

## The Poverty of Reporting Poverty: Coverage of the MDG Story in Zimbabwe Press

Mugari Z. E.

Faculty of Social sciences, Department of Media and Society Studies,  
Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

### Abstract

*The issue of poverty attracted international policy attention around the time when the UN system named it number one and the bedrock of its eight millennium development goals (MDGs). Putting in motion strategies to reduce poverty necessarily contributes towards attainment of the other MDGs and vice-versa. This puts the fight against global poverty irrevocably on top of both media and policy agendas internationally. Global initiatives such as the Making Poverty History Campaign were launched with much media fanfare. But how mass media are expected to contribute to the global effort to end poverty has continued to be at most ambiguous and unclear. A report compiled by Panos London titled "Making Poverty the Story sought to draw policymakers' attention to the challenges involved in reporting poverty. The way the media frame the poverty issue will have an influence on how the issue is understood and on attitudes towards the issue thus contributing towards the realisation of the goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2015. On the face of it media are regarded as useful as long as they fulfill their normative role as purveyors of information and education in the public interest. Existing literature points to the media as having some influence on our perceptions of reality and our attitudes to it. Using content analysis, this paper explores how the story of MDGS has been reported in Zimbabwe's press from when they were first proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000. It arrives at the conclusion that the poverty story is either not a story or when it filters through journalistic treatment it conforms to stringent dictates of news values, requirements of credibility and an inbuilt appeal to elite sensibilities that the first casualty of the poverty story are the poor themselves. When journalists do poverty stories, what treatment they give them in terms of framing, angling and sourcing limits the repertoire of response options available. It is the contention of this paper that although the state controlled media and the privately owned media differ in their approach to reporting poverty, they both frame their stories in ways that are least likely to contribute positively to global and national efforts to end poverty. The poor are much more likely to become history by their absence in the news than for actual poverty to be defeated by 2015.*

**Key words:** Reporting poverty; Milenium Development Goals; Stereotyping; Framing

*No major famine has ever occurred in a functioning democracy with regular elections, opposition parties, basic freedom of speech and a relatively free media' (Amartya Sen 2009, p. 342)*

## Introduction

In the year 2000 world leaders from 189 United Nations member countries met on September 6-8, at the UN Headquarters for what was dubbed the Millennium Summit in New York USA to review the relevance of the world body in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The outcome of those deliberations was the Millennium Declaration document in which world leaders made a firm commitment to redouble their efforts to end extreme poverty by incrementally tackling the drivers of poverty such as social inequality in access to income, health and education. This commitment later crystallised into the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. At the UN Millennium Summit the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called on the world leaders to “act to reduce extreme poverty by half, in every part of the world, before 2015”. He challenged “experts and philanthropic foundations to tackle low agricultural productivity in Africa” and went on to urge “African governments to give higher priority to reducing poverty, and the rest of the world to help them”, (Millennium Report of the United Nations Secretary-General 2000: 2).

Although no clearly stated guidelines or obligations for the media could be reasonably inferred from the Secretary General’s speech nor from any of the MDGs themselves journalism’s own professional standard and commitment to truth-telling would of necessity entail that reporters would report on poverty or more generally on progress towards the attainment of the MDGs as 2015 approached and by doing so contribute to the global effort to end poverty. By reporting the way they do and framing the poverty story in one way or another journalists exercise immense influence on attitudes towards the issue. As de Vreese (2005: 51) argues, “one influential way that the media may shape public opinion is by framing events and issues in particular ways”. This article problematises the widely held assumption that the media innocently reflect reality whether it be about poverty or any other social reality. It contends that media actively construct both those realities and more importantly the readers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the events they report on mainly through the way they frame reports on those events. Development journalism or professional watchdog journalism as reflected in news stories on MDGs and poverty would probably frame poverty issues in different ways with different implications on policy action and approaches towards tackling poverty.

The point of departure here is the argument that media doubly affects the course of an event by reporting on it as well as by the particular way they report on it, the way they framed or characterised it in the process of reporting on it. This is especially important if the theoretical assumption that “how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences”, holds true, (Dietram A. Scheufele<sup>1</sup> & David Tewksbury 2007: 11). While there is a broad

consensus on the importance of framing theory in news reporting, little is actually known of how at an empirical level such an important issue as poverty eradication in the context of the millennium development goals was actually framed in local news reports by media in Zimbabwe.

Objiofor (2009, p. 40) makes the case against distortions and stereotypical depiction of African realities in reporting Africa by foreign news agencies precisely because such information drives perceptions about Africa, its diverse cultures and subsequently the direction of foreign policy towards the continent. He maintains that: '...portrayal of Africa in Western media has consequences not only for how Africa relates with the world but also how the world understands, perceives and engages with Africa'. Where there is an absence of accurate information about the true nature of a problem such as poverty, governments and policy makers actions are akin to those of a dog who seriously and purposefully chases after the fleeting shadows when all the while the actual butterflies may be flying unmolested just a whisker above its coked ears. In such instances the dog catches neither the shadow nor the butterfly if it continues careering in this fashion.

### Methodology

This article combines both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of articles dealing with poverty issues published in the Zimbabwean press during the period under review. The articles were sourced from the Zimpapers Library at Herald House in Harare. *The Herald* newspaper morgue was chosen mainly because *The Herald* happens to have the longest undisrupted history of publishing as a national news-daily from when it was established in 1891, and as such it also has developed one of the best and most reliable archiving systems where articles on any given subject of interest published in any of the different newspaper publications in the country are thematically filed and archived. The researcher extracted a file of articles archived by *The Herald* newspaper library under the heading Millennium Development Goals. The file contained a total of 144 articles published between 30 August 2000 and 14 October 2010 in 10 different newspapers and these were quantitatively analysed to establish general patterns and trends in covering the MDGs and poverty issue. This was done to establish by way of numbers of stories how much attention each paper gave to the subject, how those stories were dispersed across any given year and across the entire period. The decision to confine the search specifications to news stories filed under MDGs was informed by the fact that stories on MDGs were most likely to refer to different aspects of poverty and how governments committed themselves to tackling poverty in one way or another. Out of the 144 total, 26 articles were purposively selected for closer textual analysis to identify the patterns of framing, sourcing and discursal strategies deployed in the stories.

