

The intermedia influence of X on legacy media coverage of the 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The legacy media has for many years been instrumental and central in setting news agenda. In Africa, where the majority of the population dwells in rural areas, the centrality of the legacy media in setting news agenda is not in doubt. However, digital platforms have of late been key platforms for news resulting in them competing with the legacy media in setting news agenda. The purpose of this paper is to examine the intermedia relationship between X and legacy media in Zimbabwe within the theoretical framework of agenda-setting. The study sought to find out the intermedia agenda setting between X and the legacy media in Zimbabwe, namely, *NewsDay* and *The Herald*. The two publications represent the polarised Zimbabwe media system and the broader socio economic and political landscape. For analysis, Rozelli Campbell's intermedia agenda cross-lagged correlation method was used. Findings demonstrate that X influenced legacy media's reportage on elections during the given period. However, there were strong correlations between X and *NewsDay* as compared to *The Herald*.

Keywords

elections, journalism, intermedia agenda, social media, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The legacy media has for many years been instrumental and central in setting a news agenda. More so, people formed their opinions based on information from the legacy media leading to communities and individuals arguing that anything that has not been confirmed by the legacy media is not worth to be taken seriously. In Africa, where the majority of the population dwells in rural areas, the centrality of the legacy media in setting news agenda is not in doubt. However, digital platforms have of late been key platforms for news resulting in them competing with the legacy media in setting a news agenda. The purpose of this paper is to examine the intermedia relationship between X and legacy media in Zimbabwe within the theoretical framework of agenda-setting. In intermedia agenda-setting, one medium is considered as one of the various sources that can affect another medium's agenda (Boyle, 2001; Lee et al., 2005). In understanding such a relationship, researchers on this discourse are confronted with one question 'who sets the media agenda?'. Sikanku (2011, 1322) adds that the intermedia agenda-setting researchers "have examined the hypothesis that the media agenda of one news organisation would influence that of a different news organisation."

At onset, we do not want to claim to be the first to carry out a study on intermedia agenda-setting. Some of the pioneering researchers in this area looked at the intermedia influence between daily newspapers and national news agencies (Boyle, 2001; Danielian and Reese, 1989) and influence of major newspapers on other newspapers and on network television (Breen, 1997; Reese and Danielian, 1989). With the advent of the Internet, there have been studies that have looked at the intermedia agenda-setting between the Internet and legacy media (Lee et al., 2005; Sikanku, 2011). Despite such efforts and other notable studies being done on how media sets agendas for each other, as shown above, the examination of this intermedia agenda setting remains under researched in Africa. This study is timely because social media has evolved, and the platformisation of content being influenced by 'platform algorithms' has resulted in social media platforms, especially X, being key in setting a news agenda. Platformisation is defined as "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" (Poell et al., 2019, 5). With the 'game' now being played on social media platforms like X, which amplify issues and have a transnational scope (see Matsilele, 2022), semi-authoritarian regimes have been found to be using legacy media to respond to social media discourses. Thus, by examining the intermedia influence of social media (X) on legacy media, this paper deepens and offers a new trajectory in our understanding of intermedia agenda-setting research, especially in semi-authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe where the state has a firm grip on the media landscape. Semi-authoritarian regimes can be described as neither full-scale authoritarianism or fully democratic yet display characteristics of each. As such, "...although generally free elections are held and democratic institutions are in operation, elections do not transfer substantive political power, and institutions operate weakly so as to provide regime incumbents with a more elaborate and believable democratic disguise" (Sondrol, 2007, 48). This perfectly describes the regime in Zimbabwe (Figure 1).

