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THE NATURE AND EFFECTS OF MEDIA POLARIZATION ON POLITICAL REPORTING: THE CASE OF HWANGE TOWN IN MATABELELAND NORTH PROVINCE, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The research study sought to unveil the nature of media polarization and the effects it has on political reporting with special reference to Hwange town in Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe. The study also sought to find out if political issues in the area under study are given adequate coverage on the media platform. The study utilized the qualitative research approach and the descriptive research design. The target population was the reading public of the two main daily newspapers which circulate in Hwange town and stratified sampling was used to come up with a sample of 20 (N=20) readers. Questionnaires were the main research instrument complemented by the researchers in harmony with the qualitative research approach. From the data collected, the study discovered that media polarization has adverse effects on political reporting because newspaper readers no longer have faith in the media because stories in the papers are always biased and do not reflect the truth about what is happening on the ground. The study also revealed that the area under study does not get adequate coverage of political issues because it is a largely a mining town and that there are no media offices and personnel assigned to the area. The study then recommended that there be more media houses like community newspapers that will cover political issues concerning Hwange. In addition, media houses need to be apolitical and stick to their core-business of information giving without bias and that Journalists need to go back to their journalism ethics and report issues objectively and truthfully in order to correctly inform their audience.

Key words: media, media polarization, audience, politics, information, press.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Media plays a key role in informing the public and delivering all types of news related to development in different spheres of life including economic, social and political. Media is often thought of as mirroring society and that

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society itself holds certain views that are dominant in day to day living. It has a strong social and cultural impact upon the society and because of its ability to reach a wide spectrum of people in the society; it is widely used to convey information as well as to build public opinion and awareness. Since media is said to have a strong social and cultural impact upon the society, it is, therefore, important for media to consider political reporting important. Media (newspapers, radio, television, other modern technologies and so on) are a part of culture and the modern society. In the same vein, Kraidy (2002) notes that the media plays a key role in the globalization of cultures. In countries of high media density, there is no aspect of society in which media has not had an impact.

1.1 Background to the Study

The concept media is generally fluid in meaning, but largely refers to various means of communication using different mediums (Haralambos and Holborn, 2005). For them, media are agencies that in reporting events, also propose certain frameworks for the interpretation of those events, moulding or structuring the audience's consciousness in ways that are socially and politically consequential. They are not apart from social reality, passively reflecting and giving back to the world its self-image. Media is part of social reality, contributing to its contours and to the logic and direction of development via the socially articulated way in which they shape our perceptions (Bennett, 2008).

The power of media lies in its function to convey information. The media, and in particular, the news media has long exposed political and corporate scandals. Not only have major heads rolled of these expositions, but they also led to policy changes as well as started global conversations on topical and key issues. It is widely accepted that media are transmitters of culture and engines behind globalizing cultures. It is through media that many cultural trends have achieved global prominence. This is particularly the case with social media; a type of media led by Internet-based social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

Media can empower people particularly the marginalized and vulnerable groups. This can be through information-sharing that helps them to understand their local as well as global context for the purpose of changing it. Media also plays a vital role in empowering the society. Empowerment in this context implies that a population is well- informed and able to convert information into meaningful knowledge and expertise for its transformation and societal development. Media can be polarized depending on a media house's stance on certain issues. In many cases, this polarization is of a political nature with a media house aligning its editorial policy to suite a

certain political ideology. Polarization has been one of the dominant themes in discussions of US politics in recent years and the rise in partian polarization has been well documented by the scholars(Bennett, ibid).