## Framing Poverty

Different theoretical perspectives about journalism and its relationship to society on whom and for whom it reports have implications on the role and conduct of journalists in mediating reality. A general claim that different journalisms will make is that their function is to gather, process and publish the news by which they mean reliable accounts of significant events, conditions and persons of interest to the public, McQuail (2008, p. 48). The above claim which journalisms of every hue are wont to make in conceptualizing their function translates to different journalistic practices leading to different news offerings in different contexts precisely because as Willems (2011, p. 5) argues, 'events are not newsworthy in themselves but only become "news" when they are selected for inclusion in news reports'. So, the buck stops with the news traditions and news cultures within which the news is produced. The selections, the salience given to some aspects of the news events but not others, the inflections and slants given to issues being reported on impose on that news story a preferred interpretive frame which tends to limit the range of possible interpretations possible on the reported news event. Chuma (2005: 6), and Norris, Kern and Just (2003: 11). understand framing as referring to the way news stories 'select to prioritise some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events'.

Events of themselves may not mean much if reporters did not impose an organising idea around which to make sense of the issue. "By virtue of emphasizing some elements of a topic above others, a frame provides not only a way to understand an event or issue" in terms of cause and effect relationships among the events but also most importantly suggest reasonable courses of action to take to remedy the situation. (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 3). It is in this regard that framing analysis becomes important in establishing the extent to which the coverage of an issue such as a country's performance on MDG indicators helps or hinders progress towards their attainment.

Poverty as an issue gains news significance only when journalists deem it as such. Denis MacQuail (2008) distinguishes four normatively different journalistic orientations as liberal, developmental, communitarian and public interest journalism and these may be relevant in analysing the coverage of poverty in Africa in the past decade. A common limitation in existing literature on journalism production in Africa is one that attempts to pigeon-hole evolving and largely indeterminate forms of journalism under one or the other of the rubric of the four normative theories of the press, (Siebert et-al 1956). This in a way may lead to a misrecognition of and failure to give a nuanced interpretation of communication realities of African experiences which avoids essentialising it, (Nyamnjoh 2010,

p.21). Most African governments in countries like Zimbabwe which adopted a socialist ideology at independence were broadly viewed as tending to espouse a broadly Soviet socialist conception of journalism as partner in development where good journalism was viewed as one that played an instrumental role to foster development and serve the national interest as defined by the political leadership. Journalism was expected to willingly submit to government directives on what to report on and how. The reality on the ground was far more complex than that. There were tensions in various directions in different newsrooms in the same country depending on whether the newsroom was owned and controlled by the state or was owned by private local or international capital and these tensions eased or intensified at different points in the history of each country in sympathy to social economic and geo-political dynamics. Hence, it would be more productive to avoid straight jacket analysis when parsing news output on such an important subject as poverty in Africa. One newsroom's approach to doing poverty stories may tend towards an 'objectivist, neutrality' pornography of poverty. Another may tend to understate the incidence of poverty on the continent as part of a strategic commitment to counter a perceived tendency in foreign news media to interpret African realities solely through the prism of negativism. They argue that neutrality has no place at the site of ideological struggle such as is characteristic of societies in transition, (Carpentier 2008, p. 69). Yet another newsroom may be impelled to make the poverty story sexy in response to market imperatives or simply ignore it as not newsworthy given the fact that poverty often strikes at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy.

### **Media against poverty**

Amartya Sen (2009, p. 339) makes a compelling case for the role of the media in fighting poverty particularly famine and starvation when he argues that:

The Bengal famine of 1943, was made viable not only by the lack of democracy in colonial India, but also by severe restrictions on reporting and criticism imposed on the Indian press, and the voluntary practice of 'silence' on the famine that the British owned media chose to follow. The combined effect of imposed and voluntary media silence was to prevent substantial public discussion on the famine in metropolitan Britain, including in Parliament in London, which neither discussed the famine, nor considered the policy needs of dealing with it.

Put differently occurrences of famine and abject poverty may in fact be reliable indices of a faulty public information and communication system in the affected society. And to prevent recurrence it may be a matter of high priority to reform the way the media and communications sector operates. Images of famished

children dying of starvation would never appear on our television screens in the first place if the media performed their normative surveillance role and rang the alarm bells early enough to enable governments to deploy preemptive strategies to avert the impending disaster. The pornography of poverty type of reporting would not arise in relation to reporting Africa if in the first place there were no structural constraints to the liberty of the media to inform without distortion and to hold power holders to account for their actions.

### **Flaunting Africa's Poverty**

On arrival on the Zimbabwean side of the Beitbridge Border Post, while one patiently follows the perpetually long queue into the Immigration Offices for immigration clearance procedures one is struck with the variety and innovativeness of approaches in the public display of destitution. Others sing Christian hymns with begging bowl or metal cup in hand, others probably too poor to carry any accessories and too tired and hungry to sing just extend an empty hand at you praying and supplicating (Ndinokumbirawo rubatsiro hama dzangu) "I'm begging for alms my brothers and sisters" as they follow the winding queue from one end to the other, all in an effort to appeal to the wayfarers' consciences to relent and drop only part of their change into the begging cup. Some do others simply turn to look on one side. But on a good day one may return home with handsome daily takings. There is political economy to it too. Stories abound of well-off relatives fighting over 'ownership' of such unfortunately circumstanced people.

*The Daily News on Sunday* (July 3, 2011) carried two stories on the poor, one, an opinion piece on the Editorial page attributed to Bishop Desmond Tutu under the headline, 'Promise to the poor is sacred', and another on the Analysis page titled, 'More vulnerable children on the streets'. The first one served as a mild criticism of those members of the G8 countries like Italy and France for reneging on promises they signed-up to, at the famous Gleneagles Summit in 2005 to help the poor. The second was a feature story about Harare's street people and their plight as they eke a precarious existence on the streets of the city, children with their own children strapped on their backs or in their arms stand at robot controlled street intersections and weave dangerously between cars begging from one motorist to the next. The story which carries a picture of orphaned children at a children's home or orphanage eating what looked like porridge look obviously well fed and decently clothed than the sordid picture the narrative of the story paints of life on the streets of Harare.

