

Pirates free up the airwaves

With private radio stations banned, brave reporters go to great lengths to gather news

SALYM FAYAD

THIRTY minutes before a meeting, Tendai Makumbe calls twice to change the gathering point to a different location in central Bulawayo. He seems to enjoy the secrecy of his job and, when possible, sprinkles his narrative with dramatic twists. He describes his tactics: before getting home, he will have to take the long way along the back roads; when in the city centre, he keeps a low profile; when on the phone, he speaks in code.

Tendai is a reporter for Voice of the People (VOP), one of a handful of independent radio stations that broadcast in short wave in Zimbabwe, using transmitters located in other countries.

John Masuku, executive director for VOP, explains that they "cannot run private radio stations from Zimbabwe because it would be against the broadcasting laws".

Set up in Harare in the year 2000, VOP sought to provide Zimbabweans with an alternative view of the news to the one offered by the government-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC).

In 2002 VOP's offices in Harare were bombed, but two months later Masuku and his team resumed their activities, operating from colleagues' homes and from inside their cars.

In 2005 they were arrested for broadcasting without a licence, but in court they argued that the transmitter they were using was owned by Radio Netherlands.

"We were released," says radio editor Maria Mataruse, "but after those disruptions we had to look for another venue to start operating".

Radio VOP's production stu-

dio has been functioning from Johannesburg since.

All the content for the programme, however, is gathered and generated in Zimbabwe. The rural areas in particular are the main target audience for VOP and at the same time the primary source of information.

Villagers from the Midlands Province say that community and security issues in the villages are rarely covered by the ZBC and even official newspapers have little, if any, distribution there.

"Besides," says Prince Mlangeni, reporter for VOP, "government supporters in these areas are very hostile to independent media journalists, because they accuse us of spreading negative news about the ruling party."

Just the suspicion of being a supporter of the opposition or critical of the government, he says, makes them a target and subject to harassment.

Mlangeni says he cannot identify himself as a journalist in the villages, especially when dealing with political issues.

"Everything I do must be kept as secret as possible."

He argues this is not only key to gathering information, but also in protecting themselves from potential assaults.

"You don't identify yourself, you don't use your real name, you cannot produce any recording equipment, and you don't travel by car; you just pretend you are like any other person who lives in that community or that you are just passing by."

Following this strategy, some of these independent radio correspondents have become masters of disguise. Lawrence Biti is the VOP reporter in Mashonaland West, President Robert Mugabe's home province, and



ELECTION TIME: Voters are held back by security personnel as they await the opening of a polling station in Harare during the 2008 election. Independent media will be crucial as the country prepares for a new poll. Picture: REUTERS

he changes his name and identity as he changes clothes.

If there is research to be done at a farm, Biti blends in wearing a blue overall. Sometimes, in the villages, he is a fruit vendor or a taxi driver. Sometimes he is an old man with a walking stick. If notes need to be taken, he pretends to be completing the crossword in an old newspaper, or sending an SMS.

"Normally I use a cellphone to record people's voices and another phone to safely record my broadcasts. I send the files separately to the production studio in Johannesburg and they edit the story".

Biti says he sends his stories via the internet using USB

modems, but this also represents a challenge, since the connection is frequently unreliable and, according to him, the use of internet cafes is too risky.

"You never know who is watching you," he argues.

Alone in the bush with his cellphones and laptop, Biti files

'Government supporters are very hostile to the independent media'

his stories. "Many of us work for the so-called mainstream media as well," says Makumbe, "so sometimes we are able to send our stories from the comfort of our offices. When we are work-

ing in the villages for independent radio, we must be very discreet when we deal with political issues," since the private radio stations are not licensed. As the sun rises over the village in the heart of the Midlands Province, Victor fiddles with the tuner of his radio

accusations that they are sell-outs... We also know when food aid and ARVs are being delivered in the village [by NGOs]."

Victor moves his radio around the house trying to tune into the faint voice of the presenter coming out of the speaker, drowned by the exasperating noise of static. "No news today; it's too cloudy", he sighs as his solar-powered radio dies away.

But cloudy skies are not the only obstacle news must overcome. When they receive the files from their stringers, Mataruse and her team edit the programme in VOP's production studios in Johannesburg.

Then the programme is sent to Radio Netherlands, from

where it is sent to their transmitter in Madagascar, and from there it is finally broadcast in short wave to the Zimbabwean audience: an estimate of 600 000 listeners, according to Masuku.

Radio VOP and other independent stations declare that they are not aligned with any political party. "We are not partisan in any way," says Tedious Chamboko from Radio Dialogue.

"As a community radio station we are interested in representing the views and lives of the people of the community, their struggles, their joys, strengths and weaknesses."

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supporters of the opposition because, with few exceptions, their broadcasts are loaded with voices of MDC party members.

According to Mataruse, most Zanu-PF members refuse to be interviewed by VOP, alleging that they are an illegal station.

Aware of the difficulties many rural families have in purchasing radios or batteries, NGOs have distributed free solar-powered short wave radio sets.

But some communities have been terrorised for listening to illegal broadcasts, and hundreds of radio sets have been forcefully confiscated by "politically aligned gangs".

Radio Dialogue is registered officially as an NGO, which allows it to have offices in Zimbabwe, even though to broadcast its programmes it must use a transmitter in the United Arab Emirates.

Radio Dialogue limits its field of action to Bulawayo's urban perimeter. "We are out there," says young presenter Chamboko. "We distribute T-shirts and Radio Dialogue parapher-

nal, flyers, hats. We do live broadcasts from the streets and we have an arts festival."

The communication strategy is also multi-dimensional. Radio Dialogue's programme is broadcast on short wave, but podcasts are also available from the Zimbabwe Community Radio website.

