Alpha Media Holdings, which has been operating since 2007, also opposed Zanu-PF and gave more coverage to the opposition. It is notable that since 2000, state-controlled media introduced "patriotic journalism" (Ranger 2005: 14). This journalism defined who were traitors and who were patriots, implying that those who were labelled traitors were against Mugabe's Zanu-PF (*ibid.*).

According to Waldahl (2005), *The Herald* and other Zimpapers presented monolithic history that emphasised the role played by Zanu-PF in the liberation struggle and castigated opposition politics. Opposition politicians were framed as agents of the West, used to reverse the gains of independence (Ranger 2002). The state-controlled media claimed that they were practising patriotic journalism at a time when perhaps socialism, education and welfare was being undermined (Ranger 2005: 8). The so-called "patriotism" was closely linked to Zanu-PF and its land reform programme, which the state-controlled media gave ample coverage throughout the 2000 elections (MMPZ 2000).

According to Raftopoulos (2006: 5), issues such as human rights and democratic values were downplayed and not emphasised in the state-controlled media by making salient the history of Zanu-PF and its patriotism. Chambwera (2014) argues that Zimpapers discredited the opposition by framing news narratives that gave more salience to "patriotism" and stimulated "patriotism discourse". *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, in the 2000 elections, published articles emphasising slavery, the liberation struggle, and the exploitation of blacks by the Ian Smith regime (Ranger 2002). Thus, the news was framed in such a way to remind Zimbabweans of the values of the liberation struggle (Ranger 2002: 160). Raftopoulos (2006: 13) writes that "the ruling party has been able, through its media monopoly and the widespread use of force, to project a much narrower and selective vision of the past". This shows how the ruling party framed the history of the liberation struggle to convince voters that it freed the country from white minority rule.

In *The Sunday Mail*, on 9 January 2005, MDC party members were called "intellectually challenged brothers in the Rhodie shadow" (Ranger 2005: 13). Generally, opposition politicians, especially former MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, were labelled as sell-outs because of "bitter Blair and bitter white settlers" (Ranger 2005: 13). According to Mutanda (2012), the state-controlled media labelled the opposition as "Western puppets". In other words, the ruling party saw itself as patriotic and castigated others as unpatriotic. Chambwera (2014) argues that *The Herald*, among the Zimpapers, was at the forefront of vilifying the opposition.

Chuma (2006; 2008) states that in 2000 and 2002, the state-controlled media, particularly *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, used binary frames characterised by terms such as "patriot" or "traitor" and "friend or enemy". The state-controlled media

reported on regional leaders from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), who expressed support for and solidarity with Zanu-PF, as friends of the state (Chuma 2006), while the MDC and the West were framed by the state-controlled media as enemies of the state. In the 2002 elections, the state-controlled media labelled the MDC as the instigators of violence (*ibid.*).

It is evident that the state-controlled media was used by the Zanu-PF government to frame political messages and shape public opinion. "The media became both a crucial setting and a tool of power struggle, with the boundaries of freedom of expression coming under stress as vulnerable governments attempt to influence public opinion in their favour," writes Mazango (2005: 34). Zanu-PF government officials used the state media to attack private journalists and the opposition, who were viewed as tools of neo-colonialism and imperialism. As a result, privately-owned media overemphasised the negative aspects of the Zanu-PF government (Ndlela 2005) and their coverage was characterised by an approach of "nothing-can-ever-come-out-of-this-wretched government" (Mano 2005: 65). The private media acted as the adversaries of the government, while the government blamed foreign interference for causing media adversity (Ndlela 2005). The government also accused private media and foreign media of tarnishing its image through anti-Zanu-PF oppositional journalism (Mano 2005).

Private media also reported on the Zanu-PF election rigging allegations and violence during the elections (Chuma 2008; Waldahl 2005). Waldahl (2005: 24) notes that while the private media's reportage opposed Zanu-PF, it did not "lead to competition on equal terms between Zanu-PF and the MDC on the media scene" because the state-controlled media maintained positive news coverage of Zanu-PF, while the private media concentrated on exposing the shortcomings of Zanu-PF (Chambwera 2014).