Story number three was a story carried on the front page of the state controlled weekly paper, *The Sunday Mail* of July 17-23 2011, under the title "President comes

face-to-face with street-kid". The story though not given lead status was given prominence by placement on front page and also carrying the lead and only picture on that page. The story though says very little about the harsh realities of street life and what the President would do for this particular case but the story then veers off into the positive beneficitation of government policy of education for all embarked upon in the early eighties and the good that has come of such prudent leadership provided by 'His Excellency, President Mugabe, who is also the Head of State and Government and Commander in Chief of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces', and his ZANU-PF lead government. The picture used for the story happens not to be of the President coming face-to-face with a street kid named in the story as Felix Mugumo, as suggested in the headline, rather as the caption states it is that of the Junior President and his deputy shaking hands with the President as they present him with a lifetime achievement award during a session of the Junior Parliament held at the Harare International Conference Centre.

These three stories carried in the local press contrast very greatly with the story the *CNN* ran intermittently on its news bulletins on 21, 22, 23 July 2011, focusing on famine in Somalia, draught in the Horn of Africa. That running story, of course only momentarily lost its breaking news status to the more dramatic terrorist attacks in Oslo, Norway. Here we had a story supported with video footage of Somali Refugees who have travelled many kilometers sometimes on foot to a refugee camp in Kenya in search of food aid. The story shows pictures graphically depicting suffering humanity, emaciated, malnourished children, men and women under-clothed, distraught parents burying their youngest daughter just died of starvation. The narrative talks about victims of misgovernance at the hands of Islamist militant group known as Al-Shabaab who control that part of Somalia where the refugees have come from. The four different scenarios above underscore the importance of the way journalism frames issues in shaping public responses to and decision making on public policy.

The public display of one's poverty for gain, turning the state of lack into a livelihood strategy by flaunting it raises questions about commitment to eradicate poverty. It is about assessing the profitability of poverty, publicized or otherwise. Veit-Wilson (2005, p.1) holds that: "Not everyone really wants to abolish poverty. ... the affluent most of all, benefit from other people's low wages and from their own low taxes". He goes on to posit the thesis that humanity's failure to abolish poverty stems less from lack of know-how or wherewithal than from fear of political ramifications on power relations. Eradication of poverty would necessarily entail a radical rethinking and reconfiguration of power hierarchies both at national and international levels. Thus most well-meaning members of the human species will be content with taking meaningful steps to mitigate the impact of poverty than to work towards its total eradication.

Public exhibition of poverty to excite pity even where the victim has agency in deciding when and how the public display is enacted raises broader questions of relations of power between those with access to different livelihood options and those with limited options. The issue becomes more pertinent where the poor lack such agency in determining the manner and purpose of the publicity of their poverty and vulnerability. In each of these cases the poor are forced by circumstances beyond their control to appear in public with all the shame it entails. Adam Smith's definition of poverty as the lack of means to appear in public without shame may need to be extended here to fully capture the powerlessness often attendant to the condition of abject or extreme poverty as represented by the prodigious work of photo journalists in objectifying and indelibly inscribing African famine in our collective memory at the turn of the century. The effect of that imaging of poverty, hunger and starvation all done in line with the highest professional journalistic standards of objectivity and commitment to truth telling has been making Africa synonymous with chronic famine. Such pictures as the 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of the vulture stalking a famished African child crawling towards a feeding point and many more pictures of starving and emaciated women and children in Somalia, Ethiopia, Niger, senseless genocidal carnage in ethnic conflict in Rwanda, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and the Darfur Region of Southern Sudan and elsewhere in Africa, are often celebrated as the best in photo journalism premised on the sanctity of facts and the free and unfettered flow of information and expression. Such pictures objectify the victims of poverty as powerless even to prevent having to appear in public in that state of "nudity" with all the shame attendant to it. There are many who would argue that the positives of such unsanctioned publicity outweigh the negatives. It awakens the international community to its obligation to intervene through the outpouring of charitable aid giving (Chouliaraki 2008), examples include the Band Aid of 1995, and the Make Poverty History Movement of 2005. Both movements managed to put some pressure on western governments and individuals to realize they had a cosmopolitan citizenship obligation to intervene by taking some concrete actions towards addressing the issue of third world poverty. Humanitarian Aid organizations depended on the global circulation of such graphic pictures of disaster and distant suffering to mobilize resources for humanitarian intervention. In the absence of such pictures it would possibly have rendered the task of invoking that cosmopolitan disposition in the spectator to empathise with and to act to mitigate distant suffering that much more difficult (Chouliaraki 2006). At an ethical level the media responsible for putting that information and those pictures of 'reality' out there is defensible on the grounds that they had done no more no less than what was professionally and ethically right, giving out a 'true' and undistorted reflection of reality as disinterestedly and dispassionately as a deontological duty to truth telling demanded. From this perspective then it would seem plausible to argue that journalism only needed to fulfill its normative role of educating and



informing the public by producing factually accurate and balanced reports of events to contribute effectively towards efforts to end poverty. In this view journalism's role then as MacQuial (2008) points out, should be confined to bearing witness, to observing the events and circumstances of the world without seeking to change it, and to "reflect this reality as accurately as possible and to convey an account to a potential audience".