Alternative means of broadcasting have made it a well-known station in Bulawayo. Some of their programmes are put on tape and CDs to be distributed among the community.

They are visible on Facebook, and they have an SMS and phone service which people can call and listen to 60 seconds of headlines.

Radio Dialogue listeners say that ZBC focuses on issues affecting Harare, and does not include their own views.

The station "allows us to express our particular needs; things like the lack of service delivery and the poor state of the roads in some areas," says a Bulawayo resident.

According to the station's editor, Zenzile Ndebele, they have no actual figures about the number of listeners, but they receive feedback from the audience through letters, SMS, emails and phone calls.

"The landscape of press freedom is changing in Zimbabwe," says Chris Mhike, a representative of the Zimbabwe Media Commission.

"We have issued more than 12 licences to private publications since April 2010, but there is a specific body dealing with broadcasters, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe."

He admits that this body "has not been very functional", and until it starts issuing licences independent radio stations will continue to be considered by the government as "pirate stations".

VOP reporter Mlangeni reflects on why radio is so heavily controlled by the state. "They know that radio is very powerful. There is no way you can see people in the rural areas reading a newspaper every day, but radio is very easy to tune in to. Even the lazy ones can listen to radio."

Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the sources.



THE POWER OF ART

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei throws porcelain sunflower seeds into the air as he poses for a photograph with his installation entitled 'Sunflower Seeds', at its unveiling in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern gallery in London last year. On Thursday, China criticised a UK-based contemporary art magazine for naming the dissident artist as the art world's most powerful figure, saying the selection, based on 'political bias' runs contrary to the magazine's principles. Ai, whose 81-day detention earlier this year caused an international outcry, topped ArtReview's 10th annual 'Power 100' list, which was published this week. Picture: REUTERS

Book questions 'mythology' of First Crusade

FOR a thousand years the idea of the Crusades has defined nations and empires, has justified wars and acts of terrorism and inspired everyone from medieval minstrels to Ridley Scott.

But is all that potency built on a misunderstanding? New research suggests that the campaign known as the First Crusade was not a religious war, and was not started by the Pope and was not about regaining Jerusalem — it was a result of local difficulty in modern-day Turkey.

According to Harvard University Press, a forthcoming book by British historian Dr Peter Frankopan is "countering nearly a millennium of scholarship" by emphasising the overlooked

eastern origins of the Crusades.

Frankopan, director of the Centre for Byzantine Research at the University of Oxford, said "something is not right" with the traditional version.

This has maintained that the First Crusade was a product of the Council of Clermont in central France in 1095, when Pope Urban II called on the faithful to free Jerusalem from occupation by the Muslim Turks.

The Pope's evangelism was prompted by news of atrocities against Christians by the Turks.

The speech electrified Europe and helped to raise an army of between 80 000 and 90 000 men, 30 times larger than the Norman force that had conquered Eng-

land a generation earlier.

Within four years this expeditionary force had conquered Jerusalem. Frankopan argues the story doesn't ring true because "Urban II in a field in central France is not the right place to start". Christians had lost control of Jerusalem in 637.

Instead, the timing of the First Crusade owes everything to the domestic politics of Constantinople, known today as Istanbul, then seen as the capital of the surviving Roman Empire.

His argument is based on a reading of Caucasian, Jewish, Arabic and Greek sources that had been overlooked by previous historians.

They revealed a "crisis in the [Byzantine] Empire" in the second half of the 11th century.

Emperor Alexios Komnenos, who was facing a series of revolts, including a plot by his family to assassinate him, opened negotiations with Pope Urban. The Pope was struggling to assert authority over a rival Pope backed by Henry IV of Germany. Their common cause led to Clermont.

For Frankopan, the First Crusade was not a religious war, but a "targeted expedition against the cities of Nicaea and Antioch", two former Byzantine possessions that the crusader army swore to hand over to Komnenos.

Jerusalem was just a carrot.

Frankopan claimed the Crusade mythology that emerged was a result of what happened next. Some Norman commanders refused to hand over the conquered cities to the emperor.

To justify this course of action, and a subsequent attempt to launch an expedition against Constantinople, they embarked on a propaganda war of "horrific vilification" against Komnenos and his empire.

Urban successfully used the recapture of Jerusalem to cement the power of his papacy and Komnenos was written out of the historical record. *The First Crusade: the Call from the East* will be published in February. — © The Times, London

Marked cards gang bust

IT WAS an uncanny streak of luck, with the three Italians making all the right calls at the card table. If the croupier had a good hand, they folded. If he had a bad hand, they bet big.

But French police believe there was nothing lucky about it — and the players now stand accused of using special contact lenses to see invisible ink on marked cards, in what commentators say is one of the cleverest scams witnessed in Europe.

Detectives believe the gang may have employed the technique in casinos across the continent before they attracted unwanted attention in Cannes.

"At first we thought they were using cameras, but we didn't find anything. Finally we realised their strategy involved using contact lenses," a police spokesman said.

The alarm was raised when the Italian players won €44 000 (\$60 564) in an evening playing a form of stud poker against the croupier in the Princes Casino on the French Riviera. When they returned to the same table this week, they made a further €20 000 (\$27 529) within a few hours.

But staff recognised them and called police. Further investigation revealed invisible marks on the back of the cards being used. A cross indicated a

king, a line meant an ace — information that gave the three an unbeatable edge.

The men were all wearing contact lenses which had been treated so they could read the invisible ink, said prosecutor Jean-Michel Cailleau.

The Italians and two alleged French accomplices were being held on suspicion of "committing fraud in an organised gang". They face a maximum sentence of ten years' jail if found guilty. One of the Frenchmen arrested is believed to work for the casino and is suspected of having slipped the marked cards in. — © The Times, London