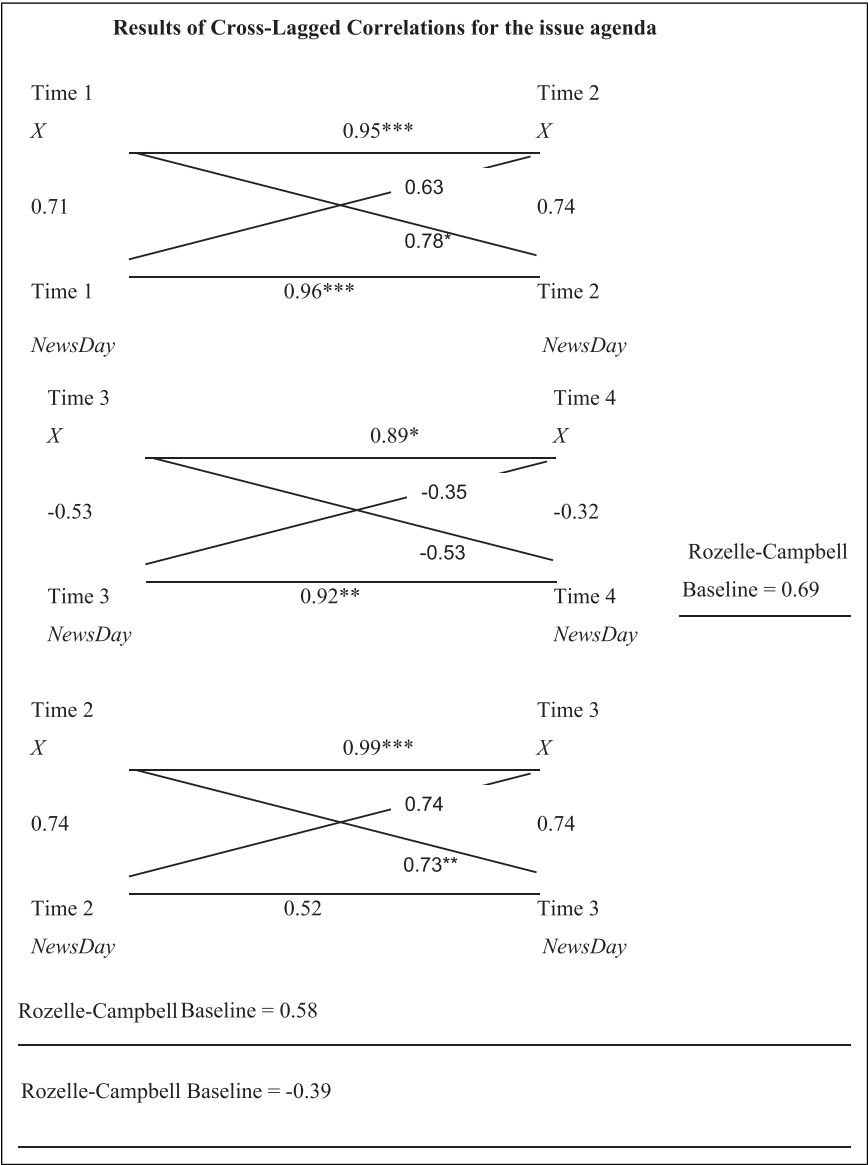


Figure 1. Results of Cross-Lagged Correlations for the issue agenda.

The paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the key discourses produced on X and the legacy media?

RQ2: Will the issue agendas presented in the legacy media influence the issue agendas on X, and vice versa?

The paper is structured as follows: it proceeds to give a brief background on media systems in Zimbabwe with the aim of showing the bifurcated media environment. The paper moves to review literature paying much attention to the influence of social media on legacy media, and vice versa. Intermedia Agenda Setting theory will be discussed next before looking at the methodology section and the discussion of findings (Figure 2).

Zimbabwe media systems and political contestations

The media environment in Zimbabwe has in the past been characterised by patriotic (state) and oppositional (private) journalisms. The state and private media have been characterised by high political parallelism. High political parallelism is a feature of media systems which refers to the nature of relations between political actors and the media. It has to do with how the media reflects political divisions (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The structure of political parties is reflected by media organisations. Political parties respond to issues raised in media consumed by their voters and media set agendas of political parties their consumers vote for (Atton and Mabweazara, 2011; Hadland, 2011). Political parallelism is essential in understanding the relationship between media and politics. In Zimbabwe, the press shapes and is shaped by politics (Chuma, 2010) (Figure 3).

As explained above, the relationship between media and politics is intertwined. For Zimbabwe, political developments have resulted in a restructuring of the media systems as we know today. Arguably, bifurcation of a pro-opposition private media and pro-ruling party state-controlled media once existed mainly during the early 2000 up to 2013 (Chibuwe, 2016; Chuma et al., 2020; Maodza, 2025). Owing to the factional politics in the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party between 2013 and 2017, it led to the development of factional journalism where both private and state-controlled newsrooms had their journalists being 'used' by ruling party factions (see Chuma et al., 2020). Chibuwe (2016) further notes that during the heightened factional fights the state-controlled media which usually covers ruling party officials in good light had to cover some of them in bad light with the private media on the other hand giving a good coverage of some ruling party officials, especially, those being attacked in the state-controlled media. Despite such being the case, we argue that during elections, the state-controlled media tends to give more positive coverage to the ruling party while the opposition is attacked, and on the other hand, the private press gives more coverage to the opposition flag bearer, and become the critique of the ruling government.