Complications often arise however, where such media images of human suffering become the defining metaphor for particular geopolitical zones - and Africa has been one fine example of this - to such an extent that disaster, conflict, poverty, hunger and starvation become synonymous with such places, Traore R. 2007, Ogunyemo O 2011, Michira J. 2002, and Ndangam L. and Kanyegirire 2005). Critics point out that though such negative portrayal of Africa mainly in western news media was defended on the basis of 'actuality' it somehow elided the contexts, causes and background processes so critical to understanding and interpreting the events accurately. A reading of the facts devoid of their proper historical, social and processual contexts would only serve to entrench the old condescending ethnocentric western attitudes toward Africa largely discredited as responsible for Europe's unilateral and colonial intervention on the continent in the name of a humane 'civilizing' mission of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Traditional News values with their preference for event based reporting as opposed to focusing on processes and structures that produce those events and with a preference for drama and action rather than slowly evolving situations with no opportunity for a "good picture" would tend more to conceal instead of revealing how these events may have their roots and origins in broader societal struggles for power and domination. Africa's encounter with Europe in the past few centuries has taught her one lesson, that to justify Europe's uninvited intervention in the continent, Africa and its people had to be depicted as other than human, the Dark continent, Nyamnjoh (2011). This school of thought further points to the impossibility of ideologically innocent mediations of African reality in the context of unequal power relations between the affluent North and the impoverished South where Northerners are often the Subjects and Southerners Objects of such mediations. Under this characterization Northern anthropologists and journalists are accused of either, deliberately exaggerating the scale of poverty in Southern countries as a pretext to justify humanitarian intervention and through it to undermine the sovereignty of Southern governments in order to effect regime change or symbolically annihilating the victims of such suffering through media silence or obfuscation of symptoms for causes. Even the outpouring of 'philanthropic aid' that flows into the continent in the wake of such public exhibition of suffering distant others is viewed with suspicion as not value free but responsible for generating counter-flows of aid benefit in the form of natural and labour resources back to Europe.

Another criticism for such “neutral” facts based reporting of “objective” reality of poverty in Africa, it is argued, perpetuates a mindset of victimhood and thus disempowers the recipient of aid. It reinforces rather than problematise the old colonial imagery and metaphors of Africa as the perpetual child, backward and hopelessly in need of European guidance, metaphors that justified the first wave of Africa’s colonization. The fight against poverty it is argued should not obviate the picturing of Africa in its nudity because pictures of poverty are inescapably pictures of humanity undressed. And in a compromised situation, it is pornographic.

‘The most prevalent approach to development awareness and fundraising in the past frequently referred to as the “pornography of poverty”, aimed to induce emotions of pity and guilt on the part of potential donors through images and descriptions of material poverty and images of helpless ‘others’ in the global South. ... the term describes images that portray people in the South as helpless, passive victims in need of assistance’, (Cameron and Haanstra 2008: 1476, 1477).

Major criticism of the pornographic representations of poverty according to Cameron and Haanstra (2008), Jooma (2006) was the fact that it obscured the real political and structural forces responsible for generating and sustaining poverty in the South in the first place by focusing on the suffering as isolated events unconnected to processes.

This debate raises the question about what it entails to do poverty stories in the interest of the poor themselves. What role should journalism play in the global fight to eradicate extreme poverty? How can journalism contribute to making poverty history not in the limited sense of eschewing giving poverty pornographic publicity but in the positive sense of reducing its incidence globally? The task of answering these questions becomes the more complex to resolve given the fact that there is not just one unvarying conception of journalism and what it entails out there. Forms of journalism can be as varied as the socio-political contexts within which they are practiced, (Seibert and others). These are the questions this paper engages with specific examples of how issues with a bearing on the Millennium Development Goals in general and the goal to halve the number of people suffering from hunger and extreme poverty have been covered in Zimbabwe since 2000. Major criticism of the pornographic representations of poverty according to Cameron and Haanstra (2008), Jooma (2006) was the fact that it obscured the real political and structural forces responsible for generating and sustaining poverty in the South in the first place by focusing on the suffering as isolated events unconnected to processes.

## Discussion of Results

In terms of volume and basing on the assumption that other poverty stories may still have been filed under different titles other than focusing on those anchored on MGDs it is difficult to determine whether the level of coverage given to the issue of poverty eradication during the period under review was adequate or not. Such a determination would only be possible where there existed an agreed standard against which to measure the media performance. The poverty MDG story was not evenly distributed throughout the year nor was it evenly distributed across the 11 year period. When analysed cross-sectionally it became clear that stories on poverty and MDGs tended to cluster around the month of September each year with fewer stories towards both tail-ends of the year. When analysed longitudinally a pattern emerges where most stories clustering around 2000, 2005 and 2010. Looking at the distribution patterns of the poverty/MDG stories during the period under review one can reasonably conclude that watershed UN Summits focusing on the MDGs constituted important media events around which journalists could anchor their news stories on poverty. Without such mega-media events poverty on its own as a story idea would probably not have attracted as much media attention in the local press.