From 2014, the state-controlled media exhibited factionalism politics. A Zanu-PF faction known as the "Weevils" controlled the state media when Joyce Mujuru, the former Vice President, was expelled from the party. The next few years, until 2017, when Mugabe was removed from power, saw a battle between two factions, Lacoste and Generation 40. State-owned media became a battlefield for Zanu-PF factionalism. For the first time since 2014, state media disparaged senior Zanu-PF officials suspected of plotting to topple Mugabe (Chibuwe 2016). Private media, on the other hand, buoyed those who were expelled from Zanu-PF.

Given this background of media parallelism between the privately-owned and state-controlled media, this study presents new contrasting frames at a time when Zanu-PF was experiencing factional and succession disputes and an opposition coalition. It further examines the influence of these frames by analysing readers' patterns of referring to the political news content.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Accessibility and applicability

This study uses the concept of accessibility and applicability as a theory to analyse readers' patterns of referring to political news. Accessibility is a way in which an

individual's stored knowledge or information is activated in response to media frames (Higgins 1996). Accessibility also refers to the idea that information that is readily available will influence judgements (Iyengar 1990). Accessibility reflects on the extent to which an individual recalls or remembers memories that influence considerations towards an issue (Hemphill *et al.* 2013). Hemphill *et al.* (2013) add that individuals further "create cognitive bridges between what they already know and what media presents". They view this process of creating cognitive bridges as applicability. According to some scholars, the strength and influence of media frames on the audience can also be analysed in terms of the cognitive accessibility (Fiske & Taylor 1991; Price & Tewksbury 1997). This study on accessibility and applicability assists in analysing audience perspectives on political matters, with media discourse as a source of information.

An audience's decisions are mostly influenced by what is already accessible – either through their own experiences or from the media (Zaller 1992). This means the availability of knowledge is essential in determining cognitive accessibility. As audiences are active and not passive media consumers (Oliver 2002), individuals will not base their judgements only on media frames, without other considerations (Shen 2004: 125). Thus, a media frame will influence an individual if the message "interacts with the individual's own predispositions or knowledge structure" (*ibid.*). When the media frame corresponds with the existing beliefs of the audience, then the effect of the frame will cause more salience and cognitive accessibility to the issue framed (Entman 1993). For example, during a political campaign, people tend to use the information provided by the media to know more about a candidate's background and personal attributes. Hence, they build their knowledge about the candidates from the information made accessible by the media (Shen 2004: 125).

Accessibility and applicability involves knowledge activation; thus, an individual's level of knowledge can influence the way a message is accepted (Genç & Kasnakoğlu 2015: 593). Jin and Han (2014) suggest that an individual with less knowledge about an issue portrayed by the media could respond in a dramatic manner because less knowledge could trigger an irrational or emotional response. These emotions determine how "citizens process political information and arrive at political judgments" (Gross & D'Ambrosio 2004: 169). Some scholars view emotions as the "individuals' occurrences shaped by the way individuals experience and interpret events" (Clore & Ortony 2008: 630). This means an individual's cognitive state could determine the effectiveness of a media frame.

Moreover, Garcia-Retamero and Galesic (2010) highlight that less educated individuals are more vulnerable to the effects of media frames. These authors (*ibid.*) provide an example of health education, where people without an understanding of health or with low numeracy are easily affected by the framing effects of complicated health messages. Botan *et al.* (2016) state that less educated people are prone to distrusting politicians and political institutions. This means that knowledge about a particular issue would "decrease the framing effect" (Genç & Kasnakoğlu 2015: 593). However, Huang (2009, in Genç & Kasnakoğlu 2015: 595) found that general education increases frame diversity, which further complicates the issue already framed. This indicates that

more knowledge brings with it a variety of interpretations or perceptions about an issue. Genç and Kasnakoğlu (2015: 594) opine that perceptions are “highly dependent on the context”, besides knowledge and education.

Adding to the concept of accessibility, Peter (2004: 145) found that consistent or repetitive news frames, which appeal to people’s pre-dispositions or considerations (consonant coverage), have more effect than news frames that are opposed to people’s pre-existing knowledge (dissonant coverage). This means “consonant coverage generates a more significant effect than dissonant ones” (Corbu & Buturoiu 2015: 153). Corbu and Buturoiu (*ibid.*) emphasise that the effects of framing occur in contexts where the audiences are exposed to repetitive framing and competitive framing. They view the two types of media exposure as “exposure to different frames (competitive framing) and exposure to the same frame (repetitive framing)” (*ibid.*).

