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# Spill-over effect in media framing: Representations of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwean and international media, 1989–2010

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### ABSTRACT

Myths and metaphors that occur in media frames play an important role in influencing public perceptions of an issue in times of war, political conflict, crisis and disaster. This, in turn, influences policy makers and (inter)national assistance and aid programmes. We investigated whether a metaphoric spill-over of frames used in connection with political events could explain the misrepresentation in the framing of wildlife conservation. Zimbabwe experienced a severe political conflict and economic downturn in 2000 when land reforms took place. We analyzed newspaper articles on Zimbabwe's wildlife conservation published between 1989 and 2010 from newspapers in Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. We selected three issues about wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe in the local and international media, namely, the ivory ban, rhino protection, and Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources to investigate the spill-over effect. Our results show that in the 1990s, the majority of newspaper articles highlighted that wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe was largely successful. However, two major changes occurred after 2000 following the land reforms in Zimbabwe. First, the international media showed little interest in wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe as evidenced by a sharp decline in published articles and second, the frames changed in the international media with the "political unrest and land reform" blame frame becoming more dominant. This transition in reporting, frames, and low frame parity shows that there was a spill-over effect of political frames into wildlife conservation following Zimbabwe's land reforms in 2000. Metaphoric spill-over effects may thus create myths in the readership, in turn influencing policy-derived actions in a sector that is not or poorly related to the actual disaster.

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### Introduction

Zimbabwe has been a subject of political crisis and economic collapse since the end of the 1990s (Coltart 2008). The country seems nowadays to be mainly known for its extreme land reforms, economic malaise and contested elections. These themes have been the main focus of articles appearing in the different media over the

last years (Ndlela 2005; Shaw 2008). The American Ambassador even declared Zimbabwe a disaster area on several occasions after the year 2000 following the country's land reforms (United States Agency for International Development 2012). Wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe has also been widely reported in the mass media as having suffered from the unstable political situation and economic collapse in the country (Shaw 2008). However, recent scientific studies provide evidence that at least in some state protected areas in Zimbabwe wildlife populations have remained stable or have increased over the past two decades (Dunham et al. 2010; Gandiwa 2013; Gandiwa et al. 2013b; Valeix et al. 2008; Zisadza et al. 2010). This suggests that framing of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe in the international media to some extent does not reflect reality.

Media studies on the role of media in times of political conflict and crisis (Alozie 2010; Entman 2003; Kolmer & Semetko 2009; Tierney et al. 2006) and natural disaster (Fu et al. 2012;

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Tierney et al. 2006) show that the media often use metaphors that unintentionally misrepresent the situation in ways that confirm prevailing myths – such as looting, social disorganization and deviant behaviour during disaster – despite accumulating counter evidence which shows that in reality social cohesiveness and mechanisms of social control actually increase during disasters, resulting in a lower incidence of deviant behaviour than during non-disaster times (Binu et al. 2008; Gandiwa et al. 2013b; Tierney et al. 2006). This misrepresentation in the media is worrisome because the media are one of the principal arenas within which issues come to the attention of decision makers, interest groups and the public (Barua 2010). The way media choose to frame an issue influences how the readership – including policy makers (Boykoff & Roberts 2007) and national and international donors (Entman 2004; Garner 1996; Kolmer & Semetko 2009) – perceives certain issues and subsequently acts upon it (Callaghan & Schnell 2005; Sun 2011). For nature conservation this could imply that misrepresentation in the international media could lead to reduced international aid and support (e.g., Olsen et al. 2003).

In this paper we address the following question: is there a spill-over effect from frames on the political unrest into the frames of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe after the land reforms that occurred in 2000? Thus, we define the spill-over effect as the resultant impact of frames from one domain (i.e., the political unrest) triggering an influence on other domain (i.e., wildlife conservation). Identifying such a possible ‘spill-over effect’ is valuable in understanding the dynamics of media framing and the consequences of this, particularly in areas that have experienced unrest or other crises in society. We analyze how issues on wildlife conservation are framed, which frames are dominating the discourse, how these frames changed over time, how these frames related to the framing of the political events in the country, whether these frames reflected the actual state of wildlife conservation at the time.

