2 Decolonising conflict reporting

Media and election violence in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Violent electoral contests' postcolonial societies present quandaries for journalists. The polarising nature of violence provides a fertile ground for the reproduction and perpetuation of journalistic tropes rooted in neo-colonial and hegemonic matrices of power. Combining insights from decolonial approaches and conflict-sensitive journalism theory, this chapter is a qualitative exploration of colonial practices embedded in conflict reporting in postcolonial societies. It examines structural, institutional and professional journalistic practices which predisposed Zimbabwean print media to colonial tropes in reporting election violence between 2000 and 2003.

How the media report on election violence is important because violence is a destructive force with fundamental and far-reaching humanitarian consequences. Compared to other types of political violence, election violence has received scant attention in scholarship supposedly because it is "time concentrated". Relative to wars and insurrections which take place over a relatively long time and result in huge death tolls, election violence has far fewer deaths (Meadow, 2009, p. 232). Meadow notes that except for Ivory Coast where about 3,000 people died in the 2010/2011 post-election violence and the Kenyan 2007/2008 post-election violence which resulted in the loss of about 1,000 lives, election violence has far fewer casualties (Meadow, 2009).

An interrogation of election violence reporting may provide deeper insights into the extent to which existing journalistic practices in conflict reporting subtly perpetuate coloniality in the media. This is because hegemonic and hegemonic struggles play themselves on the canvass of electoral conflicts.

Previous studies have mainly focused on the role of the media in elections, either deploying agenda setting/framing theoretical lens (Hobart, 2007), or a watchdog lens (Norris, 2000), primarily within the context of the industrialised democracies of the West. However, none of these studies have examined what Hoagland refers to as "discursive colonisation" aspects of "coloniality of knowledge" (Hoagland, 2020, p. 50) manifested in journalistic practices.

This has left a knowledge lacuna on the extent to which conflict reporting is deeply implicated in hegemonic Anglo-Eurocentric practices where conflict is articulated through Anglo-European normative values and journalistic canons (Hoagland, 2020). This chapter's point of departure is that media reportage of conflict, as demonstrated by the reporting of election violence in Zimbabwe after the turn of the century, is situated within the ongoing tropes of coloniality embedded in structural, institutional and professional journalistic practices. The chapter advocates for a media agenda whereby the media embrace elements of conflict-sensitive reporting anchored in Afro-centric philosophy (Kasoma, 1996) and decolonial approaches (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007).

Data for the study were drawn from in-depth interviews with 19 political reporters and editors of six Zimbabwean mainstream newspapers. The newspapers in question are state-owned – *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* – and privately owned – *Daily News*, *News Day*, *The Financial Gazette* and *The Zimbabwe Independent*. The interviews were conducted between August 2013 and October 2015 in the capital city, Harare. The selection of interview participants was guided by the need to generate thick data in relation to election violence reporting practices. Such thick data were obtained from journalists who had experience in reporting election violence in Zimbabwe and included political reporters, news editors and editors. These were accessed through referrals, thereby making the sampling strategy purposive. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

The choice of the study period was informed by the realisation that the year 2000 marked the beginning of the “Zimbabwean crisis” characterised by phenomenal electoral violence leading to loss of human life and property. Electoral campaigns took place in a tense, agitated and polarised political climate (ZESN, 2008). Such environment played host to journalistic practices which normalise Eurocentric, decontextualised narratives of conflict predicated on war journalism whereby conflict is constructed as pitting losers and winners and has no or little ‘background or historical perspective’ (Ting Lee, 2010, p. 320).

The rest of this chapter is divided into three parts. The first part briefly surveys literature on election violence and the media drawing insights from the work of decolonial scholars and the conflict-sensitive theory. The second part discusses institutional, structural and professional constraints faced by the media in Zimbabwe in reporting election violence, demonstrating how these are intrinsically intertwined with coloniality. The third and final part gives concluding remarks and suggests approaches alternative ways of reporting conflicts.