In their study, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) found that exposure to competitive frames, unlike repetitive exposure, makes individuals rethink their decisions; hence, resulting in minimal frame effects. This means that when individuals are exposed to competitive messages they tend to reconsider or evaluate their perspectives towards an issue. Chong and Druckman (2007) postulate that competitive messages motivate reasoning, which renders other frames less effective. Carrage and Roefs (2004: 223) state that the way audiences interpret frames can bring forth a multiplicity of issues involved with such a frame, such as a dominant frame. Thus, competitive messages can make an individual view an issue from a variety of perspectives and construe it as having implications for multiple values or considerations (Chong & Druckman 2007: 104). Competing frames make individuals weigh decisions on alternative interpretations, meaning the strong or dominant frame influences decision making over the weak frame (Chong & Druckman 2007: 640). According to Corbu and Buturoiu (2015: 155), “[s]trong frames are built on the principles of accessibility and applicability – they can be easily activated, and they are in line with individuals’ pre-existing considerations; weak frames cannot be so easily brought back into memory, mainly because they are less applicable”. In such a scenario, weak frames are easily blocked out by the memories of strong frames, which make an issue salient and more easily accessible than others (Hemphill *et al.* 2013: 8). This means dominant or strong frames that are repeated and are readily available in memory, often influence decision making and have the capacity to manipulate public opinion (Iyengar 1990; Aarøea 2011). Some scholars have said that a “dominant frame” can shape what people perceive as true (Druckman 2001; Sniderman & Theriault 2004). For instance, voters do not easily accept information at first (Garrett 2009), but are inclined to accept the first interpretation of an issue (Lau *et al.* 1991), which means that frames, which are quickly communicated and frequently accessed by many people, are likely to be effective in influencing public opinion (Hemphill *et al.* 2013).

Gamson (1992) studied individual frames by examining public discourse, while examining the ideas and symbols people construct of issues. He discusses three types of formation of frames – cultural, personal and integrated approaches. Regarding the cultural approach, Gamson (*ibid.*) says that group discussion relies on “media discourse and popular wisdom” (public opinion) to develop individual frames. A personal

approach depends on “experimental knowledge and popular wisdom” and does not consider media discourse to develop individual frames, while integrated discussions rely on “media discourse, popular knowledge and experimental knowledge” to come up with individual frames (Gamson 1992). Only a personal approach is independent of media discourse to form individual frames. In this study, “popular wisdom” is viewed as public opinion.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis

The Sunday Mail is a Zimbabwean state-controlled newspaper, while *The NewsDay* is a private-owned newspaper. A qualitative content analysis, aided by frame analysis, was applied to 50 articles from *The Sunday Mail* and 60 from *The NewsDay*. All articles selected were analysed. The study focused on generic political news stories to capture inclusive political content. The selection of political news stories was purposively determined by political news headlines, metaphors, cluster of words, signals in language use, and catchphrases centred on Zanu-PF's succession and factional disputes, the prospects of the opposition alliance (MDC, NPP and other), and electoral disputes. The political news stories were selected from the period January 2017 to April 2017. This period was characterised by heightened political activity in Zimbabwe before Mugabe's ousting from the presidency. The researchers used an inductive approach to analyse the political content.

Focus group discussions

A thematic content analysis was applied to readers' perspectives. Qualitative data collection was used to obtain readers' perspectives on *The Sunday Mail* and *The NewsDay's* political news coverage. The researcher conducted three focus groups discussions, each with ten participants, in the capital city of Harare as readers in the capital have access to both state-controlled and privately-owned media. Focus group discussions were conducted in three areas, Harare City Centre (central business district), Avondale (medium density suburb), and Mount Pleasant (medium density suburb).

The focus groups consisted of diverse readers; namely, three journalists, 11 students, eight teachers and eight unemployed participants. The focus group discussions were conducted during May 2017. The data collected from the focus group discussions was transcribed and coded. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the focus groups discussions by categorising audience perspectives into themes.