## Conceptual framework

Myths related to the communication of disasters refer to the often negative, fixed ideas people often seem to have about what happens in a disaster area (Kuttschreuter et al. 2011; Stock 2007; Tierney et al. 2006); they can have a great influence on how certain situations are responded to. For example, news coverage after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the United States of America (USA) in 2005, was generally sympathetic to victims, but also included instances of violence, looting and crime (Iyengar & Hahn 2007). The “looting” frame greatly exaggerated the incidence and severity of looting and lawlessness, despite evidence to the contrary. Yet, it was accepted as the truth by many influential decision makers. It emerged as the problem frame in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Tierney et al. 2006), and resulted in the USA Government starting to treat the crisis in a completely different manner, shifting the focus on creating order rather than giving aid (Tierney et al. 2006).

Framing, a term first coined by Goffman (1974), is an important process through which myths may emerge. According to Goffman (1974), framing is defined as a means to organize experience and enact action in a rather micro-sociological interest in flow of events and acting as staging. Specifically for this study, framing is used in the communication context following Entman (1993, p. 52) who defined framing as: “to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make it more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Framing, therefore, refers to how the media, media professionals and their audience make sense of events or issues (Reese 2007). Thus, framing plays an

important role in media representation (Entman 1993; Hallahan 1999; Tuchman 1978) since it defines the boundaries of the debate by placing the event or issue within a certain sphere of meaning (Kruse 2001).

It has been noted that media frames used in one realm (e.g., politics) can influence and spill-over to other societal domains (Graber & Smith 2005; Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2011). In such cases frames used in one domain are used as a metaphor (i.e., a figure of speech that suggests resemblance between essentially unrelated phenomena) for what happens in another domain (Lakoff 1993; Lakoff & Johnson 1981). Metaphors are regularly used by journalists for the purposes of: (i) popularizing, representing and dramatizing issues in order to make issues both newsworthy and interesting for the relevant audiences and (ii) helping people understand unfamiliar and complex issues by making them familiar through shared experiences, and by narrowing the perspective of complex issues (Hellsten 2002; Tierney et al. 2006). When metaphoric spill-over of frames happens in the context of amplification in the media following disasters or crises in one realm (Eckler & Kalyango 2012; Kuttschreuter et al. 2011; Ndlela 2005) it is clear that this may contribute to the creation of myths regarding the other domain. For instance, some metaphors in wildlife conservation include: (i) bushmeat hunting (poaching) resembling looting, and (ii) beneficiaries of the land reform in Zimbabwe being referred to as squatters settling (illegally) in the private and state game reserves, a form of social disorganization that caused many problems for the owners.

The present study focusses on understanding if the (mis-)representation of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe in the international media could be explained by a possible spill-over effect through getting insights into whether the framing of political issues had influenced the framing in the conservation realm. To get insight into the framing of nature conservation in the national and international media and its underlying assumptions, we will draw on the four functions of frames as defined by Entman (1993) namely (i) defining the problem, (ii) diagnosing the causes, (iii) making moral judgement evaluating the cause and its effects, and (iv) offering remedies and justifies treatments for it. In addition to that, we will also investigate the biases in the media representation of nature conservation by looking into the extent of ‘frame parity’ in the newspaper articles. Frame parity refers to the desired objectivity of the media through highlighting all sides of a story, a condition that most free press prefers (Entman 2004). Last but not least, we will investigate if there are certain discourse coalitions within the national and international media by investigating the ensemble of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to these story lines. Discourse coalitions is defined as ‘the ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors, that utter these story lines and the practices that conform to these story line all organized around a discourse’ (Hajer 1995). The concept of discourse coalitions in this research was used to identify the different groups and relations that play a role in wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe. Discourse coalitions occur because differences and competition causes actors to group together in coalitions to enhance certain discourses and constrain others (Hajer 1993, 1995).

## Historical context

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country located in southern Africa. Colonization started when the British South Africa Company entered the country exploring for minerals in 1889 (Lucas et al. 2011). In 1923 Britain annexed what at that time was called Southern Rhodesia from the British South Africa Company (Lucas et al. 2011). In 1965, the Ian Smith government declared independence, which was neither not recognized by the British Government nor

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