The key role of the media according to Happer and Philo (2013), is to provide information to all citizens, and by so doing, serve the interest of the public. People rely on media for information that pertains to development and it is also expected of the media to provide information to the government of the day on what development projects need to be done and are in place. The media also plays a key role in holding public officials accountable, hence, is expected to be the neutral link between government authority and the public. It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to interrogate the nature and effects of media polarization on political reporting with reference to the town of Hwange located in Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Media in Zimbabwe, both private and public owned, print and electronic have largely been accused of biased reporting. Publicly owned media are said to serve the interest of the government, serving the status quo; whilst private media has been accused of serving the interest of a few business elites and that of the neo-liberal Western sponsors. One of the roles of media is to aid development programmes as it should carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy. When the ruling party embarked on the land reform programme in 2000, for example, local media failed to execute its duties well, the manner in which the land invasion was portrayed by the local media sharply contrasted the role of media as agents of development. State owned media denigrated opposition party as anti-land reform; ill-advised by the Western countries, while the private media vilified the land reform on the basis that most black farmers were incapable of utilizing land to full effect due to lack of inputs and other deficiencies. Both public and private media, therefore, played political roles instead of enlightening the nation about the developmental aspect of the programme. The problem at stake is the effect such media polarization has on political reporting.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to find out the nature of media polarization and the effects it has on political reporting in Hwange District as well as to ascertain whether political issues in the area under study are given enough platform in the media forum; using the Chronicle and the Newsday to gather data. In carrying out this study, the researchers were guided by the following objectives:

- To determine the nature of media polarization in Hwange.
- To find out whether political issues are given enough platform in the media forum.
- To ascertain the effects of media polarization on political reporting in Hwange.

1.4 Assumptions and Setting of the Study

According to the researchers' background, the assumptions of the current study are that Zimbabwe is in a unique situation because the political context within which the media operates has left the media landscape polarized along political and party lines. For example, ZimPapers and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation (ZBC) largely have an editorial policy that is perceived to be lenient to the ruling party, while private media houses are generally seen to be sympathetic to the cause of parties that oppose the ruling party. The division of media in Zimbabwe is somewhat evident; which has caused both the private and public not to execute their duties objectively and to the maximum. It is against these assumptions that the researchers sought to find out the nature of media polarization and what effects it has on political reporting with special reference to the town of Hwange. The town is largely a coal mining town which is located in Hwange District in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The primary significance of the current study was is to inform the media industry and other interested parties about the nature of political reporting in the area under study. In addition, it was anticipated that findings of the this study would establish the effects of media polarization on political reporting which may possibly have direct or indirect implications to other areas in Zimbabwe and some other countries in similar circumstances. The findings and recommendations of the current study may help to curb the effects of media polarization on political reporting in the area under study.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Generally, no country in Africa and possibly other continents is immune to media polarization and Zimbabwe is no exception. Such media polarization in Zimbabwe, for example, has led to the populace being divided along political lines since independence. In Zimbabwe, there are people who support the ruling party while, in reaction to the socio-economic and political turmoil that the country has been going through, the opposition has on the other hand enjoyed growth in support (Mukundu and Ngwenya, 2011). For them, 'the media in Zimbabwe, which

had previously been divided along ownership lines, was for the first time divided along political lines and this manifested itself in the way that issues were covered'. Zimpapers and the National Broadcaster largely reported in support of the ruling party and its policies with little or no critical analysis of government action, while also being consistently critical of the opposition. They were, therefore, bundled under the umbrella of 'the state media'. Independent media houses such as The Gazette, Alpha Media and its properties, as well as 'The Daily News' were largely sympathetic to the opposition cause and critical towards the government and its policies. Consequently, they were labeled 'enemies of the state' by some sections of government (Mukundu and Ngwenya, ibid).

Polarization causes segregation and political conflict in any society as a consequence of the extreme opinions overtime and the high degree of bias of polarized opinions (Mouw and Sobel , 2001). MacCarthy (2007) attributes the rise of media polarization to changes in political or electoral institutions as well as to big societal shifts such as inequality and immigration patterns. While all these factors played important roles, one element which is often mentioned as an important driver of polarization is the role of the changing media landscape. There is growing evidence to substantiate the widespread perception that the introduction of different media technologies has had a substantial impact on political outcomes and on individual views and attitudes on and beyond politics (Stromberg, 2004).

