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The ballot vote as embedded ritual: a radical critique of liberal-democratic approaches to media and elections in Africa

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Abstract
A significant part of scholarship on media in Africa has adopted the normative ideal of liberal democracy which defines democracy primarily as electoral democracy. Media institutions, in this regard, are considered to play an important role in strengthening the democratic process and making government more accountable to its citizens. Media are seen as constituting a discursive space or Habermasian public sphere where issues of public concern can be deliberated. Audiences are treated as citizens engaged in public dialogue in and through the media. In this approach, a major task of modern mass media is to offer information in order to enable citizens to participate meaningfully in political life such as providing fair and 'objective' coverage on all major candidates in elections which would allow citizens to make a well-informed choice. This article critiques the tendency in work on media in Africa to equate democracy with a form of electoral democracy. First of all, the article advocates for a more substantive definition of democracy which goes beyond merely the regular conduct of free and fair elections, a multi-party system, respect for human rights and press freedom. Adopting radical democracy as normative ideal reveals the crucial role of media - beyond merely elections - in democratising power relations and correcting structural inequalities. Secondly, the article argues that liberal-democratic approaches to media and elections presuppose a universal meaning of elections, hereby ignoring the particular embedded meaning that elections obtain in the African context. Instead of treating media as the neutral arbiters of information on election candidates, I offer an alternative, critical research agenda which considers the engagement between media institutions and political actors as a symbiotic relationship that ultimately seeks to legitimise certain election candidates and condone elections rituals as democratic events par excellence.

Keywords: media in Africa, elections, media-state relations, liberal democracy, radical democracy

Most studies carried out on media and elections in Africa have addressed the issue from within a liberal-democratic model of media-state relations.[1] This is concomitant with dominant themes in scholarship on both media in Africa and the broader field of media and elections. Knowledge production is always situated within a particular social, political or economic context. Hence, this article treats scholarship on media and elections in Africa as a discursive formation in itself, i.e. – echoing Foucault - as a "historically contingent form of knowledge, intimately connected to

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[1] See for example Kadhi and Rutten (2001) and Abdi Ismail and Deane (2008) on Kenya; Temin and Smith (2002) on Ghana; Waldahl (2004, 2005a, 2005b) and Chuma (2008) on Zimbabwe; Andriantsoa and Andriasendrarivony (2005) on Madagascar; Teshome (2009) on Ethiophia; and Frère (2011) on Central Africa.

prevailing structures and relations of power at the time of its formation" (Abrahamsen 2000: 143). The dominance of the liberal-democratic model of media-state relations should be seen in the context of the flourishing of the 'good governance' and 'democracy' agenda in the wake of the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s. An important reason for the success of this agenda was "the collapse of Communism as an alternative, non-capitalist development model" which "made donor states more confident of the superiority of their own economic and political solutions" (Abrahamsen 2000: 42-43).

Furthermore, subsequent to the failure of economic structural adjustment packages recommended by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the late 1980s and 1990s to many African countries, 'democracy' emerged as a remedy convenient for the international financial institutions (IFIs). By blaming the disastrous economic consequences of structural adjustment policies on the 'poor governance' of African governments, the IFIs were able to absolve themselves from any responsibility for the range of economic crises in Africa (Abrahamsen 2000). Proponents of 'good governance' and 'democracy' saw bad leadership at the national level as the major cause of poverty and economic decline. Their analysis thus primarily put the blame for poverty and 'underdevelopment' on African nation-states instead of on the broader global system of power relations in which African countries remained profoundly marginalised. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Africa was therefore increasingly framed as 'undemocratic continent' in Western government policy, donor and academic accounts. While a strong, almost authoritarian state was previously seen as a conduit for development, from the late 1990s onwards, this model was more and more considered as a barrier to economic development.