FINDINGS

Qualitative content analysis

The Sunday Mail

The political content of *The Sunday Mail* was pro-Zanu-PF, pro-Mugabe, pro-Grace Mugabe and anti-opposition. “Zanu-PF factionalism”, “succession disputes”,

“the opposition alliance” and “electoral campaigns and reforms” were the main topics extracted from the analysis of the political articles. *The Sunday Mail* commended Robert Mugabe for being the “centre of power” in the ruling party:

In reaffirming the 2014 congress resolutions, which say there should be one centre of power in the party, the President, we are compelled as the Youth League to have direct access to the President (*The Sunday Mail* 26/03/2017).

Although, Mugabe was described as the centre of power, his party was haunted by factionalism and succession disputes. *The Sunday Mail* played a role in elucidating or reinforcing one faction over another. The state-controlled paper acted as a battlefield for factional and succession disputes. The Zanu-PF faction, G-40 (consisting of anti-Mugabe war veterans), was specifically targeted by the paper and were labelled “rogue”, while another faction, Lacoste (supporters of Emmerson Mnangagwa), was less of a target. Overall, *The Sunday Mail* remained pro-Mugabe and pro-Zanu-PF regardless of the factional disputes. Some articles in *The Sunday Mail* downplayed factionalism and succession disputes within the ruling party. A headline on 19 March read, “Mnangagwa opens up on succession disputes”, and emphasised that “there is no succession headache in Zanu-PF” (*The Sunday Mail* 19/03/2017), while another headline on 23 April read, “Zanu-PF fumigating itself, says VP” (*The Sunday Mail* 23/04/2017).

On the other hand, *The Sunday Mail* gave mostly negative coverage to the opposition. *The Sunday Mail* denigrated the leader of the main opposition; for example, “Don’t be fooled by Tsvangirai” (*The Sunday Mail* 05/02/2017). The article went on to say that “Mr Tsvangirai ill-informed people about matters related to civil disturbances in post-independence era”. Another article referred to Tsvangirai as “[t]he cry baby who is afraid of elections”, stating, “MDC-T knows the reality that President Mugabe and Zanu-PF are roping to victory once again” (*The Sunday Mail* 12/03/2017).

The newspaper also targeted other opposition leaders, including former Vice-President Joice Mujuru and her party. An article headlined “Mujuru learnt nothing from President Mugabe” denigrated Mujuru and emphasised that “she is too dull to learn anything”. The article labelled Mujuru as an incompetent political leader who spent 24 years as cabinet minister and ten years as Vice-President under Mugabe “and learnt nothing”. Mujuru was also accused of “plotting to remove President Mugabe from office” (*The Sunday Mail* 12/02/2017). Another article referred to Mujuru as “academically challenged” (*The Sunday Mail* 19/02/2017).

The NewsDay

The political content of *The NewsDay* was pro-opposition politics, while being anti-Zanu-PF and Robert Mugabe. *The NewsDay*, a newspaper privately owned by Alpha Media Holdings, published articles critical of Mugabe’s Zanu-PF. The newspaper gave a voice to the opposition, a space they were deprived of in state-controlled media. The echoes of an opposition alliance against Mugabe were reflected in headlines and comments such as the following:

“Coalition talks to continue despite ZimPF fights” (*The NewsDay* 10/02/2017)

“Campaign to amplify calls for grand coalition” (*The NewsDay* 22/02/2017)

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"Tsvangirai called on to stop Mugabe" (*The NewsDay* 01/03/2017)

"MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai has been called on to lead a national effort by Zimbabweans to stop President Robert Mugabe from contesting elections as a Zanu-PF candidate next year. At the ripe of 94, it is impossible for the nonagenarian to come up with new ideas to rescue the country from the current abyss." (*The NewsDay* 01/03/2017)

"Tsvangirai to lead Coalition" (*The NewsDay* 23/03/2017)

The newspaper anticipated protests, demonstrations and anti-Mugabe movements. The protest movements found positive coverage in the newspaper, for instance the #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka protests. However, before Mugabe's birthday celebrations, *The NewsDay* predicted a protest that did not occur, "Mugabe bash faces massive protest" (*The NewsDay* 11/02/2017):

Social movement Tajamuka/Sesijikile is organising a massive demonstration to protest against the holding of President Robert Mugabe's 93rd birthday bash in Matobo district, an area that bore the brunt of the Gukurahundi mass killings.