One consequence of media polarization is that consumers will tend to buy publications or view media which aligns to their beliefs; be they social, political, economic or otherwise. This is especially the case in the modern era where there is a plethora of online publications; each with their own agendas and alignment. A reader only needs to avoid certain websites in order to avoid content that is not congruent to their beliefs and orientations. Essentially, a reader of political news, for example, can now curate their own truth, which, more often than not, is in alignment with their political beliefs. Majonga (2006) states that, years behind us have seen the media being polarized to an extent that what has been reported or has not been reported, does not mirror what was really happening. When this happens, readers are often left confused as to what is actual happening, true or false. Barrat and Berger (2007) state that, it is now common in most African countries to see journalists at all levels operating as political party activists and receiving gratification from political establishments. Bourgault (1995) explains that the francophone countries in Africa inherited little in the way of an information press. 'The party papers favoured exhortation and propaganda, there were few trained francophone journalists at independence working mostly for

state papers. Little wonder that these journalists quickly developed a culture of 'propaganda journalism' associated with the African oral discourse style of communication'.

Media Monitoring Project (2008), which in principle claims to be an independent organization which reviews all newspapers and all news and current affairs broadcasts on radio and television noted that following the 2002 Zimbabwean presidential elections, the ZANU PF government strategically completed its campaign to suffocate free media expression in the country by controlling the bigger part of the country's media environment. The media landscape had, until then, witnessed at least some freedom of the Press, if not of the airwaves. Moyo (2010) claims that rather than allow the media to report truthfully on the Zimbabwean story, Zimpapers and indeed the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), were somehow turned into media tools meant to consolidate the ruling party's political authority, while disparaging its opponents as poodles of Western imperialism, who were bereft of any ideology, national outlook and policy prescriptions to tackle Zimbabwe's problems.

The growth of private newspapers in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, especially the establishment of the Zimbabwe Mirror, Zimbabwe Independent, Standard and Daily News, somewhat changed the face of Zimbabwe's media landscape. The state media now faced direct competition from private weekly newspapers as well as the independent Daily News, which soon eclipsed the state-owned Herald as the leading daily and indeed most influential newspaper. The Daily News reached a peak circulation of more than 100,000 copies in 2002; double that of the Herald (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2006). Critically, the growth of the private media meant that the opposition and civil society could now reach significant sectors of the population with their messages, resulting in the ruling elite losing its hegemonic hold on the dissemination of information and reducing its control of political discussions in Zimbabwe. News coverage in Zimbabwe became characterized by a clear divide between the state-owned and private media.

Mazango (2010) claims that, the private press, by its own admission, took the decision to criticize and expose bad governance and human rights violations in Zimbabwe. For this reason, the Zimbabwean government saw the private media as 'enemies' who had a hidden political agenda. Mukundu and Ngwenya (ibid) confirm that, the coverage of the opposition and civil society granted by the privately-owned media also attracted fierce criticism from the government and ruling elite and precipitated a broad and often brutal crackdown.

The public relies heavily on mass media for accessing important information on current events. Majority of media outlets claim to be balanced in their coverage, selecting issues purely based on their news worthiness. However, journalism watchdogs and political think-tanks often accuse outlets of exhibiting systematic bias in the selection process, leaning either towards serving the interest of the owners and journalist, or towards appeasing the preferences of their intended audience. This phenomenon is generally called media bias and has a direct link with media polarization (Adamic and Glance 2005).

Notably, two constructed camps have emerged within the newspaper industry, one that is pro-government and one that is anti- government. These camps have extended their differences to fighting each other instead of focusing on their role as information-entities and defenders of democracy, sovereignty and peace. Kupe (2012) stated that government officials and politicians often have a love and hate relationship with the media. For example, officials rely on the media to help them communicate to the public and build support for candidacies and policies, but they also fear attack or criticism from the media.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using the qualitative research approach. In this study, the researchers used a descriptive research design which is generally concerned with conditions, practices, structures, differences or relationships that exist, opinions held, processes that are going on or trends that are evident (Cresswell 2007). The descriptive research design rendered itself the most appropriate as it allowed the researchers to describe systematically the facts of what was going on in the Hwange media fraternity accurately.

