# Critical Journalism and Media Convergence During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Representation of Corruption in Zimbabwean Online News

**Wishes Tendayi Mututwa and Akpojivi Ufuoma**

**Abstract** The coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic, which began in China's Wuhan province in December 2019, has impacted nation states, highlighting their approaches and abilities to fight the pandemic. In Zimbabwe, attempts at fighting the pandemic have opened the floodgates for COVID-19-related corruption by "Covidpreneurs"-the politically connected and public officials. Therefore, in this chapter, we seek to examine the role of critical journalism and media convergence in exposing COVID-19-related corruption in Zimbabwe. Using qualitative content analysis on *Zimlive newspaper* stories culled over 1 month (1–30 June), interviews with media practitioners, and media convergence theory as a lens, this chapter critically looks at the discourses from *Zimlive,* and how these discourses expose corruption scandals involving COVID-19 funds. The study argues that critical journalism, taking advantage of digital technologies, was pivotal in exposing COVID-19 corruption in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords** Corruption · Watchdog Journalism · Covid-19 · Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Journalism in Zimbabwe has been negated by authoritarian media policies and practices spanning three phases: colonial rule, Mugabe era and post-Mugabe era. These authoritarian policies have affected the quality of critical journalism in Zimbabwe (Ntibinyane 2018). For this study, critical journalism, commonly referred to as investigative journalism, is defined as journalism that is focused on challenging and sometimes risky extraction of "facts" that are not generally known, and often

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deliberately hidden or covered up, especially by those in positions of power (Olivier 2010, p. 1). Likewise, Senam and Udo (2015, p. 44) define critical journalism as journalism that goes far beyond news gathering, writing and dissemination to exploration of news and information in a way that seeks to promote the survival of the society and strengthening social institutions and governance through credible and objective reporting. Consequently, critical journalists are commonly targeted by state security forces, and may sometimes face death. The practice of critical journalism has created an effective marketplace of ideas where information is readily available.

The importance of critical journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic where many countries and donor organisations are pouring huge financial support to deal with the pandemic cannot be overemphasized. Journalism helps provide crucial information to the public about the management of the funds, exposes corruption, betrayal of public trust, and holds government accountable during this period. Schauseil (2019) identifies three functions of critical journalism: to be watchdogs of corruption, to promote integrity and to engage citizens in anticorruption efforts. Schauseil (2019) adds that the watchdog function is founded on an understanding of the media as the "fourth estate" of democracy within a system of checks and balances with the purpose to monitor and observe the behaviour of public officials in the legislature, executive and judiciary.

The purpose of journalism lies in its end, that is, the functions or responsibilities of journalism to society. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) put it, the purpose of journalism is not defined by technology, not by journalists or the techniques they employ by the function news plays in people's lives. Put differently, critical journalism exists to provide the citizens with information by engaging in watchdog activities (Ntibinyane 2018). Locating critical journalism's role in a democratic setup, Coronel (2010), noted that high impact investigative journalism has made the media an effective and credible watchdog and boosted its credibility and support among the public. For Coronel and many others, the press as an institution is strengthened when journalists have demonstrated that they serve the public interest by uncovering malfeasance and abuse. Critical journalism requires the journalist to thoroughly scrutinize the behaviour of officials and bring to light their shortcomings, as officials cannot always be trusted to act properly, and the press is a check on impropriety. When journalists assume a critical stance towards the state, they become representatives of generalised public opinion, and their discourse is distinct from the discourse of political parties and politicians (Norris 2000). Despite the growing attacks on critical journalists in many developing countries, there is a general agreement among researchers that media actors have a pivotal role to play in strengthening anti-corruption initiatives (Brunetti and Weder 2003). Zimbabwe's post-Mugabe administration led by Emmerson Mnangagwa had declared zero-tolerance for corruption. However, numerous efforts by the media and whistle-blowers to expose corruption of senior public officials have been consistently frustrated by Zimbabwe Anticorruption Commission (ZACC)'s unwillingness to take any serious action to address the corruption allegations. Instead, attacks on

critical journalists and whistle-blowers by the country's security forces have been on the increase (Freedom House 2019).

   This study is therefore premised on the following questions: to what extent does critical journalism play a watchdog role on public finances during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do digital tools enhance news gathering and dissemination for critical journalism on online newspapers?