Election violence: residual coloniality and the media

Although election violence is a complex issue which requires nuancing, dominant narratives depict Africa as the hotbed of violence, thus evoking

notions of residual coloniality. Reif (2011, pp. 5–6) defines election violence as “any spontaneous or organized actions” by political party candidates or their supporters, election authorities, voters or other political actors ‘that employ physical harm, intimidation, blackmail, verbal abuse, violent demonstrations, psychological manipulation, or other forms of coercion... aimed at disrupting determining, hastening, delaying, reversing, or otherwise influencing an election outcome’ (Reif, 2011, pp. 5–6). This definition mirrors colonial practices akin to “misanthropic skepticism” or skepticism about the “Other”, whereby the relationship between citizen and subject is vertical rather than horizontal and ethics of war are suspended (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

Similarly, Meadow (2009, p. 234) conceives election violence as ‘acts used to harm, intimidate, exploit, disrupt, hasten, delay or reverse the electoral process or outcome’ and these acts happen between the voter registration process and the inauguration of a political administration. The view that election violence has both physical and psychological harm is consistent with Orientalist (Said, 1978) notions about violence in postcolonial societies where the “hyperbolic expression” of violence is genocide (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 248).

A common thread running through the above definitions is the view that election violence has both physical and psychological dimensions and that it is a means to an end as its ultimate objective is to influence the electoral processes and outcomes for the benefit of the political elite, thus underscoring colonial methods of governance in the postcolonial contexts (Ylonen, 2009).

Western constructions of Africa as a “dark” and “uncivilised” continent have given rise to two dominant perspectives on the role of the media on election violence: the media either amplify election violence or act as sentinels to alert the outside world about human rights abuses. The “amplifier” perspective leans heavily on primordial accounts of election violence where media are blamed for inflaming violence through reckless and sensational reporting. Mamdani refers to this phenomenon as “the pornography of violence” whereby violence is depicted as rampant and senseless (2003, p. 141). An example is during the Kenyan 2007/2008 post-election violence where the media were blamed for ‘amplifying hate speech that inflamed tensions’ leading to loss of lives and property and the displacement of thousands of people (Odhiambo, 2007, p. 1).

As sentinels, the media can inform the public about the dangers and risks of participating in the election or of going to certain areas by showing people compatriots being hurt and being killed in certain places. In this instance, the media become some sort of a sentry playing a surveillance and monitoring role – alerting the public about impending danger, what some scholars have described as “burglar alarm journalism” (McQuail, 2013). Both the “amplifier” and “alarm journalism” narrative emphasise agency of the media as providers of information about election violence and defenders of human rights, thus constructing election violence as a phenomenon that

lends itself to the logic of breaking news – the view that ‘when it bleeds it leads’ (Meadow, 2009, p. 232). Both approaches tend to be oriented toward “war journalism” which has been criticised for accentuating conflict rather than peace (Galtung, 2002).

Scholars argue that violence in general and election violence has great propensity to attract media attention because of its dramatic elements (Chalfont et al., 2007; Hobart, 2007; Thussu, 2009). Chalfont posits that “violence makes good copy” and is exciting to read. Obsession with drama in election violence has resulted in event-based reporting which masks the complexity of election violence. Some scholars argue that although violence is often spontaneous ‘it is a product of a longer sequence of historical and political actions’ (Stremlau & Monroe, 2009, p. 5), meaning that attention on drama and conflict masks the complexities of election violence. Viewing violence as spontaneous and rampant feeds on a simplistic moral logic which harks back to colonial hegemonies whereby the world is depicted as a binary of “modern and pre-modern” (Mamdani, 2003, p. 142). Given the inadequacies of these accounts to give plausible “historical explanation of agency” in postcolonial conflicts (Mamdani, 2003), it is imperative to consider alternative theoretical frameworks which can help shed insights into the hegemonic discourses on conflict reporting normalised through news values and professional practices as media practitioners try to negotiate different obstacles in their everyday operations.