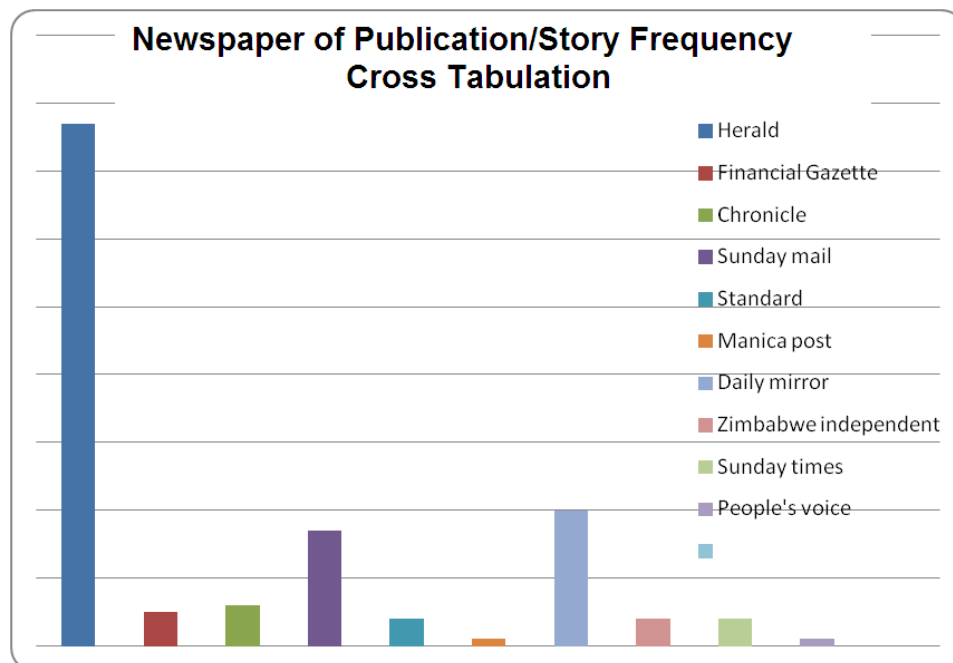


Figure 1 comparative frequency of story publication in Newspapers

The above chart shows that state controlled newspapers (*The Herald; The Chronicle; The Sunday Mail; and the Manica Post*) lead the way in terms of number of stories published and filed under the theme, a total of 101 stories. One likely reason for this may be that reporters from these newspapers are always assigned to accompany the President as part of the official presidential entourage and are expected to file reports covering the entire duration of the president's stay at the UN Summit. Their counterparts from the privately owned press did not enjoy similar treatment as they were generally viewed in ZANU-PF government circles as the 'enemy press'. Another possible factor may be that the privately owned press was more market driven and hence made editorial decisions based on what sells the paper to their most prized market, an urban readership with a disposable income to purchase the wares advertised therein. The poverty story may therefore be deemed less appealing both to the advertiser and target reader.

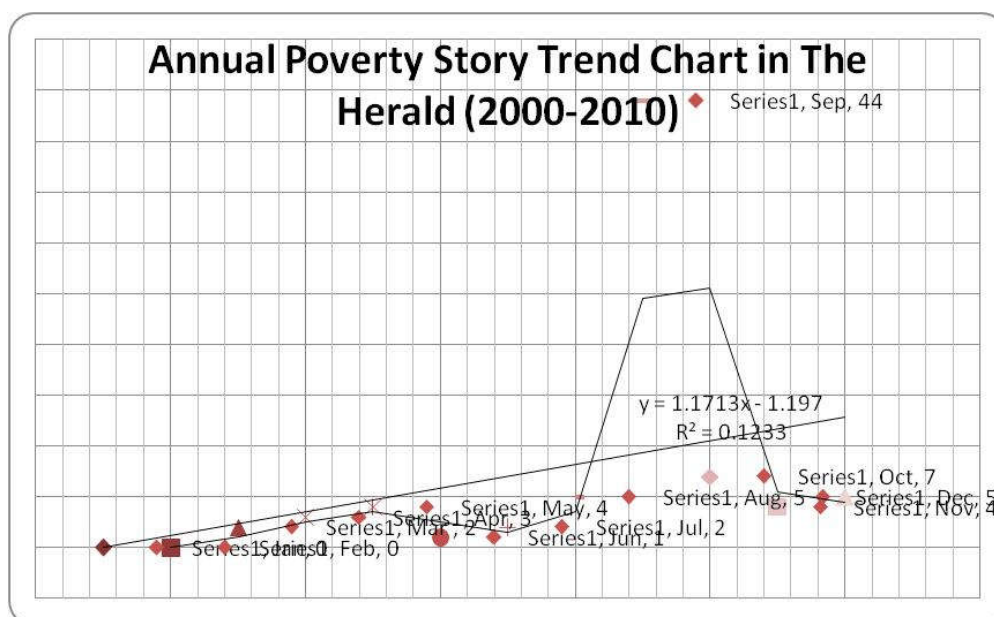


Figure 2 Scatter Diagram for stories across the year

As the trend Chart above indicates at *The Herald* stories dealing with the subject of poverty but linked to the MDGs were not evenly spread out during any one year. The frequency of stories tended to start off very low from the beginning of the year then rising steeply towards a peak around September mid-month and to tail off steadily towards the end of the year each year during the period reviewed.

The librarian at *The Herald* newsroom morgue had been archiving stories on the MDGs since the United Nations General Assembly issued a declaration committing

themselves to pursue these goals in 2000. Interesting patterns of fluctuation emerge when one simply counts the numbers and dispersion of the stories over time. There is a heavy concentration of stories each time world leaders converge on Washington DC annually to mark the anniversary of the inaugural summit of the MDGs around mid-September each year. And then the stories taper off and become sporadic during the rest of the year.

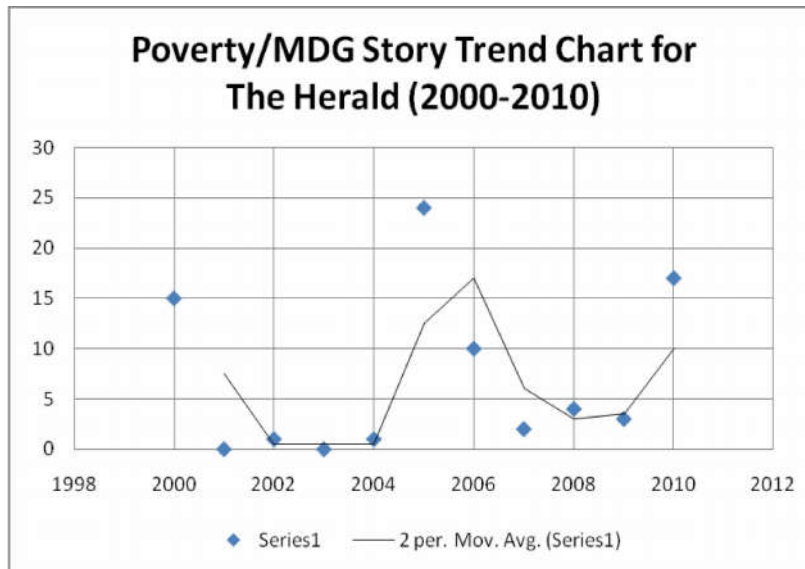


Figure 3 Scatter Diagram for stories in *The Herald* across 11 years

Figure 3 above shows a very consistent pattern of the local press getting its own agenda set for it by global events such as those involving the UN system and its agencies. When the UN puts millennium development goals on its agenda for discussion as it did in 2000, 2005 and 2010 then the stories on the theme of poverty also peak. The local press echoes the ebb and flow of the debates on its own pages albeit giving it a local flavor. Poverty becomes worth reporting on by association with elite organizations as when it carries a UN tag, political elites and celebrities like Bob Geldof, Bono etc.