## Corruption and Critical Journalism in Zimbabwe: 1987 and Beyond

Zimbabwe has a long history of corruption, mainly by public officials and the political elite predating independence in 1980. It is important to explore the role of critical journalism in reporting corruption cases involving the political elite and public officials after independence. From independence in 1980 up to 1987, there were no major corruption scandals in Zimbabwe. Shana (2006) argues that the most unanimous opinion condensed from audit reports, donor reports, household surveys, business environment and enterprise surveys, legislative reports, and diagnostic studies available between 1980 and 1987 reveal that the incidences of corruption, though present, were minimal no matter how they were defined. Major corruption incidents began to be noticeable from 1988 onwards with prominent corruption scandals like the Willowgate scandal (1988), GMB Grain scandal (1995), Harare City Refuse Tender scandal (1998), ZMDC diamond 15 Billion heist (2015), Salarygate (2015) RBZ Loan scandal (2007) and the COVID-gate (2020). While many other corruption scandals have occurred in Zimbabwe, the focus of this study is to explore the place of critical journalism in bringing these scandals to light and setting the agenda. We argue that a more nuanced study of the Zimbabwean society in the 1980s reveals that corruption was rampant though it remained largely outside the media gaze. This was because all media was state controlled then and the political elite in the security sector discouraged critical journalism (Mwatwara and Mujeri 2015).

   The Willowgate car scandal became one of the most outstanding cases of critical journalism, spearheaded by the state media in Zimbabwe. The scandal involved senior military, government and ZANU-PF party officials who purchased Toyota Cressida cars at a government-controlled cheap price of Z$27,000 and resold them on the black market for Z$110,000 (Saunders 2000). *Chronicle* editor, Geoff Nyarota and his deputy, Davison Maruziva broke the story despite threats from the political elite (Nyarota 2006). After the exposure of the Willowgate scandal, President Robert Mugabe instituted the Sandura Commission to investigate the scandal but the report was never made public (Meredith 2002). In a move that was designed to discourage critical journalism, Geoff Nyarota lost his job as editor of the *Chronicle* (Meredith 2002, p. 86). Subsequently, corruption scandals in the 1990s were not sufficiently exposed by the media (Mwatwara and Mujeri 2015).

By 2013, corruption had become so endemic that the media became vocal in calling for corrective measures. This followed one of the worst corruption scandals ever to hit Zimbabwean sport popularised as Asiagate. This was a football match fixing scandal that was choreographed by Wilson Raj Perumal of Singaporean origin and the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA), Henrietta Rushwaya between 2007 and 2010 (Toni 2012). As Chiweshe (2020) intimates, officials of ZIFA, led by Henrietta Rushwaya allegedly connived with Asian betting syndicates to send the Zimbabwe senior national football team to participate in fixed "friendly" tournaments in Asian countries such as Malaysia, Jordan, Singapore, Vietnam, Yemen, Oman and Thailand, earning huge amounts of money for the match-fixers. The scandal was eventually exposed in 2010 by Mthulisi Mafa, a former sports reporter with *The Sunday Mail*, a publicly owned but state-controlled weekly newspaper (Chiweshe 2020). Ncube (2017) and Chiweshe (2020) noted that Asiagate also involved key political actors who in many ways remained behind the scenes.

From 2009 to 2013, parastatal bosses awarded themselves hefty salary and allowance packages. Rusvingo (2014) reveals that the media played an important role in exposing these high-level corruption cases. For instance, the media made public that the Chief Executive Officer of Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), Happison Muchechetere earned about US$ 40000.00 and got US$ 250000.00 as a housing allowance while many employees at the public broadcaster were not being paid for months. In another salary scandal at Harare City Council which was exposed by the media, Town Clerk Tendai Mahachi and his bloated 18 management team at Town House were reported to have amassed US$ 500,000 in monthly salaries and allowances (Matenga 2014; Mtomba 2014). In addition, investigative journalists exposed another top-level salary scandal at Premier Services Medical Aid Society (PSMAS), where top management was earning at least US$ 1.3 million in monthly salaries and its CEO, Cuthbert Dube was reported to be earning US$ 230,000 in allowances, yet the organisation owed various service providers approximately US$ 38 million as on 31 December 2013 (Rusvingo 2014).

The overthrow of President Robert Mugabe through military-backed civilian demonstrations was premised on Zimbabweans' frustration with corruption and criminal activities by the political elite around the president. The incumbent president, Emmerson Mnangagwa promised to eradicate corruption in his inaugural speech on 24 November 2017. Consequently, he reconstituted the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) with new members, and this led to initial success as ZACC took on some financial scandals that had previously been ignored. For instance, under the new-look ZACC, Tourism and Hospitality minister, Prisca Mupfumira became the first high ranking official to be arrested over corruption in post-Mugabe era after the media had exposed a $US 95 million financial scandal at NASSA during her tenure (Chingono 2019). However, Mupfumira was later released, a move which the media described as "catch and release game" by the new government (Bwititi 2020; Tapfumaneyi 2020). The public sentiment was that the new administration was unwilling to punish politically connected officials. Despite the persistent threats to journalistic freedom, critical journalists in Zimbabwe

play a critical role in bringing corruption to light. As Adriano (2019) opines, critical journalism has made major contributions in bringing to light what some would rather keep in the dark.