In the 'good governance' discourse, 'democracy' emerged "as an unproblematic concept, an unquestionable good about which there is little or no difference of opinion" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2001: 259). Instead of treating democracy as a taken-for-granted notion, I consider it as a good example of what Gallie has referred to as an 'essentially contested concept', i.e. a concept "the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (1955/56: 169). In the African context, the concept of 'democracy' has often been deployed to refer to the normative ideal of 'liberal democracy' which includes the frequent conduct of free and fair elections; the existence of multiple political parties; and respect for basic human rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of association. Within this understanding of democracy, media play a central role in strengthening the democratic process and making government more accountable to its citizens. In the liberal-democratic or libertarian model, mass media - and particularly the press - must act as watchdogs guarding against possible abuses of power by governments. They must fulfil their role as 'fourth estate'. Press freedom is seen as a vital guarantee to enable the media to play this role. The state is expected to create an open environment in which different media can flourish and compete. Media constitute an important arena for public debate, or 'public sphere' in the words of Habermas (1989).

In the 1990s, academic work on media in Africa increasingly began to shift from a focus on the development journalism model as normative ideal towards a dominance of the liberal-democratic perspective as desirable model of media-state relations in Africa. These developments cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the changing position of universities on the continent in the 1990s and the growing importance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private research institutions in research on media and communication in Africa. The imposition of structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s by institutions such as the WB and the IMF led to drastic cuts in budgets available for higher

education and other public services. This resulted in a growth of private universities and an expansion of privatised education and research programmes in public universities (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). Universities in Africa have become increasingly reliant on donor funds, as have poorly paid lecturers who due to low wages have been forced to take on research consultancies which, as Zeleza has pointed out, has led to "the transformation of African intellectuals into 'paid native informants' for foreign donors" (2003: 157).

While African universities became more and more dependent on donor funding, 'good governance' and 'democracy' emerged as major priorities and policy conditions for funding from Western donors in the 1990s. In this context, donor-funded research institutions and think-tanks have come to play an increasingly important role in research on media and communication in Africa and have also been a major source of publications and even journals.[2] Examples of non-governmental and donor-funded research institutions are the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), the Namibia-based Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) (which also has country offices in the broader SADC region), the South Africa-based Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and GenderLinks, and the Ghana-based Media Foundation of West Africa (MFWA). Donor funding priorities have contributed to shape the research agendas of these institutions which have mostly advocated the principles of the liberal-democratic model of media-state relations. They have for example highlighted the importance of press freedom, liberalisation of the airwaves, and 'fair' and 'objective' media coverage in the run-up to elections.

The liberal-democratic model has not only shaped scholarship on media in Africa but has also dominated broader scholarly debate on politics in Africa. As Chabal (2009: 3) recently argued:

> Democratic theory, which is virtually hegemonic today, harks back to a straightforward developmental approach that is reminiscent of earlier modernization models. Sustained by a vision of liberal democracy as the only viable model of modern politics, this theory interprets the present blossoming of multiparty elections in Africa as the early phase of an ineluctable move towards democratization. Rooted in institutionalist notions of political change, it rests on the supposition that the practices of democratic elections will eventually result in the emergence of a democratic political 'culture'. Like earlier democratic theories, it is universalist, teleological and steeped in a notion of modernization as a variant of Westernisation.

In this article, I critique this particular entry point into the debate on media and elections in Africa. Instead, drawing upon the concept of 'radical democracy', it proposes an alternative research agenda which treats elections as ritual events embedded in very specific local contexts. I interrogate this proposal further by drawing on the relation between media institutions and political actors during Zimbabwe's elections in the 2000s. Before discussing this particular case, I review four dominant themes in scholarship on media and elections which, I argue, all relate to liberal-democratic interpretations of the relation between media and elections: public opinion and voters' preferences; agenda-setting and the election campaign; impact of media forms on election styles; and media coverage of elections.

Public opinion and voters' preferences

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[2] For example, in April 2006 the South Africa-based NGOs Gender Links and the Gender and Media Southern Africa Network (GEMSA) launched the *Southern Africa Media Diversity Journal*, available from: http://www.genderlinks.org.za/item.php?i_id=168 (last accessed: 12 August 2008).

Although some studies exist on the role of media in elections in Africa (see footnote 1), scholarship on media and elections is characterised by a bias towards elections in the United States. In broad terms, research on media and elections is strongly associated with the rise of the discipline of communication science in the United States. Early studies in the history of the discipline focused on the role of mass media in shaping public opinion and voters' preferences, for example in the 1940 and 1948 elections in the United States (Lazarsfeld et al 1944; Berelson 1954 et al). Primarily drawing upon quantitative research, this work sought to establish a correlation between media coverage and voting behaviour and other influences such as family and opinion leaders (see also more recent work by Patterson 1980; Cavanaugh 1995).