Howard and Sharp (2003) say when conducting research, the first step is to define the population to be studied in terms of its geographical, demographic and other boundaries to decide whether it should be fully or partially covered. A study population or target population, therefore, refers to the group about which the researcher wants to gain information and draw conclusions (Cresswell, ibid). In this study, the target population was the reading public in Hwange District of the two main daily newspapers which are the Chronicle and the Newsday.

Kumar (2011) defines a sample as a subset of the study population from which information is gathered to reasonable estimate something about the population. In this study, the researcher applied stratified random sampling, thus, dividing the participants into two groups, that is, Newsday readers and Chronicle readers. Ultimately, the study used a sample of 20 (N=20) newspaper readers. The main purpose of stratified sampling is

that it is able to achieve a more reliable sample. The researcher calculated the sample size basing on the 10% minimum sample size as advocated by Creswell (2007).

The researchers used questionnaires as the main research instruments to gather information from the readers and consistent with qualitative research, the researchers were also part of the instrument machinery in the gathering of data.

4.0 STUDY FINDINGS

The researchers self-administered questionnaires and the response rate was 100%. From the total of 20 questionnaires distributed, (16) 80% of the participants said they regularly read the Chronicle, (2) 10% read the Newsday and the other (2)10% read other papers. From these responses, the researchers observed that Chronicle has more readers than the Daily News.

Respondents were asked on the nature of the issues covered by the newspaper they read and (16) 80% of the participants who were Chronicle readers, said the paper mostly covered issues that pertain to the ruling party since it is a state owned paper. The participants said that most stories covered have to do with party politics within the ruling party and other opposition parties. They echoed the same sentiments that the Chronicle is affiliated to the ruling party; hence, the reporting was only biased to the ruling party. Only (2)10% of the participants who were the Newsday readers said the paper reported in favour of the opposition parties, whenever they report anything on the ruling party, it was always negative news, news to do with corruption and in-house fighting and factionalism. The other (2)10% of the participants said the papers report on developmental programmes for the nation. From the above results, it is evident that newspaper reports are biased towards the political powers that they are affiliated to. It is also clear that journalists from the different newspapers are not performing the media's duty of reporting on issues objectively.

The respondents were asked about the role of the media. Out of the 20 questionnaires distributed (17) 85% of the participants said that media's role is to inform, entertain and educate the nation while (3) 15% of the respondents said that media's role is simply to educate the nation. They all (100%) concurred that media is used to communicate economic, social and political issues, which basically stressed media as a tool to educate society.

From a total of 20 questionnaires distributed, (18) 90% of the participants indicated that they understand media polarization as division between media houses. Thus, these participants understood media polarization as reporting the same news article but from different angles, the same ideology but reporting that is biased to a certain political party. Participants also said that media polarization is driven by political bias. For example, media houses reported positive news only about the political party they were affiliated to. Only (2)10% of the participants understood media polarization as an exchange of information between media houses. From the results above, it implies that most media audiences (90%) understood well the meaning of media polarization.

Responding to the question on how media polarization affects political reporting in Hwange, (15)75% of the participants said that media polarization causes misrepresentation of issues leading to media audiences not being given political factual news about their own community. There is distortion of news and events, which is contributed by biased reporting and consequently, readers tended to lose faith with newspaper stories being reported. Media polarization has negative effects on the public's attitude on political issues happening in Hwange.(5)25% of the participants said media polarization influences bias amongst the readers at the same time causing confusion as the media houses report the same story but with contradicting views.