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Corruption in Africa

The rising number of COVID-19 cases in Africa has resulted in a significant increase in corruption as the institutional mechanism to regulate procurement were suspended due to the emergency response of nation states to the pandemic (World Justice Project 2020). Therefore, a significant number of COVID-19 corruption scandals have been reported in countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe (Mbewa 2020). For instance, South Africa has been one of the worst hit countries with coronavirus infections and deaths, prompting the government to set aside R 500 billion and taking a further $4.3 billion loan from the International Monitory Fund (IMF) to tackle the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and citizens. However, there have been cases of corruption in personal protection equipment (PPE) procurement, and these involved overpricing, substandard products and services, and giving tenders to those connected to the government and the ruling party. The media reported that Madzikane II, Thandisizwe Diko, the husband of presidential spokesperson, Khusela Diko had received contracts worth R125-million for Covid-19 PPE from the Gauteng Department of Health (James and Singh 2020a). The newspaper based its report on "sources and official documents" and it was evident that the story emerged as a result of inside information, perhaps a whistle-blower, rather than information publicly available or via systems currently in place to monitor procurement (James and Singh 2020b). Similar corruption cases were reported in Limpopo, Free State, Eastern Cape amongst others, thus the declaration that, there was the emergence of "Covidpreneurs" in South Africa (Mwangi 2020).

In Kenya, the political elite were at the forefront of COVID-19 financial scandals. An investigative report by the *Daily Nation* newspaper found that some of the companies awarded government contracts were not properly registered, while others purchased products that were not fit for purpose. Kapchanga (2020) highlighted that critical journalism was pivotal in exposing corruption and extravagancy of government officials. Of the Ksh 1 billion donated by the World Bank for the procurement of PPE, medicines and the setting up of isolation facilities, the government officials spent Ksh4 million on tea and snacks, and Ksh2 million on airtime (Kapchanga 2020). Similarly, Uganda witnessed some cases of corruption by the politically connected. After the media exposed these rampant acts of corruption, some Members of Parliament were ordered by the high court to pay back 10 billion Ugandan shillings ($US 2.7 million). Also, in April 2020, four senior officials in the prime minister's office were arrested on charges of inflating the cost of relief food meant to help Ugandans who were struggling to feed due to the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihood (Hayden 2020). The impact of these corruption cases on the ability of nation states to fight the COVID-19 cannot be ignored because according to Hanstad

(2020), corruption prolongs the crisis by undermining government efficiency, significantly increasing the loss of life, wasting untold resources and reducing society's fragile trust in government.

## Media Convergence Theory

Media convergence is all about integration and interoperability; the coming together of computing networks, information and communication technologies, and digital forms of information that are inherently adaptable, delivered via "intelligent" platforms, applications and devices (Holliman 2010). Jenkins (2006, p. 3) defines media convergence as "flow of content across multiple media platforms." This results in the technological combination of communication, computing and content (Fosu and Akpojivi 2015). According to Jenkins, media convergence is an ongoing process that should not be understood as a displacement of the old media, but rather as interaction between different media forms and platforms. For instance, a smart phone enables the intersection of various media such as print media, broadcast media and new media. Media convergence should be seen as cooperation and collaboration between previously unconnected communicative forms and platforms Chakaveh and Bogen 2007; Erda 2011). African countries are increasingly embracing the digital revolution in journalism practices, therefore, the way news is gathered, compiled, and disseminated is changing. Globally, critical journalists are taking advantage of the digital affordances available to them to provide evidence to their stories so that readers are exposed to the facts (Khisa 2018; Senam and Udo 2015). Exposing highly sensitive issues such as corruption requires factual documentary proof, thus critical journalists are providing video images, audio files and photographs as evidence, making the news stories compelling. The availability of this digital affordance is also assisting the whistle-blowers who might be the sources working with critical journalists.