From a more qualitative, critical media studies research tradition, this work is problematic as it uncritically accepts the possibility of researching causal relations between texts and audiences. Many scholars have of course subsequently challenged the media effects tradition, with a particularly robust critique provided by Gauntlett (1998). But the body of work on media and elections can also be further questioned for its underlying motive which is undoubtedly gaining more control over voting publics by developing a better understanding of their voting behaviour. As John Hartley (2005: 82) has argued:

> [Television audiences] are the invisible fictions that are produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of the mechanisms of their own survival. Audiences may be imagined, empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the needs of the imagining institution.

Public opinion research on the influence of media on voting behaviour is likely to serve the institutional needs of political parties keen to understand the way in which constituencies vote and the role of media in this regard. The term 'audience' or 'voting constituency' could be seen as an ideological construct that ultimately serves those in power. Thus, scholarship is aimed at knowing the audience with the ultimate aim of being able to better influence voters. Within the African context, the Afrobarometer project has carried out "[a] comparative series of national public attitude surveys on democracy, markets, and civil society".[3] The strong donor support for this project from a range of European Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank alludes to the stakes involved in knowing the audience - African voting publics - for purposes of foreign policy in this instance.

Setting the agenda: media institutions versus political parties
A second strand of work on media and elections has compared the relative power of media and political parties in the mediation of election campaigns. In an influential article, McCombs and Shaw (1972: 176) argued that media play an important role in determining what information audiences ultimately get about election campaigns:

> In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the "agenda of the campaign".

Researchers have highlighted the symbiotic relationship between media and political parties, and

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[3] See http://www.afrobarometer.org/index.html (last accessed: 4 October 2010).

have investigated the extent to which political parties are able to influence media coverage of elections, or the extent to which coverage is shaped by the particular ideological stance of media institutions. The underlying motivation of this strand of research is the concern about the way in which media influence voting behaviour. However, instead of attributing media with a role in actively changing people's opinions on politics and election candidates, agenda-setting scholars have emphasised the role of media in determining what issues the electorate should be concerned about instead of what to think about these issues. As Cohen (1963: 13) wrote in a much-quoted line: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". Countless studies have emerged from within the subfield of political communication on the role of media in US election campaigns.[4]

The medium is the message: changing election styles
A third strand of scholarship has examined the way in which different forms of media have impacted on the way in which elections are held. The increasing role of television in elections has been primarily associated with Ronald Reagan's presidency who not only effectively used the medium for campaigning and governing purposes but who also of course began his career as a film and television actor (Denton 1988). According to Denton (1988: xii), television changed the face of American politics in important ways:

> There are three critical dimensions to the primetime presidency. First, the message must fit the medium in both form and content. Second, industry demands for news must be carefully crafted by the incumbent. Finally, today's president must be, if not an actor, at least a "media celebrity".

While Reagan has been branded as the first 'primetime president', the 2008 elections in the US, on the other hand, have been popularly portrayed in the media as the first 'Facebook elections' (Fraser and Dutta 2008). Scholars have attributed important roles to social media such as YouTube and Facebook in the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 (Harfoush 2009; Metzgar and Maruggi 2009; Hendricks and Denton 2010).

The changing form of politics as a result of different forms of media has generally been viewed with suspicion by conventional political communication scholars who have raised concern about the mediatisation of politics which is seen as leading to a dilution of serious politics and a 'dumbing down' of news coverage with politics being increasingly about form and style rather than substance. For example, Denton (1988: xiii) commented as follows on the role of television in US politics:

> Television was going to make us more politically informed and democratic. The fact is that television has not made us more informed in our election choices or more democratic in terms of electoral participation. And, as the Reagan presidency has demonstrated, television cannot serve as a check on presidential power.

More recently, the role of social media in US presidential elections has been evaluated in a more positive light as making possible an increased participation of ordinary people in political communication. For example, for Metzgar and Maruggi (2009: 161-162), "[t]he 2008 U.S.