### Discourses on poverty/MDGs

The framing of the selected stories could largely be divided into two broad interpretive frames. MDG stories in the state press largely deployed various aspects of the imperialism thesis to frame the stories blaming the South's lack of progress in achieving the MDG targets on a predatory global capitalist system and an unfair

international trade regime skewed in favour of the developed northern countries and against the underdeveloped world. In the Zimbabwean case the MDG stories published in state controlled press (*The Sunday Mail, The Herald, The Chronicle and the Sunday Times*) appear to be used as platforms to launch diatribes, criticising and attacking perceived enemy countries and their leaders in the international community. Leaders of the United States of America (George W. Bush) and Britain (Tony Blair and subsequently Gordon Brown) were particularly singled out for vitriolic demonisation and blaming, with a tinge of racial overtones, for all the economic decline experienced by Zimbabwe in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> millennium in the wake of a political fallout after a government takeover of former white owned commercial farms for redistribution to landless blacks. The causes of economic ills in Zimbabwe are explained away as resulting from natural disasters such as recurrent draughts, and floods on the one hand and unilateral economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by western powers. One such story titled 'Sanctions hurt MDGs: President' (*The Herald*, September 22, 2010) orchestrates the victimhood of southern countries at the hands of imperialistic and interventionist policies of western governments towards southern countries like Zimbabwe. The intro sets the tone by foregrounding sanctions as the main obstacle to Zimbabwe's efforts to achieve its set MDG targets. The story begins: 'Zimbabwe's efforts to meet its Millennium Development Goals have been pinned back by the illegal western sanctions on the country, President Mugabe has said.' the sanctions scapegoat is exploited to exhaustion throughout this and other similar stories as it is impressed on the reader's mind that: 'because of the illegal and debilitating sanctions imposed on the country, ... the incidence of poverty in Zimbabwe remains high, the government of Zimbabwe has been prevented from making a positive difference in the lives of the poor, the hungry, the sick, the destitute... the country's best intentions were being undermined by its enemies.' In such stories there is no room for self-reflexivity or introspection. Zimbabwe's problems are foisted on it by external Others. The same edition of the paper also carried the president's full speech delivered at the UN high-level Plenary meeting on the Millennium Development Goals titled, 'Let's walk the talk on MDGs: President'. Apart from repeating the same tropes of criticism of western governments for Africa's falling behind on MDG targets almost bordering on racial slur the most prominent feature of the story was the landscape picture of the President behind the podium with the UN logo. Impliedly, the most important message this story tells beyond substantive issues about Africa's performance on MDGs and poverty is to place the President's 'unquestioned legitimacy as the sole representative of Zimbabwe on a pedestal beyond contestation by political rivals back home. The story seems to suggest more than anything else that Mugabe is still in charge in Zimbabwe. Another story headlined, 'Poverty eradication a priority: President', published in *The Herald* (September 9, 2009) continues with the same theme of emphasizing Mugabe's political leadership in all developmental issues including the fight against

poverty. The President's own political interests are represented as the teleological terminus of every Zimbabwean's aspirations and dreams. In all these stories poverty itself is very much kept in abeyance, its victims and their condition are conspicuous by their absence. The President, or his peers at the UN General Assembly and reports by elite global institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF etc are the main sources for almost all the stories, providing the reader with the official perspective on issues of poverty. Of the stories published in the state controlled press which were analysed in this study, not a single one reports about the poor and their experiences or gives a human face to the story of poverty. The focus is on what government is doing or is being prevented from doing to address what are perceived to be the poor people's concerns from above. The President becomes the embodiment of the poor people's aspirations for the good life and therefore best placed to articulate these. The poor's own views are not given space. The poor lack what Barnett A. et-al (2007, p. 298) calls symbolic power to name their world:

The concept of symbolic power refers to news media's reliance on socially dominant groups who can intervene in unfolding events and influence the framing of issues and the actions of other groups in society. Exercising symbolic power is linked to economic and social privilege where dominant groups are able to enforce their representations on others

Other headlines that seem to reinforce this reading include: 'President in New York for UN Millennium Summit' (*The Herald* September 5, 2000), 'President back from summit', (*The Herald* September 27, 2010), 'Developing countries spit venom: UN Summit outcome document torn apart' (*The Sunday Mail* September 25, 2005). The propaganda strategies of most of these stories become apparent when one considers the political backdrop of global media bashing and battering of Mugabe's image abroad, isolation by the 'international community' (a euphemism for a US/UK global hegemony) and a fierce fight for political survival at home throughout the period. Instead even pro-establishment media like *The Sunday Mail* could still have written poverty stories in a way that contributed to putting suggestions on the table on for example how sanctions were hurting international efforts to reduce poverty among ordinary Zimbabweans or on how western governments may have abdicated on their duty and responsibility on aid giving and the quality of aid given.

The enemy press on the other hand also missed the opportunity to do stories that showed how weak accountability mechanisms in government may be contributing to the entrenchment of poverty. The poverty/MDG stories cease to serve the role of enlightening the reader about what governments are doing to eradicate poverty rather they provide the only opportunity there is for the media to praise or bash the person of the president Mugabe. In this context every story regardless of the

bit becomes part of the ideological ammunition in an all-out war against western imperialism and their conspiracy to 'recolonise' Zimbabwe or against Mugabe's perceived dictatorial government.

A theme that runs through most of the stories and is also cited as one of the major structural causes of chronic poverty in most countries of the South is the inequitable distribution of power in the international system resulting in the bullying of smaller nations by big ones. The poverty/MDG story thus provides contextual fodder for a counter-attack on perceived unilateralism by powerful nations in the affairs of weak nations. Most of the MDG stories . in state controlled press are published each year around the time of the UN general assembly meetings at which heads of states including the Zimbabwean President have an opportunity to an international audience. In the context of the waning political support base at home the United Nations General Assembly Summit meetings on MDGs present a rare opportunity for the local captive press to recast the President as a revolutionary politician of note on the international arena standing shoulder to shoulder with counterparts in the South such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Ahmadinejad of Iran and the Jamaican leader Percival Petterson. The MDG story is generally an uncritical presentation of the President's address at the UN, an exercise in the political dusting, polishing and rehabilitation of President Mugabe's political image. This approach to reporting poverty is consistent with a developmental journalism ethos whose raison-deter is mobilizing the citizenry behind the nation building project. , rather than harping on the leadership's failures