Going forward, the high degree of political parallelism has hypothetically resulted in low journalistic professionalism. Low journalistic professionalism entails the ethics and standards of journalism not being followed (Chari, 2009). Media is governed by certain codes. Truthfulness, objectivity, accountability and the essence of verification are some of the core principles of journalism which media houses should follow. By pursuing political goals or being used in the political matrix, the media in Zimbabwe is not upholding these professionalism guides owing to the high political parallelism (Mpofu, 2017). Stories are not selected according to news values and the media gives false accounts of events. *The Herald*, a state-run newspaper and *NewsDay* a private owned newspaper can have two contradictory accounts of the same event. This is because of low journalistic professionalism. This has diminished the electorate's trust in the media

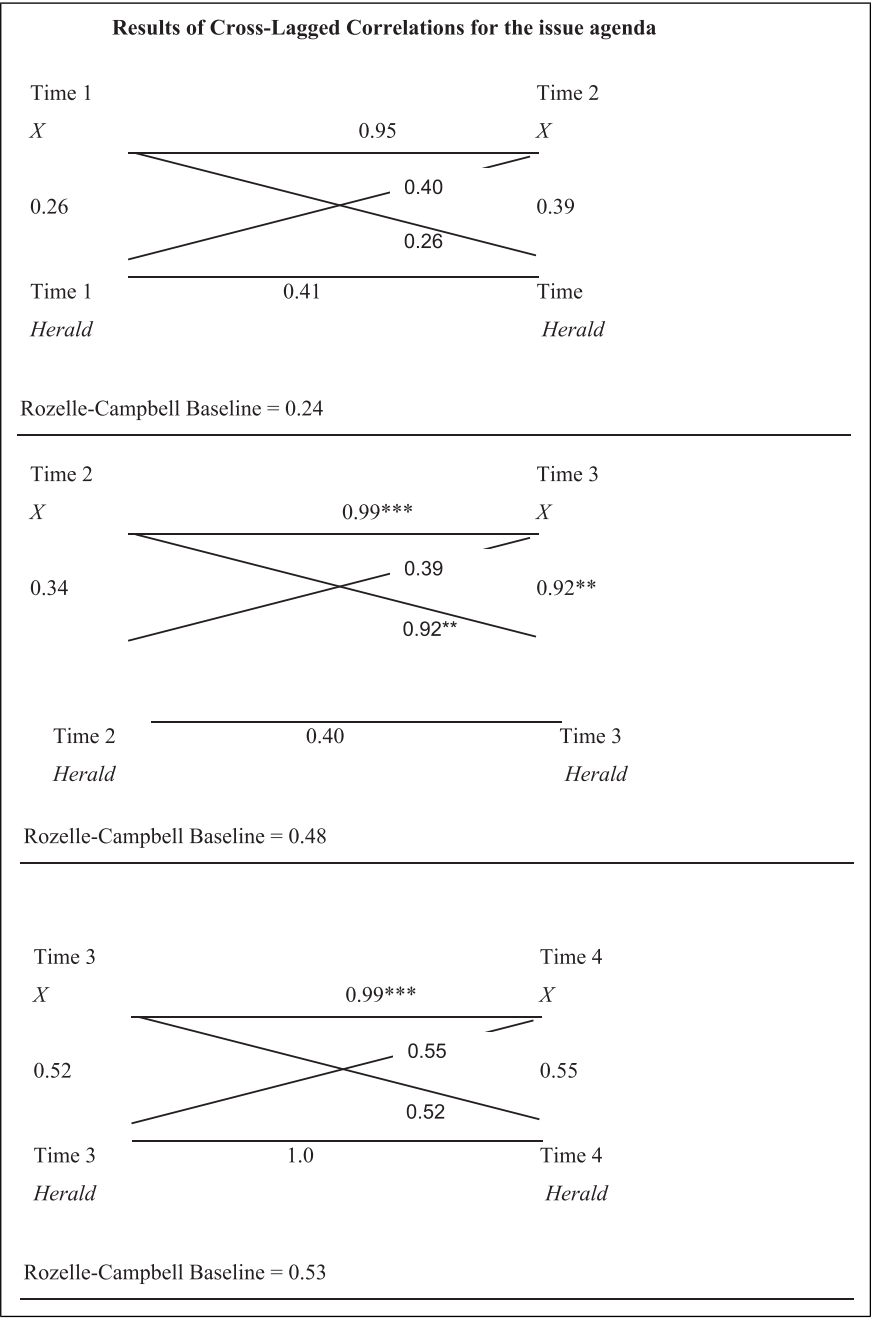


Figure 2. Results of Cross-Lagged Correlations for the issue agenda.