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[4] Arterton 1984; Crewe and Harrop 1986; Owen 1991; Stempel and Windhauser 1991; Kendall 1995; Just 1996; O'Rourke 1997; Kendall 2000; Kellner 2001; Benoit 2003; Adams 2005; Panagopoulos 2007; Pfau et al 2007; Skewes 2007.

presidential election was another step in the direction of democratic discourse enabled by social media technology. While the end-state of such discourse is not possible to predict, what is clear is that the people formerly known as the audience, empowered by technologies and spurred on by their fellow formerly passive audience compatriots have a bigger role to play than ever before".

Media coverage of election campaigns and candidates
A fourth theme in literature on media and elections is the way different media have covered election campaigns and candidates. The underlying assumption of this work is that mass media are crucial in shaping voting decisions. The normative premise here is that media – and public broadcasters and other publicly-funded media in particular – have a duty to cover elections in a fair manner, partly because they receive tax funds. Media should give equal weight to election candidates and enable voters to make a fully informed decision. They are expected to provide adequate information on the voter registration process and inform voters about the various issues put forward by different political parties.

Measuring coverage against these ideals, political communication scholars have raised concern about the "media's insistence on covering election *process* issues such as competitor league tables and who is doing the best character assassination on whom, in preference to elaborating *policy* differences" (Ross and Nightingale 2003: 106-107, emphasis by original authors). Partly as a result of the obsession with poll results, election coverage is seen to often equal the coverage of a sporting contest, with ample use of game metaphors and enemy/adversary language (Hollander 2006: 570). Other scholars have linked these argument to the growing 'tabloidisation' of news media and the increasing emergence of 'infotainment' that does not provide citizens with good quality information to make adequately informed decisions (Franklin 1994; Sparks and Tulloch 2000; Thussu 2007). These changes are linked to broader developments in the global media landscape with the increasing privatisation of public broadcasters and the commercialisation of news media environments.

In the specific African context, the importance of media coverage in elections has been highlighted by scholars who have looked at the various ways in which elections have been reported (Waldahl 2004; Waldahl 2005a; Waldahl 2005b; Chuma 2008). But increasingly, a range of projects and non-governmental organisations have also been established in recent years that have focused on monitoring the reporting of various types of media in the run-up to elections. Donor-funded groups such as the South Africa-based Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ) have used different tools to measure 'bias' in news coverage of elections.[5] Various workshops on how to report elections have been offered to journalists of African media houses and reporting guides with best practice examples have been designed (Cammack and Carver 1998; Lange 1999; Khaguli and Esipisu 2009).

Elections as ritual events
Previous literature on media and elections has thus focused on four strands: the link between media public opinion/voters' preferences, the tension between media and political parties in setting the agenda of media coverage, the impact of media forms on election styles and media coverage of election candidates. These four approaches have made a number of assumptions.

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[5] See http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org for more on MMA and http://www.mmpz.org/ for more on MMPZ (last accessed: 6 October 2010).

First of all, they have adopted a rational choice model in which media offer citizens 'information' to enable them to make a well-informed decision in elections, hereby downplaying the ideological role of media in constructing a particular version of reality. Secondly, they have assumed that elections offer real and valuable opportunities for citizens to participate in politics. Mass media might have dumbed down their meaning or turned elections into 'horse races', 'games', 'spectacles' or 'melodramas' but elections still offer key opportunities for citizens to exert their democratic right and continue to function as the primary means through which citizens participate in politics. Elections thus play a fundamental role in the doctrine of liberal democracy. They are seen as the primary mechanism through which citizens leave their mark on national politics and are treasured for enabling citizens to participate in the election of their leaders.

However, as this article contends, the central role of elections in understandings of African democracy must be questioned, even more so in a context which continues to be marred by sharp power differences and economic inequalities. For example, in the case of South Africa, the extension of the right to vote to South Africans of all colours and the country's first general elections in 1994 is commonly described as the 'advent of democracy and freedom'. But what is the meaning of electoral democracy and the right the vote when thousands of South Africans have not seen any substantial improvement in their living standards? Commenting on the transition from Apartheid to 'democracy', Steyn (2008) evaluates the outcome as follows:

> The outcome has been a liberal democratic constitution with an economic policy vision laced with a programme of economic liberalisation, which disproportionately entrenches the mutual class interests of both the white and emerging black elite. The outcome of this scenario is that it has led to a form of democracy that has little relevance for the majority of South Africa's citizens. The democratic game tends to be reduced by the power of entrenched elites and what is acceptable to these elites frequently provides the boundaries of democratic politics.[6]

The dominance of elementary, procedural and electoral definitions of democracy in the African context is highly problematic, given the sharp inequities in many African nation-states. As the Nigerian political scientist, Claude Ake (1992: 40, quoted in Lumumba-Kasongo 2005: 4) has argued:

> Democracy requires even development, otherwise it cannot give equal opportunities to all, it cannot incorporate all to articulate their interests to negotiate them. It cannot produce a political community in which all are able to enjoy rights, nor avoid compromising justice because it takes the development of consciousness and capabilities to seek and enjoy justice. That is why development, especially even development in this broad sense, is an integral part of the process of democratisation.

Hence, it is essential to move beyond liberal definitions of democracy which have their limitations in radically changing economic power relations, crucially important to the majority of Africans who find themselves in marginal, economic circumstances. Albeit writing from a different (European) context, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: xv) have argued that:

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[6] Steyn, Ibrahim, The shorthand of electoral democracy: democracy for some, *South African Civil Society Information Service (SACSIS)*, 15 May 2008, http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/news/detail.asp?idata=108&iChannel=1&nChannel=news&iCat=250 (last accessed: 6 October 2010).

> [T]he problem with 'actually existing' liberal democracies is not with their constitutive values crystallized in the principles of liberty and equality for all, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of those values. This is why our project of 'radical and plural democracy' was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the 'democratic revolution', as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations.

These scholars thus advocate for a more substantive, radical definition of democracy which goes beyond merely the regular conduct of free and fair elections, a multi-party system and respect for human rights. This definition is particularly relevant in the African context where liberal democracy often coincides with stark, economic inequalities.

In a more radical interpretation of democracy, elections could then be seen as mere rituals to endorse the power of the ruling classes. As Bennett (1983: 49) has argued, previous literature

> [i]s based on the assumption that elections are actually arenas in which issues can be specified and resolved. In light of the absence of any policy-making process, it might make more sense to regard presidential elections as rituals that function to promote the myth that elections are arenas for specifying and resolving issues. If elections serve to promote myths, then their melodramatic aspects are not inexplicable failings, but defining characteristics of a ritual.

Liberal democracy could then be defined as "a set of rules intended to legitimise bourgeois power" (McNair 2003: 24). A more radical research agenda on the relation between media and elections would adopt a framework in which elections are treated as mere rituals that rubberstamp those in power. Such an agenda could investigate the way in which media – in collaboration with politicians – create the myth that elections offer voters a real opportunity to participate in politics. As Bennett (1983: 51) has argued:

> [R]eform proposals for things like better press coverage, more citizen education, or increasing political participation in elections may perpetuate the very problems they address by distracting attention from the underlying realities of political processes.

So, adopting radical democracy as analytical and normative framework points us to the limitations of electoral, liberal and elementary forms of democracy which are insufficiently able to truly democratise power relations on the continent. A ritual approach to elections considers these not necessarily as true occasions for citizens to participate in political affairs but instead as critical moments in the (re)legitimisation of those in power.

Embedded meanings of elections in Africa
Apart from assuming that elections offer real opportunities for citizen participation, another limitation of liberal-democratic approaches to media and elections is that these tend to presuppose that elections are part of "a set of 'universalistic' practices that is carried out in a similar, orderly manner everywhere in the world, with the entire process being driven by the arrival of an outcome by aggregation of individual votes" which ignores that "[t]he modes and reasons of electioneering practices are never random but unavoidably embedded in and hewed from the local cultural milieu" (Huat 2007: 3). In order to gain a better understanding of media and elections in Africa, it is crucial to interrogate the particular meaning of elections in the African context.

The advent of multi-party elections in Africa has often been praised as coinciding with the introduction of more democratic regime but should also be seen against the background of the growing hegemony of liberal democracy in the post-Cold War period.