The privately owned press on the other hand framed Africa's poverty as an internal problem resulting from poor, irrational economic policies and weak governance structures and a political culture of repression, unresponsive to and unaccountable to the citizenry. The lack of progress in achieving MDGs is couched in terms of a discourse of bad governance and lack of inbuilt mechanisms of institutional checks and balances, ineptness and a general breakdown of the rule of law. One typical story published by *The Standard* (September 18, 2005) a privately owned weekly paper had the following headline: 'MDGs, a pipe dream for Zimbabwe', captures a sense of hopelessness and a bleak future for Zimbabwe's poor. It even carried a picture of a destitute Zimbabwean street vendor whose livelihood had been reduced to selling mice as a means of earning a living. The caption of the picture: ' Battling poverty ... Ackim Hari of Harare sells mice for a living', when read in the context of a 'credible' analysis of the poverty situation in the country attributed to a University based counter elite intelligencia or political analysts presents a very bleak picture of the Zimbabwean situation. The main sources, two University of Zimbabwe political analysts and a UN Commission for Africa, and the Zimbabwe Millennium Development Goals progress report all concur on their diagnosis of



the deteriorating condition of Zimbabwe's poverty situation and its causes, concluding that:

it was impossible for Zimbabwe to attain 2015 MDGs target under the current economic and political dispensation, being a pariah State, Zimbabwe does not have the capacity to generate funds needed to attain the goals. ... This has been attributed to unplanned policies such as the chaotic land reform programme of 2000 and more recently "Operation Murambatsvina", which rendered 700 000 destitute without sources of livelihood, throwing thousands of pupils out of school.

*The Financial Gazette* (November 9, 2006) carried a similarly very negative report on Zimbabwe's performance on MDGs in the form of an editorial comment titled: 'Cry, the beloved country' the editorial comment citing a World Bank report released recently also fingers poor government policies as largely to blame for what it describes as a bleak outlook for Zimbabwe. The comment puts the blame on what it describes as irrational and ruinous policies for Zimbabwe's never ending woes. The report also concludes that Zimbabweans go hungry 'because of the failure of several years' harvests owing to a poorly executed land reform exercise,' and even goes further to suggest that Zimbabweans now look back at the turn of independence – an era of surplus and security – with a deep sense of nostalgia'. The remaining articles published in the privately owned press which generally claims to play a watchdog, fourth estate role on government paint an equally pessimistic view of the African situation with headlines such as: 'MDGs: Africa faces uphill task', 'Region makes slow progress in reducing hunger: report', 'Most African countries will miss millennium goals – IMF'. The reports generally construct foreign aid policies of global Aid agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank the G8 as benevolent towards Africa but place the blame for lack of progress squarely on African governments who are held responsible for conflicts and civil wars, inappropriate economic policies and governance problems that stall growth and economic progress. Africa here is again framed as a victim this time not of external enemies but a victim of a corrupt African elite in political leadership, a leadership from whom Africa must be saved. Africa is the perpetual child badly in need of a saviour and a guiding hand from outside the continent. This trope feeds into established benefactor/beneficiary epistemes according to which Africa is represented in western media as the recipient of the West's outpouring of mercy and philanthropy, (Alhassan 2009; Chouliaraki 2009).

Again, it is important to note the absence of poor people's voices in all these stories which are clearly based on elite opinion contained in official reports of research arms of elite institutions and an official line on issues of poverty. On a comparison the state controlled media and the privately owned press arrive at diametrically

opposed conclusions in their diagnosis of the nature of the poverty problem in Africa, its causes and possible solutions. The former largely explains the problem as a relational one, in terms of how Africa has been and remains disadvantageously inserted and integrated into the global capitalist order and that the solution thus lies not in reforming the domestic political systems but in reforming the geopolitical relationships in the international system. The latter represents the problem as internal to and inherent in the nature of African governance system itself which badly needs to be transformed if the poverty issue is to be seriously tackled, as Ake (2000: 160) puts it, "the problem is that the typical post-colonial state in Africa is perhaps even more than its colonial predecessor literally an instrument of oppression".. In doing the poverty/MDG story the one takes a developmental journalism approach which it understands as implying a journalism practice beholden to and acting as an appendage of the government of the day or the opposition party of the day. The other considers itself as the independent press watchdogging over holders of political power. Both however, in doing the poverty/MDG story tend to incline towards a news ideology that privileges elite interpretations and officialdom albeit of different establishments so that when taken together, the overall picture presents a yawning gap when it comes to the poor people's voices so that there is a deafening silence of the marginalised poor who in most parts of Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular constitute the majorities. But mainstream media logic of a hierarchy of newsworthiness minoritises, 'economically and socially disadvantaged groups' denying them 'a voice regarding issues affecting their lives', (Barnett et-al 2007, p. 208), (Mann 2001). This has serious implications about media facilitation and affordances for citizen participation in democratic and development processes and to 'correct current injustices of representation means recognizing the voices of the poor, those excluded by mainstream media,' and bringing the poor back into the stories about their plight, (Couldry 2008, p. 18).

## Conclusion

This investigation set out to find out the level of coverage the issue of Millennium Development Goals received from local newspapers in Zimbabwe. It especially sought to find out how journalists framed the story concerned with the fight to eradicate extreme poverty. The way journalists frame any issue they report on is important as theory posits that framing influences readers' attitudes towards an issue by defining what the problem is, diagnosing the causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting what the remedies should be.(De Vreese C. H. 2005) The content analysis established that on the whole the poor themselves hardly featured in the poverty story. The state controlled press framed the poverty issue as mostly caused by the western powers' imperialist designs and Mugabe's government and by extension Zimbabweans as victims of a ploy to recolonise the country. The privately owned press on the other hand framed the issue of poverty

as a clear manifestation of misgovernance on the part of the Mugabe government and in the process missed the opportunity to bring out the structural issues behind poverty and suggesting practical ways to tackle the problem.