Respondents were also asked whether political issues in Hwange were given enough platform in the media. Out of 20 questionnaires distributed, (18)90% of the participants said political issues in the area under study were not given adequate platform in the media platform. Some of the reasons given were that the area is just a mining town and most news from the town will be on coal and electricity matters. For them, that largely explained why it is rare to see political issues reported in the media. The participants added that there is not much political activity in the town and there is not much publicity opposition parties are given in the state- owned newspapers. The participants also said that the other challenge faced by Hwange is that there are no visible media houses in the town and there are no journalists from renowned newspapers like the Chronicle and Newsday. Reporters solicit for news only when there are special events. Some of the participants said that Hwange does not have political figures who are vocal, hence, less is said about the politics of the town. Only (2)10% of the participants said political issues in the area were given enough platform in the media, saying that any political activity taking place in the district is covered in media. From these results, it can be concluded that political issues in Hwange were, at least for the period covered by this study, not given enough platform in the media forum. There is enough evidence to say that the area is not effectively recognized politically by the media hence not much publicity is given on political issues.

From a total of 20 questionnaires distributed,(17)85% of the participants said that media polarization causes biased reporting and division amongst people who support different political parties. Participants said that it causes hatred amongst people including relatives while some said reporting becomes monotonous as the media houses will try to maintain their affiliation to a certain party and that media polarization causes propaganda among political parties which may lead to mistrust among individuals. They also said that media polarization limits public knowledge on information about other political parties, since the newspaper will only report about the politics of a party that it has an affiliation with. Consequently, readers make wrong interpretations on issues because of biased reporting. Only (3)15% of the participants said that media polarization is not a good thing for the country and needs urgent attention from responsible authorities.

From the above results, it can be said that media polarization and biased reporting causes division amongst the audiences or media consumers. The responses revealed that this can also have adverse effects on political issues and news reporting in all spheres of life. Media polarization can cause divisions among the media audience which is generally not good for a nation's prosperity; be it economically, socially and politically.

On strategies that can be employed to curb effects of media polarization on political reporting in the area under study, (16)80% of the participants suggested that journalists need to go back to journalism ethics of reporting objectively, truthfully, honestly and without bias. Participants said that journalists and media houses need to be apolitical and concentrate on their core business which is information giving without fear and favour. There was a suggestion by some respondents on opening of more independent media houses, opening of community radio stations and community newspapers that can adequately cater for political issues that pertain to Hwange as a community. Some of the participants suggested that government should enact legislation that promotes media plurality. The remaining (4)20% of the participants did not suggest anything. From these results, it can be said that media in Zimbabwe needs to change in terms of their reporting. They need to gain back the trust that they have lost from their audiences by reporting objectively and truthfully about all political and other issues affecting the day to day living of the people.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

From the data collected, the researchers generally concluded that media polarization has impacted negatively on political reporting in the area under study and that political reporting is not given enough media coverage. There

is clear evidence that media is not very active in the town because there are hardly political stories about the area from both the state-owned and the independent newspapers.

More specifically, the researchers concluded that:

- Most respondents regularly read the Chronicle more than the Daily news in the area of Hwange in Matabeleland North province in Zimbabwe.
- The majority of the media audience understood what media polarization was and how it affects political reporting
- Almost all respondents shared the same sentiments that media polarization had a negative impact on the political reporting in the area under study.
- The area under study is not very recognized politically, hence, very little is reported about politics.
- There is no much political activity in Hwange that warrants news to be reported in the media.
- The major effect of media polarization is that people will be misinformed about events happening in their own community
- Hwange town is largely recognized for coal and electricity production, hence, politics is not given adequate coverage
- Newspapers are generally biased towards the political parties they are affiliated to causing media to be polarized in as far as political reporting is concerned.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

With reference to the above findings and conclusions, the researchers arrived at the following recommendations:

- The area under study needs newspapers' correspondents who will report on political issues that pertain to it as well as to the entire district.
- Opening of media houses such as community newspapers and community radio stations in the area under study will possibly promote effective political coverage of the area under study.
- Media houses need to be apolitical and stick to their core- business of information giving without bias.
- Journalists need to go back to their journalism ethics and report issues objectively and truthfully in order to correctly inform their audience
- Future research is recommended in as far as it will answer the effect of media polarization in other areas
 of reporting other than political reporting.

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