

Supressing higher aims? Buried institutional logics resurface in public service broadcasting in Zimbabwe, 1970-2008

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Abstract: Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation operates in a complex institutional environment, with contestation over logics – some idealised, others cynical – about that it means to be a public service broadcaster. This paper draws upon the institutional logics perspective to analyse secondary data source for signs about how institutional logics might help to explain the curious, periodic resurfacing of ideals of independence, drawn in part from the legacy of its roots in the logics of public service broadcasting developed in the BBC and not always enacted the ideals would have it.

Keywords: Public service broadcasting, Zimbabwe, institutional logics

Introduction

Public broadcasting plays a strong role in the formation of public attitudes and the institutionalisation of social practices. In countries with state broadcasting monopolies or a dominant state broadcaster, they can become instruments of propaganda, embedding the state or ruling party's rules into practices of a broad public. They can also be benign, beneficial transmitters of social values and norms, in cases where media independence is valued and institutionalised in the broadcast. Applying the institutional logics perspective initially to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), this study examines how that reference point informs another case – Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) – from its inception with the country's establishment in 1980 through to the recent past.

Although tracing its roots to the BBC, ZBC undergoes quite different institutional development, in which the liberation struggle and an assertion of African identity create logics that inform its structures and practices. And yet, during crucial points in its history, logics drawn from the BBC resurface in the practices of ZBC, only to be suppressed again and then resurface, in a cycle linked to the strength of the regime's legitimacy. This study points towards the idea that a widely held value system can persist despite strong attempts to suppress it, in this case at least because it roots in individuals' longing for free expression are nurtured through the suppression with an officially authorised discourse of independence.

The paper sets its theoretical frame through a discussion of institutional theory and institutional logics. We then discuss the concept of public service broadcasting, drawing particularly upon the version articulated through the history of the BBC, and show how a dominant logic of independence from state influence becomes embedded in its practice,

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which informed to a greater or lesser extent the three broad principles articulated at its inception: “to educate, inform and entertain”, but also how this logic of independence sits, sometimes uncomfortably, with other social imperatives.

After a discussion of methods, we then examine the history of ZBC, where independence takes on a different meaning: the rejection of British colonial power and of the white-dominated rule in Rhodesia following Ian Smith’s “unilateral declaration of independence” in the 1970s, yet practices of the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation inherited from the BBC persist albeit with new state-focus. Once Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF forces gain power in 1980, white, Rhodesian managers are replaced with Zimbabwean Africans, and yet many of the practices persist. Despite state effort to impose new norms, reinforced with a new discourse of the “liberation struggle”, we see evidence that the old logics of independence resurface whenever the ZANU-PF regime’s legitimacy, defined as, broad public acceptance of its authority, becomes unsettled. It shows how inherited logics, embedded in practices of individuals and work groups, are difficult to dislodge in part because the language of independence, used to create regime legitimacy, echoes a different, suppressed logic in the broadcaster.

Theoretical context

Institutions are the sets of rules that, when taken for granted, guide social behaviour, establishing norms and granting legitimacy to those who adhere to them (Suchman, 1995). Institutions guide the decisions of individuals, groups and organisation, providing an accepted way of choosing between alternatives. They made living and deciding easier, and in so doing, persist through crises, often beyond the time they serve the purpose for which they were originally designed (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The assumptions on which they are based, the principles but also the practices and artefacts that signify them – the outward signs as well as the inward understandings – are often called their logics.

Institutional logics

Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) define institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.” Misangyi, Weaver, and Elms (2008, p. 757) say institutional logics can be used as a gauge for power base insofar as they can delineate what does and what does not count as important to an institution. Institutional logics are “symbolic systems, ways of ordering reality, and thereby rendering experience of time and space meaningful” (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005, p. 1032). Jones, Boxenbaum, and Anthony (2013, p. 52) view institutional logics as being “often implicitly” guides for action.

The professions, corporations, the market, the state, the family and religions have been conceptualised as societal areas – “orders” in Friedland and Alford (1991) – where institutional logics originate and where the individuals and organisations that frequently interact, adhering to shared rules and beliefs (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Goodrick & Reay, 2011).