These affordances have consequently made online newspapers central to critical journalism. Mabweazara (2015, p. 1) echoed this centrality by stating that vibrant digital media practices are emerging in the African continent despite infrastructural, political and economic obstacles. Stovall (2011) observes that the web is an ideal news medium because of its ability to handle information in most of the formats of traditional media like texts, pictures, graphs, audio and video. The web provides enhanced capacity as the reporter has the liberty of using as many words and as much time to tell the story (Kalamar 2016). The web provides the option to include with the reports full text of the speech that they cover, audio of the source and videos of the scenes where the stories unfold. The medium offers more flexibility as information can be shared in different-formats therefore encouraging interaction and participation (Rahnavad et al. 2017). Fosu and Akpojivi (2015) add that the inclusive and participatory ambience that brings those in authority and ordinary people into direct interaction is created to overturn the hitherto mostly one-dimensional flow from top to bottom. Therefore, online newspapers allow critical journalists to join a network

society, collaborating with readers, other reporters and media outlets, yet publishing in media outlets, which arguably remain the central stage of the public sphere (Carson 2013).

Unlike independent print newspapers, which are elite papers mainly because they target an urban and middle-class readership, online newspapers have found a niche market in the ordinary citizen, thus assuming the role of the voice of the voiceless as such online newspapers encourage participation, and provide citizens with information they require (accountability and transparency of the state), thus endearing online newspapers to the citizens (Asieng and Akpojivi 2019). Online newspapers aim to promote accountability and transparency due to their crucial and investigative stories (Ungar 1995; Rønning 2009). It is in this context that we argue that online publications can fill the void and write stories which resonate with the majority of ordinary citizens that is, holding governments accountable.

## Methodology

The study adopts qualitative research approach in data collection and analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as an inquiry to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience. The major focus of the qualitative research methodology employed in this paper is to understand, explain, explore, discover and clarify situations around how COVID-19 funds were corruptly used by the political elite and public officials in Zimbabwe. We selected *Zimlive* online newspaper purposively for two reasons. Firstly, *Zimlive* is the publication that exposed the COVID-19-related corruption. Secondly, *Zimlive* as on online newspapers has been actively engaged in critical journalism in Zimbabwe since its inception, thus a veritable field for study. Therefore, data was extracted from *Zimlive* for a period of 1 month, between 1 and 30 June 2020, a period characterised by the reportage of corruption and misappropriation of COVID-19 funds. From *Zimlive*, we used the keywords, "COVID-19," "COVID-gate" and "Corruption" to search for stories on COVID-19. A total of six stories on corruption were collected during the period (refer to Table 1 for summary of stories).

In addition, to further explore the role of critical journalism in exposing corruption and strengthening the democratic project, semi-structured interviews with five prominent critical journalists in Zimbabwe were conducted, one of them being *Zimlive* editor, Mduduzi Mathuthu who broke the COVID-gate news.[1] The other four journalists are from *New Ziana, Insure 263, Zal Empire Radio Station* and *The Herald.* Due to the COVID-19 restrictions (lockdown), the interviews were conducted via Zoom. According to Kvale (2006), interviews are key in understanding the world from the subject's point of view and to unfold the meaning of their

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[1] All the interviewees consented to have their names published.

**Table 1** COVID-19 corruption stories run in Zimlive

| Author | Date (2020) | Story title/brief description of story |
|---|---|---|
| Tony Karombo | 28 May | Mnangagwa-linked company nets US$1 million in Covid-19 funds<br>The finance ministry authorised the payment of US$1 million for a consignment of Covid-19 equipment at inflated prices from a company linked to President Emmerson Mnangagwa's son, according to a leaked document |
| Sipho Mabuza | 9 June | Zimbabwe cancels US$60 m tenders given to Mnangagwa-linked company<br>The government has cancelled corrupt procurement deals worth up to US$60 million signed with a company linked to one of President Emmerson Mnangagwa's sons |
| Mduduzi Mathuthu | 13 June | The Zimbabwean government's payment of $2 million to a new start-off firm (2 weeks old), prompting an Interpol investigation<br>Authorities in Hungary commenced a money-laundering probe following the payment of US$2 million to a two-weeks-old company by the government of Zimbabwe. Following the referral of the case to Interpol, the business opened a new office in Dubai and requested the government of Zimbabwe to pay the new invoice of over $1 million into an account in Mauritius, an African tax haven |
| Lindie Whiz | 14 June | Delish Nguwaya first person charged over COVID-19 procumbent scandal<br>Delish Nguwaya, on Saturday became the first person to be charged over a multi-million-dollar COVID-19 medical equipment supply scandal exposed by *Zimlive* |
| Mduduzi Mathuthu | 19 June | Zimbabwe arrests health minister in COVID-19 procurement scandal<br>Health Minister Obadiah Moyo was arrested on Friday over an international COVID-19 procurement scandal exposed by *Zimlive* |
| Nelson Banya | 20 June | Obadiah Moyo has been granted bail after being indicted in the COVID-19 procurement corruption<br>Health Minister has been freed on bail Saturday following his arrest the previous day on allegations over a US$ 60 million deal to procure COVID-19 tests and equipment |

