Communicating environmental sustainability in the Zimbabwean press

By

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September 2007

Abstract
The paper analyses the apparent and latent features of environmental reporting in the Zimbabwean press. It argues for critical environmental reporting in the local press by discussing the worsening state of the natural environment across the country. Using two national weekly newspapers as sites of study, the paper also discusses the complex web of organisational and extra-organisational forces, filters and drivers that impact on environment news construction and determine the level of coverage observed.

Main body: 1,970 words

1 This paper is based on the findings of research carried out by the author in partial fulfilment of the Master of Arts degree in Communication and Media Studies at the University of Zimbabwe, 2006.
http://envirocom.wordpress.com/environmental-reporting/
**Introduction**
The natural environment represents an important reservoir of economic, social and cultural resources for the people of Zimbabwe yet it is currently suffering from unsustainable exploitation. With the majority of Zimbabweans, both urban and rural alike, directly deriving their livelihoods from natural resource extraction, environmental sustainability is a major concern in the country.

However, despite evidence of widespread environmental degradation, the press in Zimbabwe has been less than enthusiastic in taking up environmental issues as a sustained category of reporting. Except in cases of environmental catastrophe, environmental issues have lagged behind other societal concerns in establishing themselves on the media agenda. The press is duty-bound to provide relevant, timely information on the state of the environment, educate society on good environmental stewardship and promote sustainable practices. It should provide a bridge between environmental experts, policy makers and the public in efforts towards sustainable natural resource exploitation. To do this however, coverage of environmental issues in the press has to increase in quantity and improve in quality.

This paper examines environmental reporting in two Zimbabwean newspapers\(^2\) for the period 1 May 2005 to 30 April 2006. The paper also discusses the organisational and extra-organisational forces, filters and drivers that impact on environment news construction and determine the level of coverage observed.

**Zimbabwe’s environment**
Economic development, industrialisation and urbanisation in the past century have seen Zimbabwe transform from a completely rural society to a complex country whose ties to natural capital remain strong across the rural-urban dichotomy. Most of the country’s urban settlements are concentrated around areas of economic activity. Based on natural resource exploitation such as mining and manufacturing, activities in the urban centres have combined with rapidly increasing populations to exert unprecedented pressure on natural resources. Urban residents generally consume more renewable resources than rural people thereby placing heavy demands on the environment (Chenje, M et al 1998, p.25). The urban population is projected to increase at a rate of five to six percent yearly.

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\(^2\) *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* are the two leading national weeklies in terms of readership, commanding 42 and 17 percent of the urban readership respectively, according to figures from a 2005 Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey.
which is six times the national average population growth rate (GoZ/UNDP 2003, p.36). The burgeoning urban population generates large volumes of chemical and biological waste, resulting in pollution and health problems, especially reduced sanitation, as urban planners and managers battle to meet the upsurge in demand for basic services. According to many commentators the proliferation of unplanned urban settlements is the root cause of many environmental problems and the urban environmental management conundrum in Zimbabwe.

With more than 69 percent of Zimbabwe’s population living within communal areas in the rural districts, the inequitable distribution of land inherited at independence in 1980 has led to problems such as high population densities, high rates of soil erosion, deforestation, land fragmentation into uneconomic units, low productivity, overstocking and resultant overgrazing (Chenje M et al 1998, p.21). Environmental degradation in the rural areas is largely a result of increasing land shortage and poor management practices, poverty, a skewed land tenure system as well as climate change with its attendant extremes of droughts and floods. These factors have combined to cause rapid desertification, loss of bio-diversity and decreasing productivity.

For decades the landownership system was environmentally unsustainable as it led to disproportionate pressure on natural resources. Some areas were sparsely populated with very little pressure on land and other natural resources while in some areas population densities were very high, resource exploitation excessive with little or no environmental management.

A fundamental policy response to the land distribution problem has been land reform (Murombedzi 2005). Land reform has gone through several phases in post-independence Zimbabwe, beginning with the market based land acquisition resettlement programmes in the early 1980’s, through attempts at compulsory acquisitions of the 1990s, to the fast-track land reform phase that began in 2000. Paradoxically, while land reform has attempted to address the problems of overcrowding and inequality, it has also precipitated a new and catastrophic ecological challenge in previously under-utilised and protected areas where farmers with limited knowledge of environmental management have been resettled (Manzungu 2004). Due to poverty, exacerbated by successive droughts, and lack of training in resource management, wildlife poaching,
deforestation and stream bank gold panning among other environmentally unsustainable practices have reached alarming levels (Wolmer et al 2003, p.8).

**The press in Zimbabwe**
Currently the mainstream press in Zimbabwe consists of eight weeklies and two dailies. Among these, the weekly press allows for in-depth coverage of issues, as there is greater space for research and investigative journalism. There is also a greater likelihood that journalists at a weekly can go out of their immediate surroundings to cover environmental stories ‘on site’ as they are not constrained by the 24-hour cycle in operation at daily papers. This is often critical for comprehensive environmental news reporting. Both *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* carry news from all provinces of the country and offer space in which environmental issues can be covered either as hard news, feature articles, analyses or editorials.