The NewsDay portrayed Mugabe and Zanu-PF as dictatorial and undemocratic through headlines such as "Zanu-PF won't listen to opposition parties" (*The NewsDay* 10/02/2017). Mugabe and Zanu-PF were at the centre of criticism, including the following:

"Ncube blasts Zanu PF's egocentric patronage system" (*The NewsDay* 23/02/2017)

"Mugabe must go: Opposition" (*The NewsDay* 03/03/2017)

"Reduce foreign 'useless' trips: MDC" (*The NewsDay* 13/03/2014)

"No to 'wheelchair' President" (*The NewsDay* 06/04/2017)

The newspaper also published Gukurahundi issues attributed to Mugabe's alleged ruthless mass killings of the people in Matabeleland, namely, "Mugabe's 'Zezuru Gukurahundi crack unit' exposed" (*The NewsDay* 13/03/2017).

Factionalism and succession disputes received extensive coverage in *The NewsDay*. The newspaper covered factionalism and succession disputes in Zanu-PF in detail:

"Double-faced Mugabe will be resisted: War vets" (*The NewsDay* 13/01/2017)

"FEAR and trepidation has gripped warring Zanu-PF factions" (*The NewsDay* 17/02/2017)

"Violence rocks Zanu-PF" (*The NewsDay* 07/03/2017)

"War vets outwit Mugabe" (*The NewsDay* 18/03/2017)

"Mugabe not on our agenda: War vets" (*The NewsDay* 23/03/2017)

Focus group discussions

The findings of the focus group discussions reflect an active audience with political and socio-economic experience of the country. The political perspectives were distributed across Zanu-PF and MDC discourses. Although the readers' perspectives could be defined as pro-ZANU-PF or pro-MDC, this study notes that the readers as individuals exercised their own subjective political views and that these opinions did not always clearly side with one of the parties.

Previous literature has shown that readers develop “pre-conceived reality created from shared knowledge and experiences in a society”, which determine their reaction towards an issue (Wang 2009: 748). The readers had different perspectives towards the private and state media, Zanu-PF and the MDC, and several political aspects.

Opinions on state-owned vs private media

A discourse common in Zanu-PF reflected by *The Sunday Mail* has shown that the party believes that private media is designed to support an opposition and Western agenda. The participants affiliated to Zanu-PF confirmed the same perspective:

The NewsDay is a Western sponsored paper bent on tarnishing the image of the country.

They promote Western sponsored political parties such as MDC and their editors are busy aligning their stories to please their foreign masters.

The private editors peddle lies about Zimbabwe.

These comments show that there is amity between the participant as a supporter and Zanu-PF as a political party. The readers' political judgement is readily determined by affiliation:

Change media laws in Zimbabwe and deregister all private papers who peddle lies about Zimbabwe.

Private media sometimes ends up exaggerating issues or introducing some inert biases.

On the other hand, the participants with a different perspective noted that the state-controlled media is pro-Zanu-PF and it is only the private media that “sheds light on what is happening in Zimbabwe which cannot be shared by the state-controlled media”. Other comments in this regard include:

The private media is there to just oppose government policies and anyone in power at the moment.

Privately-owned media tends to reduce votes for the ruling party by exposing their tricks.

Some of the participants expressed an anti-Zanu-PF attitude. They believed that the state-controlled media was determined to keep Zanu-PF in power. Phrases extracted from the readers' perspectives on the state media's political news coverage include “Zanu-PF propaganda”, “hero-worshipping”, “inclined to the ruling party”, “tarnish the image of the opposition”, “to gain mileage in elections”, and “to keep the ruling party in control”.

Although the readers showed an understanding of media polarisation between the state-controlled and privately-owned media, many blamed Zanu-PF for monopolising state media. This was apparent from a comment such as, “I think the solution to the Zimbabwean puzzle is just removing Zanu PF”, while others argued that “polarisation is rife in both media houses, they all write in an extreme that over-emphasise their agenda”.