lived world. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was used to analyse both interview data and data from the corruption stories from *Zimlive*, allowing us to come up with thematic interpretations about corruption. Roller and Ravrakas (2015, p. 232) define QCA as "the systematic reduction of content, analysed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data." In QCA, content embraces all appropriate data sources beyond the text such as images, videos, audio, graphics and symbols (Kuckartz 2014).

## Findings and Discussion

The discussion below will be based on the themes derived from both the interviews and news stories collected.

### *Corruption Starts from the Top*

The data gathered from interviews and the online newspaper *Zimlive* show that corruption in Zimbabwean public offices is closely linked to influential politicians. The political leadership in Zimbabwe speaks against corruption on public forums but they rarely live up to their promise. The spike in COVID-19 cases in Zimbabwe like in many other nation states, motivated an urgency in the purchase of COVID-19 equipment. The companies and individuals who benefitted from the tenders are closely linked to the president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa. *Zimlive* exposed that a "two-week old company" called Drax International using a United Arab Emirates address yet claiming it was headquartered in Switzerland. The connection between Drax International and the Mnangagwa family is traced from the "business partnership" and friendship between Drax owner, Delish Nguwaya and Mnangagwa's son, Collins Mnangagwa. Drax's proximity to political power can explain why the "Zimbabwe government lifted its own restrictions on buying from third party vendors to approve the deal" and "gave a special dispensation for Drax to deliver its consignment worth US$987,720." From the story "Mnangagwa-linked company nets US$1 million in Covid-19 funds," the invisible elite political hand can be deciphered in the actions of the secretary of the Ministry of Finance, George Guvamatanga who had "earlier terminated existing contracts" to pave way for the Drax tender. Apart from winning the COVID-19 equipment supply tender through its proximity to power, Drax International also overpriced the equipment.

Drax International won a tender to supply 5040 units of N95 masks at a unit cost of US$28 per unit, 15,000 Covid-19 test kits at a unit cost of US$34 and 3740 protective clothing at the unit cost of US$90 each. As Karombo (2020) established, the masks cost an average US$5 per unit or less with suppliers in Dubai, where Drax was registered, while the protective clothing cost an average US$30. Therefore, that the contract was allowed to sail through the Ministry of Finance without any red flags allude to the political influence behind Drax International. *Zimlive* editor, Mduduzi Mathuthu explained how corruption culture is sustained saying:

> Sadly, there is corruption at the very centre of government, in the country's cabinet and among those who wield political power. Weak controls and oversight in offices such as the Presidency, the Legislature, Treasury, the Procurement Regulatory Authority which on numerous occasions is bypassed by government agencies that flout procurement rules, make it difficult to police corruption. (Mduduzi Mathuthu, personal communication, 24 September 2020)

In the early stages of the pandemic, President Mnangagwa had publicly announced that he had "made a personal appeal to Drax international" for help and they kindly responded by donating COVID-19 test kits before promising to supply equipment worth US\$ 60 million. As *Zimlive* exposed, the president was fully aware of the identity of Drax International and the "donations" are common in corrupt regimes as they are a means to gain proximity to the political elite and eventually supply tenders. Drax International was not registered with the Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (PRAZ) (Mathuthu 2020). This is a legal requirement for all companies dealing/doing business with the government. Despite failing to achieve this condition, the Drax International was paid US\$ 2 million for the overpriced supply of Covid-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) and test kits. Ilir Dedja, a 51-year-old man from Sefaraj, a community in Albania, arranged the payment. Dedja had been to Zimbabwe to meet with Mnangagwa and Delish Nguwaya, his Zimbabwean partner. On 20 February 2020, he registered Drax Consult SAGL in Hungary, indicating that the company's activities include "business consulting, marketing, advertising, and business management consulting for foreign firms trading in medical and cosmetic products," according to official records. Following its registration, the company was credited with US\$2 million, in the form of \$1 million deposits. The payments were a 10% deposit on a delivery of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies worth \$20 million under a contract. The National Pharmaceutical Company (NatPharm), a state-owned drug company, would pay the remaining US\$18 million in monthly payments of US\$1.5 million through the country's Treasury. Zimbabwe has a long history of political influence on government tenders and as Rusvingo (2014) opines, corruption in Zimbabwe is pervasive because the head of this mafia or "yakuza"-like operation sits in the highest office in the land and there are no repercussions for those found guilty except being arrested and later released, popularised in Zimbabwe as the "catch and release" system. *New Ziana* journalist Moses Chitiyo, while buttressing the above held that:

> *Zimlive* did well in exposing the procedural shortcomings in the COVID-19 equipment tender. There are some who have been arrested on allegations of high level corruption but their cases have not progressed much from the initial court appearances to the last one. There is much hype at the start, but it dies naturally and there seems to be no longer any interest by the authorities to pursue the corruption cases. (Personal communication, 27 September 2020)

This explains the breach of the tender process to favour Drax International. This observation was summed up in an interview with another critical journalist who said:

> Lack of political will. The catch-and-release system currently prevailing in the country is nurturing corruption in Zimbabwe. The system protects criminals within the government and hounds perceived enemies. (Lazarus Sauti, personal communication, 25 September 2020)

Corruption in Zimbabwe is part of the patronage system which begins from the grassroots political structures to the presidium. Part of the *Zimlive* exposé showed that one of the beneficiaries of the COVID-19 equipment supply tender was President Mnangagwa's bodyguard who owns a shelf company registered in Namibia

called Jaji Investments. The company had received payment for the supply of COVID-19 test kits worth US$ 66,000. Apart from the test kits being costed at twice the standard price by Jaji Investments, the kits were never delivered. The Minister of Health and Child Care, Obadiah Moyo used his political influence to assist Jaji Investments to bypass the tender process. On 14 April 2020, Moyo wrote a note instructing his permanent secretary Agnes Mahomva to "find an invoice for the rapid response kits for purchase from Namibia." This was despite Mahomva having earlier declined, citing that the kits were locally available. The adverse impact of corruption is that it erodes the institutional capacity of government as established procedures are disregarded, resources are siphoned and officials are assigned or promoted without regard to performance (Bonga et al. 2015).

## Digital Tools Provide Irrefutable Evidence

The study finds that the use of digital tools in news gathering allowed *Zimlive* to provide irrefutable evidence that exposed corruption. Schiffrin (2014) argued that critical journalists in today's highly connected digital society are now taking advantage of their online community relationships to scour documents and uncover potential wrongdoings. Critical journalism as watchdog journalism performs an important role in maintaining checks and balances on governance by exposing corruption by public officials and their associates (Malila 2018). In an interview with *Zimlive* editor, Mduduzi Mathuthu, it was found that *Zimlive* journalists relied on sources within the Ministry of Finance who provided documentary evidence of corruption through photos of the corrupt transactions and messages. *Zimlive* stories provided several photos which drew the connection between President Mnangagwa, his twin sons Collins and Shaun Drax International. One of the photos accompanying a story titled, "How Zimbabwe paid a two-week-old firm $2 million, prompting an Interpol investigation"; Collins and Shaun Mnangagwa are pictured with Valdano, the Zimbabwe agent for Jaji Investments. With digital affordances, the online newspaper used graphic tools to encircle Delish Nguwaya's face in one of the pictures taken with the Mnangagwa twins and other youths while on a trip in China in 2019 (see Fig. 1). While the graphics allow the publication to direct the readers' eyes to the key person, it also reinforces the connection between Nguwaya and the president's family. Commenting on the appropriation of graphic tools by *Zimlive*, one journalist said:

> *Zimlive* provided evidence in form of photographs and used graphic tools to encircle the subjects of corruption. This would make readers easily identify the subjects and draw connections between entire groups of connected political elites. (Neo Batakati, personal communication, 29 September 2020)

These digital tools offered critical journalists access to critical images, audios, videos and graphics which would strengthen their evidence of the COVID-gate

**Fig. 1** A photograph shows Delish Nguwaya (*circled*) flanked by the Mnangagwa twins and other ZANU-PF youths during a China visit back in 2018. *Zimlive* (28 May 2020)

scandal by the political elite in Zimbabwe. Highlighting the efficacy of digital tools in exposing COVID-gate, the *Zimlive* editor commented thus:

> Digital tools were critical in our investigations. We were able to communicate with investigative journalists and authorities in other countries using digital tools, online messaging services and encrypted services to receive and share messages, information, images and records relating to our investigation. Digital tools were also used to examine documents and images for authenticity. We were able to use social media listening tools to track certain stories, comments and trends relating to this story. We were able to procure official documents relating to this scandal using digital tools that helped us protect our sources. (Mduduzi Mathuthu, personal communication, 24 September 2020)