Given the above illustrated trends of stories about the poor the prospects of making poverty the story in the local press would require a sea change in current journalistic ideologies, practices and orientations that privilege elite sourcing, views and interpretations, (Manning 2001). The trenchant of this old paradigm with officialdom becomes all the more evident particularly in the Zimbabwean press system which is increasingly being remade in the image of its 'alien' progenitor - the colonial press. Like its predecessor whose professional journalists in the then Rhodesia, according to Hills (1978) rarely ventured beyond Salisbury's (now Harare) bars and Government press-releases, it publishes from the capital city for an urban readership, it publishes in the language of 'civilisation' (English) not in the language of first socialization for most of the ordinary poor people who continue to live where they have always lived in geographically marginalized rural areas. With a press corps like that who hardly ever stray from the rail or tarmac, come 2015 and beyond, unless the UN draws up another set of goals to give a new salience on the relationship between media and poverty there are few grounds for optimism that poverty could soon become history not because it has been abolished but because according to current standards of journalistic excellence it will have been deemed unnewsworthy.

## References

- Ake, C. (2000). *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, Dakar, CODESRIA
- Alhassan, A. (2009). "Telescopic Philanthropy, Emancipation and Development Communication Theory", Carlsson U. *Nordicom Review Media and Global Divides* Goteborg, Nordicom.
- Cameron, J. and Haanstra A. (2008). 'Development Made Sexy: how it happened and what it means', *Third World Quarterly* 29(8) :1475 – 1489.
- Carpentier, N. (2008). 'Identity, contingency and rigidity. The (counter-) hegemonic constructions of the identity of the media professional' in *Democracy, Journalism and Technology: New Developments in Enlarged Europe*.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2009). "Global Divides in Transnational Media Managing the Visibility of Suffering" Carlsson U. *Nordicom Review, Media and Global Divides*, Gotebog, Nordicom

- Chouliaraki, L. (2006), *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, London, Sage Publications Ltd
- Chuma, W. 2005, *The Crisis of Framing a Crisis: The Sunday Times on Zimbabwe*, London CAMRI, University of University of Westminster.
- Couldry, N. (2008). 'Media and the Problem of Voice', in *Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on content Creation*, Carpentier N. and De Cleen B. (eds) UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Hills, D, (1978). *Rebel People*, London, George Allen and Unwin.
- Jooma, M. 2006, 'Africa in 2006: The humanitarian hangover?' *Africa Security Review* 15.1 Institute for Security Studies.
- MacQuail, D. (2008). 'Journalism as a Public Occupation: alternative images', in *Democracy, Journalism and Technology: New Developments in Enlarged Europe*,
- Manning, P. (2001). *News and News Sources A Critical Introduction*, London, Sage Publications.
- Michira, J. (2002). *Images of Africa in the Western Media*.
- Ndangam, L. and Kanegirire A. (2005). 'African Media Coverage of NEPAD: Implications for Reporting Africa' in . *Africa Media Review*, 13 (1): 41-60.
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2010) 'De-Westernising media theory to make way for African experience', in *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*, Thussu D. K. and Wasserman H.(eds) London. Routledge.
- Obijiofor, L. (2009) 'Is Bad News from Africa Good News for Western Media?' in *Journal of Global Mass Communication*, 2(3/4): 38-54.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*, London, Penguin Books.
- Skjerdal, T. S. (2011). *Development Journalism Revived: The Case of Ethiopia*, Equid Novi African Journalism Studies, South Africa, Routledge.

Traore, R. (2007). 'Implementing Afrocentricity: Connecting Students of African Descent to Their Cultural Heritage' in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(10) :62-78.

Willems, W. (2011). 'Comic Strips and "the Crisis": Postcolonial Laughter and Coping with Everyday Life in Zimbabwe', in *Popular Communication* 9: 1-20, Routledge.

### Online Resources

Barnett A, Hodgetts D, Nikora L, Chamberlain K and Karapu R. 2007, 'Child Poverty and Government Policy: The Contesting of Symbolic Power in Newspaper Constructions of Families in Need', in *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17, pp. 296-312 [www.interscience.wiley.com](http://www.interscience.wiley.com) viewed on June 14, 2011.

Chouliaraki, L (2008) The Mediation of suffering and the vision of a cosmopolitan public. *Television & new media*, 9 (5). pp. 371-391. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21293/> Viewed October 9, 2012.

de Vreese C. H. 2005. News framing: Theory and typology in Information Design. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17, pp. 296-312 [www.interscience.wiley.com](http://www.interscience.wiley.com) viewed on June 14, 2011.

Dietram A. Scheufele & David Tewksbury 2007. Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007) 9–20 International Communication Association Accessed at [http://www.scienze politiche.unimi.it/files/\\_ITA\\_/COM/3-Framing-AgendaSetting.pdf](http://www.scienze politiche.unimi.it/files/_ITA_/COM/3-Framing-AgendaSetting.pdf).

Hudok A. Voices of the Poor Encouraging Good Governance and Poverty Reduction through Media Sector Support [http://www.uneca.org/itca/governance/Documents/MediaSupport\\_for\\_GoodGovernance.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/itca/governance/Documents/MediaSupport_for_GoodGovernance.pdf) Viewed May 24, 2011.

Nash K. 2008, *Global Citizenship as Show Business: The Cultural Politics of Make Poverty History*, Media Culture Society 2008 30: 167 <http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/30/2/167> viewed May 27, 2011.

Ogunyemi O. 2011, 'Representation of Africa Online: Sourcing Practice and Frames of Reference' in *Journal of Black Studies* 42(3) 457–478 available at <http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/42/3/457> Viewed on June 11, 2011.

UN Millennium Report 2000, *We the Peoples—the Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/report/overview.pdf>.

Veit-Wilson J. (2005) Can poverty be abolished? <http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/j.veit-wilson/documents/cap0605.pdf> viewed May 24, 2011.

### Newspapers

*Dailynews on Sunday*, July 3-9 pp. 8, 10

*Manica Post*

*The Chronicle*

*The Daily Mirror*

*The Financial Gazette*

*The Herald*

*The People's Voice*

*The Sunday Mail* July 17-23 pp.1, 4

*The Sunday Times*