**Environmental reporting in the press**

**The apparent features**
Newspapers are commercial products and the stories they carry are intended to sell the paper. Among the news items published, certain stories are considered most likely to maximise sales and these are often placed on the front page of the paper. Careful examination shows that environmental issues seldom make it to the front page of both *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*. Comparative analysis shows that political stories are eight times more likely to appear on the front page of *The Standard* than are environmental stories. Crime stories are twice more likely to make the front page. Similarly, at *The Sunday Mail* political issues are four times, and crime twice more likely to make the front page than do environmental issues.

For stories on the inside pages, a hierarchy exists and various techniques are used to guide the reader towards the lead story on the page. These include the use of bold typeface, large font size, the use of visual images and whether the story appears at the top, middle or bottom of the page. Using a scheme drawn from these techniques to identify the lead story for each inside page it emerges that political stories still eclipse

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environmental stories in assuming lead story status inside the newspaper. However, environmental stories at both papers assume higher prominence inside the paper than crime stories which tend to be shorter, albeit in larger numbers.

Pictures are a potent way to enhance visibility of a story and capture the attention of the reader. At the same time however, their use is not always determined by perceived importance of the story itself but sometimes by what the picture brings to the story. Analysis of the differential use of pictures for different newsbeats shows that environmental coverage is characterised by a significant use of photographs. Environmental issues have a strong visual appeal and coverage exhibits a propensity to contain highly illustrative visual images. Further, there is a tendency towards the use of stand-alone pictures to portray various environmental concerns, perhaps lending credence to the journalism maxim: ‘a picture is worth more than a thousand words’.

Among environment stories the popular format is the hard news story, which emphasises reports of recent events. Hard news accounts for 67 percent of environment stories in The Standard and 62 percent in The Sunday Mail. By their very nature environmental issues evolve slowly and rarely are they well served by the hard news format. Environmental issues arise out of complex interplay between individual and institutional practice and the interface between these and their surroundings. As such they require multidimensional analysis that cannot be accommodated in a typical 600-word hard news story. Seldom are environmental issues covered in the more appropriate feature or analysis story format. Consistent with local findings, research from elsewhere shows that much of environment news coverage in the press is event-centred hard news (Anderson 1997, p.21).

Environmental news stories are seen to belong one of a number of themes. Themes are broad classificatory areas used by reporters to tell a story about environmental phenomena in ways that the audience will easily understand. The ‘safe water and sanitation’ thematic category dominates environmental coverage, accounting for 49 percent of environment news in The Standard and 42 percent in The Sunday Mail. Perhaps not surprising given the persistent and worsening water supply and sewage problems in the country’s urban centres. Other themes commanding appreciable coverage include climate, biodiversity conservation, human habitat, energy and environment related health concerns.
The latent features

Before news stories make it into the paper, the issue must first make it onto the media agenda. The media agenda is the hierarchy of importance ascribed to different issues by a news organisation. The agenda at a news organisation is limited in capacity and there is fierce competition among stories for space. We can think of issues as rising or falling on the agenda or competing with one another for attention and this process is essentially a zero-sum-game (Dearing and Rogers 1996, p.3). What determines whether environmental issues make it onto the media agenda in the local press is a complex interplay between the influence of issue proponents, proprietary power and its influence on the value judgments of gatekeepers, exposure of the issue in other media, spectacular news events, extreme events that may result in disaster, and sometimes evidence of environmental processes.

Gatekeepers include the various editors at a news organisation who select and process the stories that ultimately get published. In their work gatekeepers are guided by the editorial policy, predetermined news values, that is, what makes a story newsworthy, the commercial imperative and their perception of the target audience’s informational needs. Social issues compete with each other for the media’s attention. It is the duty of the gatekeepers to decide what is news among the multiplicity of the contending issues. Reporters’ choice of stories to pursue is highly influenced by what the reporters think will go through the ‘gates’. Gatekeepers maintain that without compromising their editorial independence, they must necessarily pander to the wishes of advertisers and the socio-political worldview of their proprietors. Thus environmental stories are rarely value free. Gatekeepers also contend that locally environment issues are largely regarded as a special interest category rendering them commercially non-viable for the popular press.

Where environmental news makes it into the paper, the issues are circumscribed by frames of reference that also define their newsworthiness. Most environment stories fall within the related frames of risk, uncertainty, fear, outrage and crisis. Environmental coverage is characterised by heightened fear of impending consequences of evolving environmental processes. Coverage is often risk-led and based on anxieties concerning threats to health posed by major incidents or disasters. Within a news story these frames are operationalised by the use of scare words or phrases, the use of certain contextual references, the choice of pictures, and reference to certain sources, among other textual devices.
The type of story can also be used as a framing device. Reporters avoid writing lengthy articles based on complex research and instead resort to covering environmental events and breaking news of disasters only in terms of the statistics: loss of lives, lost revenue or magnitude of rescue operations. In attempting to simplify for the audience they also ensure that their stories get past the selection processes. This lends the environment beat to the hard news format, a frame that does not fully communicate the multidimensional nature of environmental issues and processes.

**Conclusion**

Despite the clear urgency for increased reportage and discussion of environment and sustainability issues in the country’s media, coverage remains low. Chief among reasons for this neglect is the commercial imperative of newspaper publishers. Reporters are not motivated to take up the challenge of environmental reporting citing the adverse attitude of gatekeepers to environmental issues. As a result when they do get coverage environmental issues are rarely covered adequately, and in educative and informative ways.

**References**