Opinions on Zanu-PF vs MDC

Some of the participants' perspectives as individual frames corresponded with the private media's political discourse. Those who showed an affinity for the opposition supported the MDC, pointing out that opposition political parties should unite to remove Zanu-PF from power. For instance, supporting the idea of a grand coalition, two participants had the following to say:

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Based on the split vote of 2008, confronting Zanu-PF as a united opposition is the only key to unseating it. The coalition, if properly managed, is the only hope for Zimbabweans. It's a good initiative, though individuals need to zero down themselves to avoid power struggles.

Others with an apparent anti-opposition stance dismissed the idea of an opposition coalition. Some of their comments on the opposition politics include the following:

The coalition is a non-starter. It will not topple the formidable ZANU. They are wasting time and resources.

The coalition is confused, lacking mission, vision and leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that every political frame from media discourse does not necessarily influence media audiences. Readers base their judgements on experience and affiliation, and less on media discourse. Media discourse is only used as a point of reference if the frame is consonant to their pre-conceived ideas. This study argues that the participants harbour pre-conceived political ideas from experience. Some of the political frames exert a certain influence on opinion, especially when the audience has knowledge or experience.

The individual's consonant or dissonant cognitive frames also determine whether the person will agree with the message or not. Knowledge, experience and public opinion seem to play a greater part in shaping individual's cognitive frames for consideration. Researchers believe that individual cognitive frames, shaped from experience, knowledge and public opinion, determine political affiliations that influence behaviour, attitudes or beliefs towards some political issue. This leads to the conclusion that knowledge, experience and public opinion build up individual cognitive frames that determine perspective on political reality, which lessens or heightens the influence of a political message.

Although the participants could make their own judgements, this study confirmed that some of the participants read across political stories to build up their own individual frames, as stated in the literature that "individuals would not only base their judgements on media frames without other considerations" but they read across stories to gather facts (Shen 2004: 125). Thus, with a growing number of media outlets and less reliance on the state-controlled media in Zimbabwe, the participants indicated that they read across several media outlets to deduce facts from the stories. This indicates that some of the participants do not wholly depend on media discourse for opinion, but they dissect and choose what they want to believe as true, determined by consonant frames or dissonant individual frames.

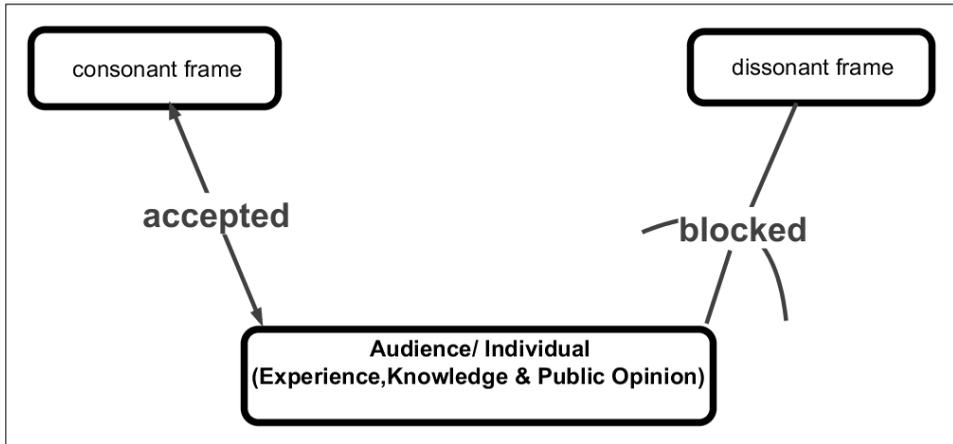


FIGURE 1: AUDIENCE ORIENTATION AND FRAME EFFECT MODEL

The audience orientation and frame effect model, as shown in Figure 1, illustrates that media audiences are active audiences. This study demonstrates that an audience or individual can block any frames or media discourse dissonant to his/her pre-conceived ideas constructed from experience, knowledge, interest and public opinion, while on the other hand, he/she can possibly accept any news consonant to pre-existing beliefs.

NOTES

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