Logics convey the search for legitimacy. Suchman (1995, p. 574) calls legitimacy “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or

appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”. Hence institutional legitimacy is an empirical, rather than a normative concept, associated with the extent of society’s approval and acceptance. The struggle between a dominant logic and opposing subsidiary logics may be viewed as the quest for the attainment of institutional legitimacy; one logic will gain acceptance and hence gain legitimacy and other logics are disenfranchised and thus become illegitimate (Henisz & Zelner, 2005). A dominant logic is a sign of acceptance and support, for its use and influence in an institution, by the actors concerned and the society at large. Indeed issues of actors’ views on identity and meaning inherently define which logic gains legitimacy and/or illegitimacy in varying contexts (Seo & Creed, 2002; Suchman, 1995).

Dominant logics vs subsidiary logics

Because an institution can be influenced by other institutions and actors, in a multi-faceted society usually more than one logic seeks to influence a particular institution (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Dunn & Jones, 2010). As a single logic gains acceptance, it becomes the dominant logic and the other opposing or alternative logics become subsidiary, coexisting together (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008). Arriving at the decision of selection of a dominant logic over other subsidiary logics involves a high level of “consensus” among the institutional actors (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Dunn & Jones, 2010).

Subsequently, there may be relative balance at certain times in an institution between the dominant logic and the subsidiary logics but there may also be struggle and conflict for dominance amongst the logics. Possible reversals of positions of logics from dominant to subsidiary and subsidiary to dominant may arise, depending on the levels of the struggles and the context those struggles are in and decrease in consensus among the institution’s actors.

Presence of multiple logics

The lack of a single, dominant logic can arise from a lack of social consensus, creating a fragmented institutional environment, with conflict among actors seeking to gain adherence to their varied interests and logics. In such situations, multiple logics may indicate not different explanations for and weightings among the same set of rules, but discord about what rules should apply. Besharov and Smith (2014, p. 7) categorise two dimensions of types of logic multiplicity. The first dimension, “compatibility”, describes the degree of compatibility between the organizational instantiations of multiple logics; the second, “centrality”, describes the extent to which multiple logics manifest in core features that are central to organizational functioning. This multiplicity of logics can thus create institutions complexities where expectations for an organisation become incompatible (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Scott, 1991).

In complex institutional settings, the contestation between logics can lead to the emergence of hybrid or blended logics, but also to sedimentation (Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood, & Brown, 1996), as new logics become layered upon old, but where the defeated ones are suppressed but still present. This paper examines such a case, in an arena in which the “public service” in broadcasting is deemed by different actors to serve different conceptualisations of the public.

Public service broadcasting

In many countries broadcasting has an institutional character. News organisations are often termed the “fourth estate”, or, in republican usage, after the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches of government. Broadcasting more generally informs social norms also by providing mass education and mass entertainment, with the ability to bring together more of society at one time than almost any social or political activity.

We focus on public service broadcasting and suggest that such organisations have the ability to possess multiple logics at a single period. Public service broadcasting comes in several shapes and sizes, differing by institutional setting, that is, by the laws and civil traditions of differing countries, and by the purposes it is meant to service. Close synonyms, like state broadcasting and public service programming, embrace elements of either state ownership or public service within a private purpose. Some public broadcasters are not only state-owned but also instruments of the state, working under direct government supervision (e.g. Russian state television). In certain one-party states *de facto* control may rest with a political party more than governments (e.g. China).

A different institutional model has broad application in western European countries since the inception of broadcasting in the first half of the 20th century, and copied by broadcasters that emerged in former colonies of the European powers after the Second World War. Among the first of these was the British Broadcasting Company in 1922 (renamed the British Broadcasting Corporation five years later), with a broadcasting monopoly but governed under a royal charter meant to safeguard its independence from government. Its first general manager, then director-general, John (later Lord) Reith, articulated principles of public service broadcasting that became a model for radio and then television in countries in continental Europe and the British overseas colonies, and later in the Commonwealth. At the core of Reithian principles to PSB is the threefold mission which aims to “inform, educate and entertain” (Armstrong & Weeds, 2007; Briggs, 1979; Hendy, 2013). Because of its central position in this study, we explore the Reithian version of public service broadcasting (PSB).