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One could argue that in the 1970s and 1980s, the one-party state was still considered to be acceptable as political model; not only to African governments but also to global forces. The justification was that a one-party state could offer unity to artificially created African nation-states. It would enable countries to offer a common purpose in building a prosperous nation and would strengthen national consciousness in the face of ethnic strife and divisions. For example, as Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe argued in the 1980s, "[w]e are one family, one country, with one nation and one government. So we must have one party. It is that simple" (quoted in Shaw 1986: 379-80). Elections – and the multi-party system more broadly – were associated with leading to conflict and divisions in newly decolonised countries which were not considered to be 'ready' for liberal democracy.

However, in the post-Cold War context and the growing hegemony of the Washington consensus, we see a shift in normative ideas around political systems. Liberal democracy has increasingly been celebrated as the most desirable model in the African context (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005). Free and fair elections emerge as particular conditionalities for African nation-states to enable them to access donor aid packages. It could then be argued that in certain African contexts, elections emerged as much in response to global demands as in reaction to popular pressure from citizens. While in Zimbabwe elections emerged as key demands part of the liberation struggle, more recently, one could question whether elections are still aimed at offering citizens real opportunities to participate in political affairs, or whether these might have different meanings instead. As widely reported, Zimbabwe's conduct of elections in the 2000s was marred by violence, intimidation and rigging. In the run-up to the second round of Zimbabwe's 2008 presidential elections, Robert Mugabe made the following statement during a rally in Matabeleland North province:

> The war veterans came to me and said: 'President we can never accept that our country which we won through the barrel of the gun, be taken merely by an 'x' made by a ballpoint pen'. Zvino ballpoint pen ichirwisana neAK? Is there going to be a struggle between the two? Ipapo munoona kuchirwiwa zvakakomba. Asikana ma'x' achitevera nzira yakatarwa nepfuti? Is that alright? Liyekele ukuphikisana lombhobho. Tasunga-naka. Tohwina shudhu.[7]

> *Full English translation*
> The war veterans came to me and said: 'President we can never accept that our country which we won through the barrel of the gun, be taken merely by an 'x' made by a ballpoint pen'. Does it now mean that the pen can fight against an AK? Is there going to be a struggle between the two? That is when you will see a real battle. But if the x follows the route taken by the bullet? Is that alright? Do not argue against the gun. We are prepared to defend our heritage. We will win.

This statement echoes another statement that Mugabe made in his role as leading commander of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZNLA) in 1976:

> Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer – its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins (quoted in Meredith 2007: 1).

Hence, in the case of Zimbabwe, the political leadership has not presented elections as opportunities to allow citizens to exert their vote freely, let alone enable them to participate

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[7] 'Land must be yours before I can retire', *The Herald*, 20 June 2008.

meaningfully in political affairs. This then demands for a rethinking on the meaning of elections in the African context. If election results are not presented as opportunities for citizens to election their leaders, what might then be the meaning of elections? In the Zimbabwean context, it could be argued that in recent years elections have become mere ritual events aimed at meeting some of the conditions of elementary, procedural or liberal democracy, introduced on the global scene through the hegemony of the Washington consensus. The particular hegemonic meaning of democracy as liberal democracy in a way enables states to appear democratic if a handful of international democratic procedures are being adhered to.

Elections as 'media events'
If elections are mere rituals to satisfy a global consensus, what might media then mean or do in such a context? Instead of treating media as neutral arbiters of information enabling voters to make a well-informed rational choice, the focus of our examination could be on the way in which they become part of the election ritual by either legitimizing the election process itself or certain election candidates. Media coverage of elections should then not be treated as a form of 'information' provided to citizens but instead as reflecting particular local meanings of elections as well as reflecting the specific relationship between media institutions and political actors. A key event that both demonstrates and requires the symbiotic relationship between media institutions and political actors is the campaign rally which forms a key part of the election ritual. It is not only a medium in its own right – and it could be argued particularly important in the case of rural Africa where mass media penetration is low and voters largely depend on the rally for awareness on elections and party manifestos – but it should also be treated as a 'media event': an event waiting to be mediated by television cameras, an event staged partly for the purpose of being covered by formal mass media (Dayan and Katz 1992). In order to offer the electorate a semblance of credibility and popularity, political parties have a vested interest in coverage that mediates signs of popular support expressed in and through the party rally.