Conflict-sensitive journalism: a decolonial lens

Scholars have noted how the mass media in Africa are implicated in the colonial experiences of African countries (Kasoma, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Banda, 2008; Shaw, 2009). Banda (2008, p. 84) notes that African media are still “embedded in international media structures”. Decoloniality provides a lens to explain the perpetuation of coloniality in the media and other knowledge institutions in the postcolonial state. Decoloniality focuses on countering the “coloniality of power”, “knowledge” and “being” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). Coloniality refers to a situation where colonial relations of power remain deeply entrenched in spheres of authority, sexuality, knowledge, economy, politics and ‘the general understanding of being’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 232). Maldonado-Torres asserts that coloniality is different from colonialism in the sense that it ‘denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Because coloniality survives beyond colonialism, it is about long-standing patterns of power that arose out of colonialism and is maintained in the postcolonial phase through

books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in commonsense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and in

so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time.

(Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243)

Thus, decoloniality is a 'shift away from the imperial attitude (both natural and theoretical; Eurocentric, Americancentric or otherwise) and the decolonial attitudes in politics, theory and critique' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 262). Since the media shape public knowledge about conflict, decoloniality is a useful lens to interrogate "universalised" Western rationality often promoted by the mainstream media about postcolonial conflicts. This is because decoloniality is concerned about the liberation of knowledge and the 'destruction of the coloniality of world power' (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). Quijano adds:

epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend some universality.

(Quijano, 2007, p. 177)

As an inclusive knowledge paradigm accommodates alternative approaches of understanding conflict in postcolonial contexts such as conflict-sensitive journalism, a more nuanced approach to Peace Journalism championed by Norwegian scholar, Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1998, 2002). Galtung (1998) distinguishes Peace Journalism, which is peace-oriented, from war journalism which he conceives as war/violence propaganda, elite and victory-oriented journalism. According to Galtung, the conflict arena consists of two parties pitted against each other, featuring "Them vs Us", whereby the "US" are humanised and the "them" are de-humanised (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000). However, Peace Journalism has been criticised for its "naïve realism" (Hanitzsch, 2004). Against this background, Conflict-sensitive journalism has gained traction. It derives its moral underpinning from the fact that professional media can positively influence peacebuilding through dissemination of knowledge about politics, local issues and consensus building (Howard, 2008, p. 2). Conflict-sensitive journalism reflects a refinement of the original values of the news media and is rooted in the belief that the media can be a powerful force for conflict resolution in society. Journalists are equipped with analytical skills to better understand conflict, report it in a context as well as help them avoid the use of stereotypes, narrow perspectives on the causes of conflict. The media can therefore contribute to a wider understanding of conflict through dialogue among diverse communities and can provide information about ways of conflict resolution in society while at the same time maintaining the original core values of the media such as accuracy, fairness, balance and responsible conduct. In this vein, conflict-sensitive journalism has resonance with Afrocentric approaches

advocated by scholars (Kasoma, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Banda, 2008; Shaw, 2009). To the extent that conflict-sensitive reporting speaks to the necessity to transform journalistic news values and ground rules, it could be a more viable approach to decolonise conflict reporting in postcolonial societies.

Walking a tightrope: journalistic safety and the reproduction of coloniality

The majority of journalists who participated in this study constructed electoral violence as ubiquitous rendering some parts of the country as unsafe for journalists to do their job. Some rural areas, which were strongholds of the ruling Zanu PF party, became “no-go areas” for private media journalists due to violence, making it impossible for journalists to gather news. A journalist who works for the private media elaborated on the difficulties of trying to access such “no-go areas” and how he could feel ‘it in the air that the environment is not really friendly...even if no one attacked him he could see the hostility in their eyes’ (J1). The journalist explained thus:

I went to Mash Central,¹ you get there and you know, you are afraid, you know you are not free, you are not comfortable. Even as you approach people that you approach you have to be very careful in terms of how you approach, how you approach the people that you want to talk to. Then you get some people who are really very emotional and the you feel your life is under threat at that time.

(J1, Private media Journalist, Male)

This statement illuminates on how election violence was viewed as palpable, inevitable and rampant, making it impossible for some journalists to gain a first-hand experience of the situation, thereby rendering their reports superficial and devoid of historical perspectives since they could not conduct face-to-face interviews or take pictures to authenticate their stories – a key requirement in election violence reporting (Ting Lee, 2010, p. 320).