Reithian PSB is a complex institution that is vague, abstract and ill-defined (Harrison & Wessels, 2005; Jakubowicz, 2003a, 2003b). Søndergaard (1999) calls it unwieldy. To Blumler and Hoffmann-Riem (1992), it is an institution serving political, cultural and social purposes. This thus makes logics contestation rather messy and undefined, resulting in the requirements for legitimacy of PSB being difficult to demarcate. We argue that such contestation, institutional complexity and multiple logics have been present at Zimbabwe’s public broadcasting organisation – ZBC – from 1980-2009, but with the added complexity that political actors have frequently acted overtly and at times violently to suppress debate about their legitimacy, a debate on which the institution of public service broadcasting may depend for its legitimacy.

ZBC

The ZBC was officially created in 1980; this coincided with the Independence of Zimbabwe from Rhodesia’s white minority rule, under Ian Smith. ZBC replaced the Rhodesia

Broadcasting Corporation (RBC) which had been a pro-minority white broadcaster. ZBC inherited not only the plant and equipment of RBC, but many of its technical staff and organisational structures. RBC itself had been modelled on BBC. But ZBC was not just RBC with new administrators. Key personnel and practices derived from Voice of Africa (VOA), a liberation war broadcast channel closely aligned with one of the rebel groups (Mano, 2008; Zaffiro, 1986). The organisation has existed in an environment that has seen changes and continuation in politics, economics and socially. The environment has inherently influenced how ZBC operates and as such the organisation's base for legitimacy as well as the institutional logics it has had to employ at these different intervals. We show that multiple logics were present at ZBC from the period 1980-2009, and provide evidence of how a more plural, independent logic resurfaced at crucial points, providing at least some evidence of resilience in the face of pressure from other powerful logics.

Methods

We have identified pivotal changes in circumstances and/or events in Zimbabwe's history and employed them to analyse how ZBC as an institution reacted to them and to what degree. The main changes of circumstances and/or events in Zimbabwe came in three periods. First, consider the early years of ZBC, marked by the transformation of RBC into ZBC (late 1970s – 1980), ZANU-PF's political ascendancy and the incorporation of liberation-struggle broadcaster VOA, followed by civil war and then peace in Zimbabwe (1983-1987). Second, we examine what happened at ZBC once the de facto one party state ran aground, leading implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in Zimbabwe. Third, we analyse the aftermath of the first election loss by ZANU-PF and emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change MDC opposition party under Morgan Tsvangirai (1997-present). The study will identify which logics at ZBC were present and in use during the periods we have identified. Because of the absence of access to documents from this period, this part of the study draws up three core secondary texts: Zaffiro (1984), a doctoral dissertation that documents the contemporary history of ZBC, drawing on access to individuals and documents from the period; Mano (1997) and a report for the Open Society (Chiumbu, 2009) provide points of reference for the later periods. The texts are a mixture of academic studies and an organisational report on ZBC. Indeed this is secondary material and limited but the works are well quoted in various academic works concerning ZBC and there has been seldom quality work on ZBC and the three publications are considerably reliable.

... To be developed ...

Conclusion

The case of ZBC can provide fresh insights into how institutions work, how they deal with changes, and to what extent those changes affect the institutions. It explores institutional logics, drawn in part from an idealised view of what the BBC was; these logics faced contestation and suppression but seem to have persisted despite, emerging again and then again, as a reminder of what a different view of "public service" might contribute to society. ...

[We are seeking ideas about how to reinforce the methods for historical research, given the current sources are secondary and primary sources are lacking. The diaspora of former ZBC employees is one route, though we see difficulties in seeking to balance their likely disgruntlement. The project, of which this is a part, involves conducting primary, contemporary research to assess the current situation. We believe, however, that this history itself is worth telling.]

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