

Governing the country through the public broadcasting corporation

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Introduction

Public service broadcasters are a peculiar form of organisation, corporations in name but extensions of the state that call them into being. They share that distinction with other firms, long since privatised: the PTTs of yore – post, telegraph, and telephone providers – or what were once seen as natural monopolies: water and electricity. But they differ in a crucial and paradoxical regard: Among their functions is to hold the state to account. It is, therefore, a corporate form with the agency problem as part of its reason for being. It is a governance mechanism over its own governors. In liberal democracies, states have come to accept that paradox and tolerate its ambiguities as a condition of state legitimacy. In this paper we ask the question: How does a state broadcast retain its legitimacy when the legitimacy of the state is under question?

In many countries around the world, state broadcasting companies have persisted in state control – remained institutionalised – where those in other industries have not. Many, including those that took over the colonial relics of broadcasting across Africa, inherited a double-edged purpose – serving the state while serving the people by fulfilling goals that are at once complementary and contradictory. For when the state oppresses the people, or less frighteningly but more insidiously, when the state is captured¹ by the corruption of its officials, the interests of the state and the people diverge. In extreme cases, when a tyrant dies or the military stages a *coup d'état*, the airwaves often become the first point of seizure, ahead even of the ports, railways, and roads.

Many state broadcasters, most overtly those with their legacy in the British Empire, draw their inspiration even now from the founding principles of the British Broadcasting

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Corporation from its founding in 1922: the role of state media is to inform, educate, and entertain (Reith, 1924). Each mission is similarly double-edged. *Entertainment* brings pleasure, while also lulling the audiences into submissiveness. *Education* provides the basis for economic welfare and personal development, while projecting the one, right way to think. *Information* means critique and fact, while the absence of the former can lead to disinformation, and critique becomes what those in charge of some states now call “fake news” (Safian, 2017).

This paper is part of a larger study of how a state broadcaster copes with these tensions in times of state crisis, how it governs itself when the links to the state are in question. It also examines how what Foucault (2009), in his “governmentality” lectures, aptly called the technologies of securing territory and the population – including the technology of broadcasting – when those in charge of the state use the broadcaster for their own purposes, which may not always correspond to what those working for the broadcaster consider the interests of the people or the state.

In this conference paper, we use institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) to explain how practices arise that give a state broadcaster – in our case Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) – legitimacy among the governed population and that legitimises it even to dissident former employees during a time of national emergency. The dominant logic, which holds that the state is right even after decades of increasingly erratic one-party rule, persists by bringing with it of the liberation struggle in the 1970s memories and assumptions about its continuing validity. We ask the question whether a conflicting and subordinated logic, with roots in Reithian principles of what broadcasting means to the state and the people, may ironically support the dominant one during certain crises, and ease the transition towards new institutional arrangements.

The empirical information in this paper is based in part on a live case study enacted as one of us was in Zimbabwe on family matters when the military, in effect, deposed Robert Mugabe from the presidency after 37 years in power. As we discuss, the move was unconstitutionally constitutional. Mugabe’s “resignation” was legitimised through everyone agreed to a form of words that did not violate the constitution even as it violated its letter and spirit. Similarly, at ZBC, the military took command and then didn’t command the airwaves, let broadcasting continue, pretty much as usual, and then withdrew to allow the broadcasters to carry on with their routines during the days of uncertainty about who would lead the government. The “state logic” of state broadcasting was not really challenged by an alternative logic of “public service”, with its Reithian roots in standing apart from those in

power and serving the plural interests of the public, not the narrow, singular ones of the state.

We draw echoes between these events and those of earlier incidents in Zimbabwe's history, including the challenges Mugabe faced over its financial rescue by multilateral creditors, including the World Bank, in the 1990s, and during the hyperinflation of the early 2000s. In those periods, secondary sources studying the work of ZBC, suggest the public service logics came out of hiding, sustaining the broadcaster's legitimacy, only to be suppressed again later.

This leads us to consider a range of research question that can contribute to our understanding of organisational purpose, of the role of institutional forces during state and organisational crisis, and of the role of ZBC itself in sustaining the state during recurrent crises.

This study seek to answer the ancient question of governance: Who will guard the guardians? (Hurwicz, 2007; Juvenal, 1999). In political science, one of the missions of the broadcaster is to guard the population from the excesses of the state. But in organisation theory, when the broadcaster is owned by the state, an agency problem arises (Fama, 1980). Organisation theory tells us that the salience is defined by three criteria: power, urgency, and legitimacy (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Political theory tells us that order is defined by three partially overlapping criteria: power, legitimacy, and the rule of law (Fukuyama, 2014). Our study, therefore, sits of the cusp of different concepts of power and legitimacy. It examines them by exploring the meanings of urgency and the rule of law.

¹ For a recent discussion of state capture, see the briefing on South Africa in "Captured state" in *The Economist* of 09 December 2017 (pp. 23-25 in the UK edition).

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