For example, in the run-up to Zimbabwe's 2000 parliamentary elections, Stephen Mpofu, the editor of the Bulawayo-based newspaper *The Chronicle* received a call from the Minister of Home Affairs, Dumiso Dabengwa, who was standing as a ZANU-PF candidate in the elections.[8] Dabengwa questioned Mpofu on why his rally in Bulawayo was never covered by *The Chronicle*. The newspaper was forced to apologise and to write a story on the rally even though none of its reporters actually attended the event. Regardless of this, the following day, the paper's lead story was headlined 'Dabengwa in electrifying rally'. This example demonstrates that politicians attach major significance to media coverage of election campaigns as popular attendance at rallies is considered to either reinforce or threaten a party's popularity. Media coverage can play an important role in legitimising the rule of one or the other political party.

This is further demonstrated by the way in which two ideologically opposed Zimbabwean daily newspapers – *The Herald* which largely supported the agenda of the ruling party ZANU-PF and the privately-owned *The Daily News* which was sympathetic to the opposition MDC - covered party rallies in the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections. The coverage of rallies in the two papers almost represented 'inverted discourses' where *The Herald* sought to emphasise the popularity of ZANU-PF rallies and the unpopularity of MDC rallies. Conversely, *The Daily News* stressed the popularity of MDC rallies and the unpopularity of ZANU-PF rallies. The stark degree of intertextuality between the two papers is demonstrated in the following two excerpts of

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[8] Former Chronicle journalist Admore Tshuma shared this anecdote during the 2008 Britain-Zimbabwe Research Day in Oxford (see Willems 2008).

reports in *The Herald* and *The Daily News* respectively:

> THOUSANDS of Chitungwiza Zanu-PF supporters braved the heat to witness the launch of the presidential and mayoral campaign at a rally at the town's Chibuku Stadium.[9]

> MORGAN Tsvangirai, the MDC's presidential candidate, yesterday addressed his biggest campaign rally ever since launching his bid to dislodge President Mugabe from power.
> About 50 000 supporters attended Tsvangirai's main rally at the Zimbabwe Grounds in Highfield suburb where he urged Mugabe not to rig the poll.[10]

While affirming the popularity of their preferred party, the two daily newspapers also sought to reinforce the unpopularity of the 'opposed' party. For example, both newspapers suggested that ZANU-PF (in *The Daily News*) and MDC (in *The Herald*) respectively were forced to cancel a rally because they allegedly could not drum up sufficient support:

> President Mugabe has cancelled his rally at Sakubva Stadium in Mutare today and will instead hold rallies outside the city at Checheche in the morning and Zimunya in the afternoon. Morgan Tsvangirai, the MDC leader, attracted a large crowd of 15 000 at his first presidential campaign address at Sakubva Stadium last Sunday. Top Zanu PF provincial officers said the Mutare rally was cancelled because Mugabe was too busy. […] During the campaign for the June 2000 parliamentary election, about 10 000 people walked out of Sakubva Stadium after Mugabe launched a scathing attack on opposition and independent candidates.[11]

> POOR attendance forced the MDC to cancel its rally in Marondera yesterday where the opposition party leader, Mr Morgan Tsvangirai, was supposed to be the main speaker.
> Mr Tsvangirai was greeted by less than 200 people, most of whom had travelled from Harare, at the meeting dubbed "MDC Star Rally". MDC leaders last night gave flimsy excuses, saying that their supporters failed to attend the rally owing to alleged intimidation by Zanu-PF supporters and war veterans.[12]

With regard to the agency of rally attendees, newspapers represented these as either heroes willing to support the opposition in the face of rampant voter intimidation (in the case of MDC supporters in *The Daily News*) or pawns bribed by promises of food aid funded by overseas forces (in the case of MDC supporters in *The Herald*). For example, *The Herald* commented as follows on the MDC's campaign strategies:

> The MDC has used food aid as its campaign trump card to woo the rural vote. It has already announced that it has secured several thousands tonnes of maize that will last until next year March. The MDC has, however, not revealed the source of its food aid only claiming that friends for Zimbabwe were waiting in line with some food aid. MDC has been widely criticised for its close ties with Western governments who have a hidden agenda to turn the country into a colony again.[13]

The Daily News, on the other hand, could be seen to emphasise the way in which ZANU-PF was forcing support through violence and intimidation or food aid:

> ZANU PF has been giving out free food and money to mobilise people in Matabeleland to attend

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[9] Thousands turn up for Zanu-PF rally, *The Herald*, 11 February 2002.
[10] Ruhanya, P., 50 000 Attend Tsvangirai Rally, *The Daily News*, 4 March 2002.
[11] Mangwende, B., Zanu PF rally flops, *The Daily News*, 7 February 2002.
[12] Poor attendance forces MDC to cancel rally, *The Herald*, 2 March 2002.
[13] Tsvangirai rally flops, *The Herald*, 5 March 2002.

rallies addressed by President Mugabe. The paper confirmed this in Umzingwane District where people who attended one of the rallies told the newspaper in separate interviews that they attended the rallies because they wanted food. […] All the rallies in Matabeleland South were attended by an average of 10 000 hungry people who scrambled for food during the gatherings. They received sadza and cooked beef. Some villagers at Umzingwane said they were given cooking oil, another scarce commodity, and undisclosed sums of money to entice them to attend the rally. […] Other villagers from the surrounding areas said they had been told that if they did not attend the rallies they would be punished.[14]

In the particular context of a highly polarised media landscape, *The Daily News* and *The Herald* then were as much involved in the election contest as the two political parties, ZANU-PF and the MDC. Through their coverage of party rallies, they sought to legitimise the party they were sympathetic to and to delegitimise the 'enemy'. The quotes above bear testimony to a highly intertextual dialogue between the two newspapers in which both papers seemed to respond directly to each other's.

Apart from print media, the electronic media arguably play an even more crucial part in mediating party rallies because of their ability to visualise the event. In the absence of any private broadcasters, it has been well documented that the monopoly, state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) strongly privileged the campaign rallies of the ruling party ZANU-PF. As the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ) has convincingly demonstrated, the MDC was rarely offered an opportunity to speak but mostly mediated through the voice of ruling party officials. With particular reference to coverage of the campaign rally, ZBC's use of different camera positions served to construct divergent images of party rallies. For example, in the case of well-attended MDC rallies, the camera would often only show close-up pictures of a handful of supporters.[15] Some of the supporters shown would be white supporters in order to reinforce the image of the MDC as a party controlled by white interests – whether Rhodesian or British. ZANU-PF rallies, on the other hand, would be recorded using a long-distance angle that would give the impression of a large crowd. Treating elections as 'media events' therefore enables us to highlight the way in which media institutions and political actors form particular relationships that are aimed at legitimising elections as credible events and condoning certain political actors as legitimate candidates.

Conclusion
As this article has sought to demonstrate, a critical and radical research agenda on media and elections looks beyond elections as real opportunities for citizen participation but instead problematises universal meanings of elections and points to the importance of understanding the local context in which elections are embedded. While in many Western democracies, political leaders present elections as real opportunities for citizens to participate in politics, in some African contexts, as the Zimbabwe example demonstrated, politicians do not pretend that elections are aimed at enabling the electorate the right to vote their leaders into power. Instead, the power of the gun remains important in adjusting the outcome of unfavourable elections. Instead of treating media as the neutral arbiters of information on election candidates, I have considered the relation between media institutions and political actors as a symbiotic relationship that ultimately seeks to legitimise the election ritual as well as certain election candidates. Both media institutions and political actors are concerned with attracting a particular readership or

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[14] Gande, C., Zanu-PF entices the hungry to Mugabe's rallies with food, *The Daily News*, 25 February 2002.
[15] See also: State media ups propaganda, *The Financial Gazette*, 7 March 2002.

support base. Hence, they share a joined agenda of mobilising popular support. An outright declaration of support for a particular party could assist in selling newspapers. On the other hand, positive coverage of a political party in a newspaper or on television may cultivate further support. By highlighting the symbiosis between media institutions and political actors, we come to understand how media become incorporated in the election ritual. Finally, it is important to emphasise the limitations of the liberal-democratic model of media-state relations which continues to frame many studies on media in Africa. Given the low penetration of mass media in many parts of Africa and the particular meaning of elections, it is evident that a straightforward application of liberal-democratic theory hardly results in a deepened understanding of the role of media and elections in Africa. Instead, it might tell us more about what Africa media or politics lacks than how it operates.

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