



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension  
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom  
15 & 16 February, 2007  
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**CIRCUMVENTING THE CENSORS**

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My media experience is purely Zimbabwean, but I'm sure that my experiences are common to many countries.

What I know for sure is that it is possible to circumvent censors, to some degree, but you have to be incredibly determined and it helps to be extremely well funded. Without money you are not going to be that effective.

Zimbabwe is one of the most repressive media environments in the world – you are fighting a regime that has the support of the army and the police, is totally determined to hold on to power and it can print as much money as it needs.

And we're not talking about censors as the west imagines censorship – this is censorship to deny you the right to even show any curiosity in another political party. This is censorship that leads to mass human rights abuses, murder, torture, rape and general human misery on a grand scale.

So how do you fight the bad guys?

You need to use a combination of old and new media. You couldn't do it just with new media – we're talking about a country that's being dragged back into the stone age. But there is still much that you can do.

We started off five years ago broadcasting on shortwave into Zimbabwe. Sadly the regional countries were not amenable to hosting us so we had to set up in the UK. A little reminder that repressive governments continue to exist because they often have external support.

We were very successful in reaching a wide audience in Zimbabwe for the first three years. We also streamed live through our website, which was specifically set up to cater to the estimated 4-5 million Zimbabweans who have fled their country and are living outside the footprint of the shortwave signal. Programs are also archived for two weeks to cater for listeners in different time zones.

The website was created with the knowledge that hardly anyone in Zimbabwe has broadband and connections are extremely slow. It hasn't changed from when I left in 2001, when I would connect to say the BBC website and go and run a bath, wash my hair, have supper and then maybe the first page would have downloaded.

So although our website is created primarily for the diaspora it does have reduced image files for easy download. We also stream at two different speeds so that in Zimbabwe it is possible to listen without too much of a buffering problem.

And the site is used in country. We had reports of a woman who ran a bed and breakfast facility in the capital Harare. When you came down to breakfast you found the daily state controlled Herald newspaper, plus our website stories, printed out and stapled together like a newspaper.

We also transcribe key interviews and these are widely circulated by us, and by others who send them on to their mailing lists.

We obviously have very good software protecting our site, so we don't know if it's been deliberately targeted by the regime.

One of the many repressive laws promulgated in Zimbabwe a few years ago was to do with the internet. Internet service providers have to give the CIO, Mugabe's secret police, access to an individual's emails if requested. The penalty for non-compliance is two years jail. It's impossible to know if email observation is effected on a regular basis, but it does mean that people emailing in Zimbabwe are quite paranoid, and fear is the most effective means of controlling a population.

In 2005 we had our first problem with our shortwave broadcasts, courtesy of Mugabe's friends the Chinese. They supplied him with rather extensive jamming equipment and we believe personnel were sent to China for training. It effectively blew us out of the water completely. But again the jamming is focused on the main cities, in many rural areas we are still clearly heard – and the jammers need time off so they don't work weekends. We do.

Last year the jamming equipment was upgraded and now targets us and Voice of America, who broadcast a daily Zimbabwe focused program on medium wave and three shortwave frequencies. A radio ham friend in Zimbabwe sends us jamming reports and he swears you can hear them cranking up the jammer and as it hits full power, the lights dim!

We could circumvent this jamming with multiple frequencies – but that's a serious amount of money that we can't get our hands on.

So - to get around the problem we recently started providing a new service – sending news headlines into Zimbabwe, via SMS.

Zimbabwe has the problem so many other third world countries has, when a government is intent on stealing resources it puts nothing back, so you have few telephone land lines. This has created a huge boom in the mobile industry

– and Zimbabweans truly love their mobile phones. Even in poor rural areas there will be many people with mobiles.

As we already generate news headlines for shortwave and internet broadcast, it made sense to find other ways to spread this information. And it's a nice easy model for an additional donor. One cost, the text messages, which doubled two weeks after we started as government, who controls the gateway, increased the charges. It wasn't targeting us by the way – it was targeting an independent mobile phone company.

The challenge is of course, what is the financial model for this? Zimbabwe has an inflation rate of over 1,500% - people are desperately poor and becoming poorer by the minute – they can't subscribe to an SMS service. At the moment we're building our free subscription list and sending SMS messages to about 1,800 people every day – and this is growing at the rate of about 50 people a day. As long as someone wants to give us chunks of money we can grow this to as big as we like. Any big donors listening, please feel free to give us lots of money.

The other challenge is to précis the complexity of Zimbabwe's news stories into 160 characters, including spaces.

It's an incredibly popular service, and as Zimbabwe goes into complete meltdown, it couldn't be more important.

We've also just started podcasting. This has been something of an experiment and we could only do it because an old friend is providing this service for us for free. We've had about 2,000 downloads in the past two weeks. So surprisingly popular.

I think the moral to the story is try absolutely everything you can to circumvent the censors and don't give up. But there are pitfalls and it's been interesting to see the large number of news websites created by Zimbabweans in the diaspora – the problem is that few of them generate their own news. Many do a cut and paste job or create stories out of rumours, and we have found that we have to be very careful with information from some of these sites.

We've spent five long years building our credibility and making sure our listeners trust what we tell them – and as the regime begins to collapse and the in-fighting in the ruling party becomes more intense – deliberate misinformation is often fed to the media by various political factions and it can be quite easy to get it horribly wrong.

You have to travel the high road. There are so many people who work hard for press freedom and to bring information to people who are denied it. And there are so many different ways of doing this now. But I get very disheartened when I read that Google has caved into China, that Yahoo is responsible for a political activist being jailed, that Microsoft and Cisco Systems give into pressure and that China has signed an agreement with Skype to block key words.

The issues are too important and people can die in this war. So when the 'good guys' do this – then I want to find another planet, in a galaxy far, far away.