Beyond superficial journalism, these sentiments reflect the continuities of coloniality within the postcolonial Zimbabwean state whereby life is marked by dichotomies along various axes and “zones of being” characteristic of Santos’s “abyssal thinking” (Santos, 2007, p. 1), signifying ‘a system of visible and invisible zones established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms’, the realm of “this side of the line” and the realm of “the other side of the line”. Thus, the “metropolitan zone” (urban) represents the “zone of being” which is governed by “social regulation and social; emancipation” while the colonial zone (rural) is governed through “appropriation/violence” (Santos, 2007, p. 46). The use of coercion illustrates the extent to which colonial modes and practices of governance continue in the postcolonial phase, thereby questioning the authenticity of “independence” and “freedom” enjoyed by citizens. The hierarchical divisions between the

citizen and the subject manifest when the citizen uses violence on the subject to affirm their sense of “being” or coloniality of power (Mignolo, 2007). This Hobbesian is graphically captured by Maldonado-Torres (2016, p. 17) when he says life in the zone of non-being is ‘a torture chamber making life acquire the overwhelming feeling of it being worse than death’. Although this partitioning of populations into zones of “damnation” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016) and zones of privilege and power is a colonial phenomenon, it is perpetuated through colonial practices of governance such as “black on black” violence which rears its ugly head in postcolonial societies (Ndlovu, 2017).

The polarity between the “zone of being” and the “zone of not being” is further reinforced in the news media through institutional and professional practices such as news sourcing patterns that normalise certain accredited knowledge producers at the expense of others. For instance, most journalists who were interviewed for this study confirmed that they were forced to rely on elitist, “suburban”, partisan and institutional news sources, such as the police, politicians and Western-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), involved in human rights, ostensibly they “had better access to the situation on the ground”. However, besides the fact that such sources were not directly affected by the violence, their perspectives were not only mired in elitism, but also motivated by partisan interests reflective of the political polarity in Zimbabwe.

Although the majority of journalists interviewed for this study denied that their proximity to politicians influenced their reportage, it could be argued that the reliance on conflicted sources such as politicians and partisan NGOs might have loosened journalists’ control of the news agenda and the adoption of the political protagonists’ news frames might have perpetuated dualistic narratives, resulting in war-oriented reportage rather than de-escalation of election violence.

The fact that most journalists did not have access to rural and peri-urban areas where most of the election violence took place meant that news on election violence was skewed in favour of urban areas while little was reported about the rural and peri-urban areas. A female journalist who works for one of the private-owned newspapers explained how one could risk their life by reporting from “no go areas”, resulting in “little in terms of rural coverage” – hence, the limited voices of rural voters (J4 Private Media, Female). In the broader scheme of things, the hierarchical nature of the Zimbabwean society means that their perspectives of rural citizens who bear the brunt of election violence occupy the lower rungs of society and are systematically excluded in discourses on election violence, while the elite, urbanites, and representatives of Western donors and agencies dominate this space. This creates a kind of knowledge apartheid reminiscent of the colonial era with regard to issues of election violence. This implies that an opportunity to balance the Eurocentric neo-liberalist of human rights and alternative perspectives was lost. This war-oriented approach to election reporting, thus, meant very little could be understood about the suffering of

civilians. Scholars stress the necessity to speak to people behind the front-lines because they are the ones affected by a conflict and are best placed to talk about their story, their suffering because they know what they have lost, and what they have experienced.

This “urban-centric” journalism and the fixation on political elite as sources of news emptied news of its humanistic touch as the media adopted a zero-sum game approach, resulting in suffocation of subaltern voices. This was exacerbated by the lack of human, financial and logistical resources which militated against access to the rural areas as media houses reeled under the economic meltdown and a commercial logic which put premium on profit at the expense of the public interest. A senior editorial staff member of the state-run newspaper, *The Herald*, explained how resource constraints circumscribed by commercialism negatively affected “comprehensive coverage” of the elections. He pointed out that during the 2013 elections his organisation spent US\$50,000 on the first day of voting and this was expensive for them (E1 Public Media Editor, Male).