More evidence of political interference in the COVID-19 equipment tender scam provided by *Zimlive* evidence of political interference to the COVID-19 equipment tender scam was a photo of a hand-written note by the Minister of Health and Child Care, Obadiah Moyo, directing the Permanent Secretary, Agnes Mahomva, to authorise payment for 4500 COVID-19 test kits to be supplied by Jaji Investments based in Namibia and to copy the transaction to himself and the Minister of Finance, Mthuli Ncube (see Fig. 2). There was also another letter dated 8 May 2020 from the secretary of Reserve Bank for Finance and Economic Development, George Guvamatanga directing Agnes Mahomva to immediately arrange a payment for the supply of surgical masks, coveralls and COVID-19 test kits, which had been
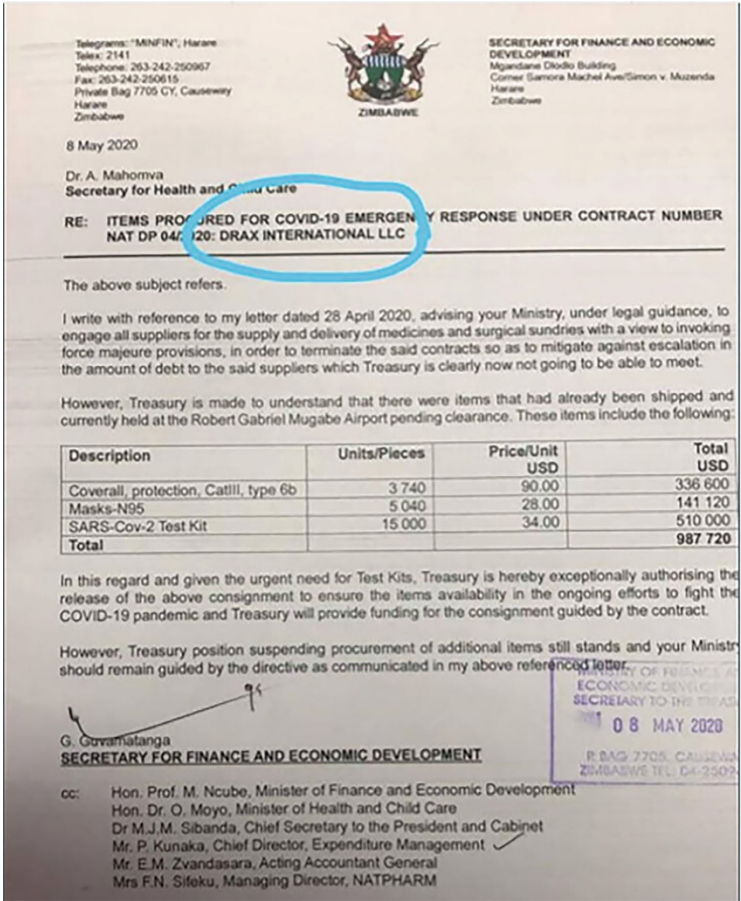
**Fig. 2** George Guvamatanga's letter directing the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health to quickly arrange payment of COVID-19 equipment. *Zimlive* (13 June 2020)

supplied without following tender pocesses. As argued by Steingrüber et al. (2020), this pandemic has been seen by some as an opportunity to take advantage of the emergency to abuse their power for private gain. Schipani et al. (2020) add that although corruption has been rife in Africa before COVID-19, the pandemic has given room to another level of looting. As this study finds, this looting is sophisticated as it is a network of well-connected politicians and public officers, making efforts to address the graft difficult.

The photo evidence from *Zimlive* shows that COVID-gate was executed through a collaboration of top officials in the Ministry of Finance, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Health and Child Care and the presidium. *Zimlive*'s exposure of the handwritten note by Moyo demonstrates that corruption in Zimbabwe is pervasive

and it starts with the political elite downwards. This view is also shared by journalist, Neo Batakati, who noted:
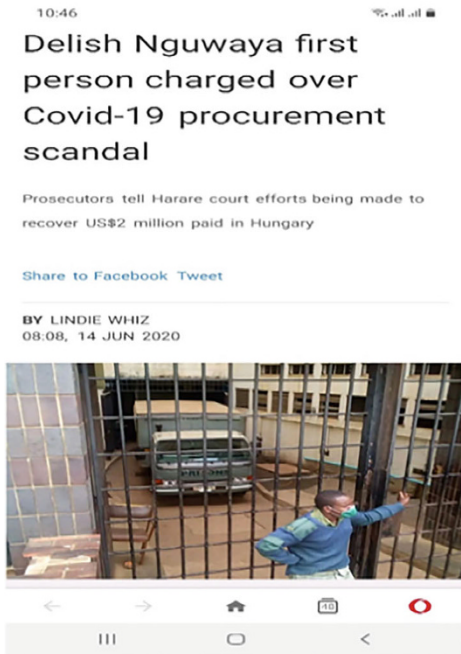
> Corruption in Zimbabwe is institutionalised and sadly, very functional. The culture will be difficult to stop as it is enabled by those with political privilege who use their power to override public officers and law enforcement agents. (Personal communication, 29 September 2020)