A private-media political reporter lamented the lack of election reporting budgets, thereby reducing journalists to what he described as “Desktop Journalists”. He explained:

I was disappointed, for example in our newsroom, there was no election budget. I thought that, I thought you know we would have an election budget. To tell you the truth, eh, I don't know because I am not blaming her or him, but as journalists we might ask ourselves why during an election there was no budget. From my own perspective, I don't think that my bosses appreciate the importance of having an election budget. Yes, things are tough, the economy is in the doldrums but I believe that when you have got a budget there is ah...even a budget for three trips outside Harare, so that you are not restricted to, to, to Desktop journalism... What we saw much is that, it seems foreign journalists had more resources to cover our elections, were more prepared to cover our elections...For me I was then forced to squat at some foreign journalists who had the resources.

(J3 Private Media, Male)

This view was corroborated by Dumisani Muleya, then editor of the privately weekly, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, who noted how journalists were “relying on phone calls” and “talking to interested players” who had “their own version of events to advance their agendas”, thereby limiting their ability to reflect on stories correctly “since they could not physically travel to the ground to able to interview people there”. Muleya noted how “Desktop journalism” was increasingly becoming due to the proliferation of social media as journalists would ‘just sit in the offices, wait for posts on the social media, Tweets, Facebook’ (Interview with Dumisani Muleya, 9 September 2013).

That some journalists were forced to “piggyback” on foreign journalists due to the lack of resources to cover election violence is a serious indictment on the neo-liberal commercial logic of the media in the postcolonial context and demonstrates the extent to which economic inequalities expose local journalists to neo-colonialist journalistic news framing practices which normalise hegemonic relations between the West and the Global South. When local journalists are embedded within foreign journalistic crews, it is inevitable that they will parrot journalistic practices of those and their framing of the local reality. Local journalists become appendages of Western media, and amount to a tacit endorsement of the “epistemic superiority” of the better resourced Western media.

Political pressure, self-censorship and editorial manipulation

Apart from coercive measures, continuities of coloniality found expression through political pressure, editorial influences and self-censorship. These forces resulted in the lopsided selection and framing of election violence news. Most journalists pointed out how political pressure, editorial influences and self-censorship acknowledged negatively influenced election reporting. Given the deteriorating economic conditions in Zimbabwe at the time and the fact that politics is a source of patronage activities, violence became a means to an end. A state media editor illustrated how sometimes they get blackmailed by politicians who convene press conferences to make “baseless” allegations of election violence against opponents only to discover that thereby misleading the media.

Sometimes politicians they tend to say out things without backing, without evidence. So, we try to make our own investigations.

(E1, Public Media Editor, Male)

While this journalist alluded to the politicisation of election violence, he tended to downplay politicisation in his newsroom. The then editor of *News Day*, Vincent Kahiya, acknowledges the propensity to politicise election violence by politicians, but placed emphasis on how politicians burden the media by demanding “good press” and the fact that political parties “have got a line that newspapers must report on”. He added: ‘And if you do not do that there is always the accusations by the other political party. So sometimes you ask yourself, do you trade that very very thin line and say, no we will be very neutral?’ (Interview with Vincent Kahiya, 9 September 2013).

Although he agreed with Kahiya about the pressure exerted by politicians on the media, the state-media journalist claimed they spurned any attempts to manipulate them by politicians as they had “mastered ways of dealing with politicians” and managed to publish balanced (E1 Public Media Editor, Male).

A more serious form of political pressure was when journalists were threatened with unspecified action by politicians to force them to drop uncharitable stories about them or their political party. Sunsley Chamunorwa, a veteran journalist and editor of the *Financial Gazette*, indicated how his newspaper was forced to drop some stories on election violence because of threats by ruling party politicians. He gave an example of a story in 2009 which stated that ‘in 2008 an excess of 200 people were reportedly killed in politically motivated violence’ which got him into trouble even if it “was a statement of fact” (Interview with Sunsley Chamunorwa, 11 May 2015). Chamunorwa added that depending on “what the ruling clique” wanted, the owner of the newspaper, who was a government official, would come up and say ‘you can’t report on so and so or such and such an institution because it may actually end up affecting Zanu PF’. Chamunorwa said he was ‘stifled big time’ (Interview, 11 May 2015).

A journalist from the same newspaper narrated how he was falsely accused of “insulting the president” by a ruling party politician, forcing him to drop the story because he feared arrest. This meant that journalists lost their monopoly to determine the news agenda to politicians, resulting in the dominance of a war journalism.

Although both private and state media agree about the toxicity of coercion, political repression and editorial manipulation, state media journalists were more nuanced, arguing that they try to maintain editorial independence by following the “rules, ethics and guidelines of journalism” (E1 State Media Editor, Male). Another state media journalist, while agreeing that ownership had a bearing on the way they reported election violence, argued that the overriding guiding principles in the reportage was “the national interest”. However, some private media journalists dismissed the state media’s professed “national interest” as a nebulous concept used to mask “partisan” by the state media (J3, Private Media, Journalist).

The polarised views between the private and state media reflect historical political divisions in the Zimbabwean society, but are a carryover from colonial times. While the use of repressive modes of governance reflects contemporary neo-patrimonial politics and socio-economic and political schisms in contemporary times, they are rooted in a genealogy of paternalistic modes of governance which emerged out of colonialism. Although they have their origins in Western “modernity and colonial encounters” (Quijano, 2007), continuities of coloniality have survived beyond colonialism and manifest themselves through repression, cooptation and other colonialist practices meant to secure or retain power for the political elite. Ylonen (2009, p. 51) is on point when he argues that the transition to independence in Africa ‘merely changed the composition of the managers of the administration’ but its modalities of governance based on ‘a narrow base of social forces and coercive measures emphasising the state as a device of violent repression and not a source of security’ for all citizens remained intact.

This view is clearly at odds with framings of violence in Africa which is “pathologised” through neoliberal discourses whereby election violence is viewed as signalling breakdown of the “rule of law”, violation of “human rights” and “good governance”. Such discourses perpetuate distorted, stereotypical and “Orientalist” (Said, 1978) perceptions whereby the post-colony is “invented” and “inverted” (Mudimbe, 1988) as “hellish” and “precarious place of existence” where the conventional ethics of war do not apply (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 17).

Polarisation and partisanship: the ugly side of advocacy journalism

A central feature through which colonial tropes were sustained was the Manichean lens through which election violence was reported. It reflected enduring genealogies of colonial practices whereby society was constructed as consisting of “US” and “Them”. The most conspicuous polarity pitted the state media aligning themselves to the ruling Zanu PF party while the privately owned media unapologetically defended the opposition, particularly the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. In the ensuing hegemonic struggle, election violence reporting was characterised by “Othering” which often degenerated into advocacy” journalism and labelling. Bemoaning partisanship, the then Editor-in-Chief of *Newsday*, Vincent Kahiya, attributed partisanship to the fact that journalists are “political creatures” with “an inclination to become activists”, because they had political aspirations which were betrayed by their “appetite to root for political parties in their personal capacities” and how this was “reflected in the stories” (Interview, 9 September 2013).

His view was corroborated by Dumisani Muleya, the editor of *The Zimbabwe Independent*, who lamented the “tendency for journalists to take positions” along political lines. He observed:

You try to encourage people to see things in binaries which is not what you should. What you should be doing is to report in such a manner that on one occasion if I take the story in *The Herald* and put it in *The Independent* and take the one in *The Herald* and put it in *The Independent* the readers will not know where it was written. That should be the situation. So, one of the limitations we have here is the polarisation of the media and the partisan nature of the coverage of issues, particularly elections.
(Interview 9 May 2013)

To the extent that partisanship is the clearest evidence of weaponisation of the media for political power, it is a mirror of colonial era kind of the bifurcation of society into “zones of being” and “zones of non-being” whereby citizen solidarity is undermined by the divide and rule power retention strategies of the political elite. Media solidarity is thus replaced polarity, advocacy journalism and “Othering”.