In an environment where access to information is difficult for journalists, this study finds that digital tools, particularly the mobile phone ensured that journalists were digitally connected with sources who captured and provided crucial evidence of corruption without risking themselves.

## *Impact of Exposing Corruption by the Media*

The effectiveness of critical journalism is revealed in the *Zimlive* COVID-19 corruption scandal as shown by the response of government, citizens and the police. The role of critical reporting is to safeguard effective political competition by ensuring that claims about a government's record or a candidate's qualifications for office are open to external scrutiny and evaluation (Norris 2000, p. 29). Casero-Ripollés et al. (2016) add that critical journalism is a vital safeguard against abuse of power. Officials cannot always be trusted to act properly, and the press is to check on impropriety (Adriano 2019). Understood within the context of watchdog journalism, critical journalism's task is to oversee political activity, particularly of those in positions of power, detect and expose errors, corruption, injustice and abuses of power (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016). In response to the media exposure of COVID-gate scandal and growing public anger, mainly expressed on social media under the hash tag #bringbackourmoney and #corruptionmustfall, there was some attempt by the state to address the scandals. For instance, the Health Service Board responsible for supervising the tender process was immediately dissolved. Also, the Health Minister was fired few weeks after both the Minister of Health and Child Care, Obadiah Moyo and Delish Nguwaya of Drax International were arrested. However, they were both granted bail and Nguwaya's case was reduced to a mere procedural misdemeanour instead of corruption (Fig. 3).

All the journalists who were interviewed concurred that the "catch and release" game reflects that corruption has the blessing of the powerful political elite. However, in comparison to the charges given to the political elites involved in the corruption scandal, *Zimlive* editor and a fellow freelance critical journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono, who amplified *Zimlive*'s coverage of the corruption stories on his popular Twitter page, paid a huge price as they were arrested on spurious charges of threatening to overthrow an elected government (Paradigm Initiative 2020). According to Joseph (2014), critical journalism in Zimbabwe has become a minefield for journalists and editors as they are exposed to dangers and threats from the state while engaging in their constituted responsibility of informing the public and

10:46

## Delish Nguwaya first person charged over Covid-19 procurement scandal

Prosecutors tell Harare court efforts being made to recover US$2 million paid in Hungary

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**BY LINDIE WHIZ**
08:08, 14 JUN 2020

## Bail for Obadiah Moyo after being charged in Covid-19 procurement scandal

Prosecutors say health minister disregarded warni by intelligence services to give companies tenders

Share to Facebook  Tweet

**BY NELSON BANYA I REUTERS**
15:14, 20 JUN 2020

**Fig. 3** News headlines in *Zimlive*, 14 June 2020 by Whiz (2020) (*left*) and *Zimlive*, 20 June 2020 by Banya (2020) (*right*), showing the arrest of Delish Nguwaya and Minister Obadiah Moyo

holding state officials accountable. Casero-Ripollés et al. (2016) trace the strong and systematic pressures on journalists to the political realm and the efforts by politicians to control the news. Despite these threats, the power of critical journalism in society cannot be overemphasised as the coverage of collusion and corruption by journalists may help prevent corruption or affect the trajectory of corruption as it unfolds (Andvig and Moene 1990).

## Conclusion

The study established that critical journalism is a critical component of democracy as it performs the watchdog role over public officials and their use of public finances. As Abdelkader (2019) opined, the online press associated with the field of cyber media engage in investigation and dissemination of information to large and uncontrolled social networks. In this study, we find that online newspapers like *Zimlive* play an important role in highlighting and enhancing the role of critical journalism in exposing corruption cases and the prominent personalities involved in such corrupt acts to the general public. In a society in which misinformation has impacted people's trust in news, the availability of digital tools and their affordances

allow online newspapers to use images, audios, videos and graphics to provide proof in corruption cases to the satisfaction of the readers. These technological affordances augment the main story offering graphic evidence of people, organisations and the relationships between them.

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