A private media journalist explained how in their newsroom journalists would ask each other “which political party one rooted for” which resulted in unbalanced stories. She explained how in her newsroom there were no more journalists but “activists” (J4 Private Media Journalist). As advocacy journalism took root, some stories were either toned down or completely jettisoned from the news agenda, resulting to one-sided reports on election violence. This “rigging” influenced the public’s moral evaluations and causal interpretations about election violence.

The journalist quoted above explained how one could be labelled “a Zanu PF mole” or a member of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) for writing positively about Zanu PF, making it impossible to balance stories on election violence as stories gravitated towards “the extremes” (J4 Private Media, Female).

These journalistic practices are shaped by political power dynamics and have historical antecedents in the colonial setting whereby knowledge production was centralised for the preservation of political power by the minority elite class. Just like in the colonial era, journalism is still being weaponised for political purposes rather than maintaining societal harmony. The fact that people who are supposed to be unified under the umbrella of one professional body use toxic and derogatory labels against each other is indicative of this extent weaponisation, the destructive nature of power politics on the social fabric – the same way coloniality perpetuates itself through anti-democratic practices and modalities of governance.

While agreeing with their private media counter-parts that election violence lends itself to polarisation, they attributed the ‘use inflammatory language or hate speech to “Other” media’ (J1 Statement Journalist), thereby underlining the polarities entrenched in the Zimbabwean society. The contours of divisions in the media are vocalised through narratives that hark back on neo-coloniality graphically illustrated by a state media journalist who blamed “western countries” for interfering in Zimbabwean affairs, accusing them of operating a “megaphone diplomacy” whereby ‘they pretended to have a telescope vision to know what was happening in Zimbabwe’ by blowing out of proportion any skirmishes in the country so that Zimbabwe is put on the United Nations agenda. He added:

Any skirmish in Zimbabwe you will find the Secretary of State of the US will be on CNN condemning it, the Canadians, the Australians and so on. Any skirmish between two people probably a bottle store it hits the headlines. So, we always try to get other voices, the voices of our African brothers, to, to, to tell the story that, because they will have people on the ground. They have embassies in Zimbabwe. They will have observers and monitors on the ground. So, we always try to get them to corroborate our story because we will be a lone voice basically, ranged against these powerful global media that are trying to portray a picture of a crisis in Zimbabwe in order to subvert the electoral outcome which

they always know goes against them. Because the politics that they are trying to import into Zimbabwe is an alien politics that is at variance with what the needs of the majority are.

(E 5, State Media Editor)

These statements highlight that polarities in the Zimbabwean media are, justly or unjustly, constructed by some as rooted in the neo-colonial enterprise of the West whereby the postcolonial state is caught up in a struggle to assert its sovereignty in a neo-colonial set-up, in which circumstances the media 'become a pawn on the politics of power to be deployed in the service of state elites and the struggle for the hearts and minds of the citizenry' (Banda, 2008, p. 93). In these circumstances, journalism is weaponised against society and becomes a source of conflict and a negation of peace.

Concluding remarks

This chapter examined the extent to which election violence reporting in the Zimbabwean print media after the turn of the century was mired in continuities of coloniality. The chapter has demonstrated how long-standing practices of coloniality and old time modes of governmentality embedded in institutional, structural and professional practices of the media manifest themselves in the postcolonial context. One of the most intriguing findings of the study is the extent to which journalism has been weaponised for political agendas during electoral contexts. The political environment in which the media operated and the war-oriented approach which they adopted betrayed the historical contours of bifurcation in the Zimbabwean society which found expression through polarities, coercive and repressive modes of governance practiced during the colonial era. These deficiencies go beyond ethical shortfalls, but speak to larger epistemic interventions; the need to decolonise conflict reporting in postcolonial contexts whereby journalists incorporate elements of the conflict-sensitive journalism model and a deliberate subversion of the dominant Western-based philosophy of journalism.

Note

- 1 Mashonaland Province is one of Zimbabwe's ten provinces.

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