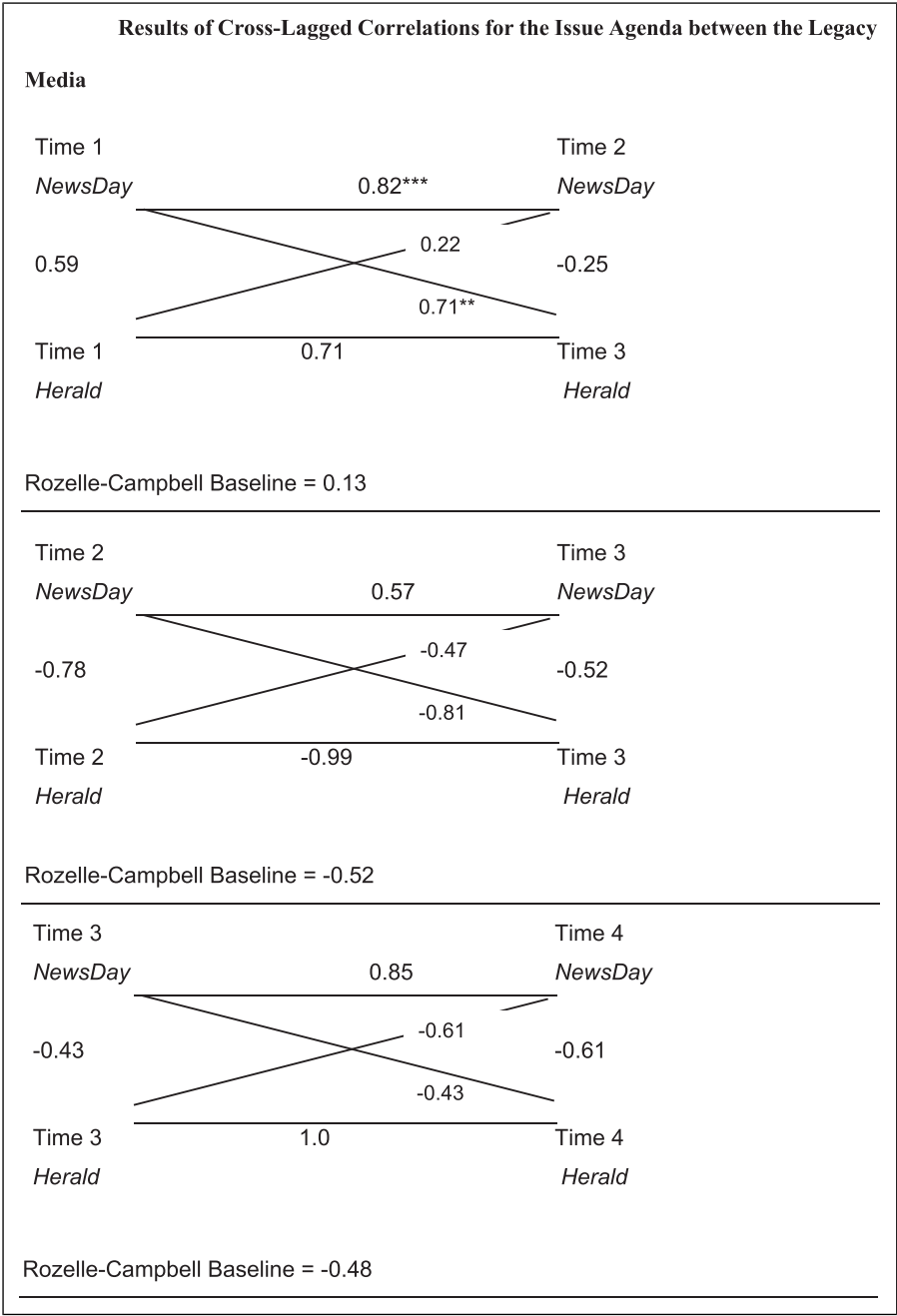


Figure 3. Results of cross-lagged correlations for the issue agenda between the legacy media.

(Chari, 2009; Mabweazara, 2010). Democracy has been compromised as the media as an important aspect of democracy is biased and fails to play the watchdog role so as to bring the economic and political power bloc into book (Chari, 2009; Mpofu, 2017). Low journalistic professionalism has killed the media's ability to ensure responsiveness and agency among citizens.

Arguably, social media has improved how and when people share issues thus contributing to the governance process in Zimbabwe through increasing citizen participation (Mutanda, 2024). With the advent of the internet and new media technologies, media users migrated from traditional media because it had lost public trust and credibility (Rasmussen, 2014). Social media has deepened and enhanced democracy (Papacharissi, 2004). As essential spaces of public and semi-public discourse, new media technologies have shown their democratising potential by increasing access to information and lowering the barrier of participation in public debates (Dzisah, 2018). Social media platforms have helped voters voice their concerns and have added a communication link between voters and politicians. Through social media, there is a potential voice, a platform and access to the means of production (Berger, 2013).

However, the offline camps and factions have migrated online. There is a camp which is now known as Varakashi. Varakashi is a Shona term meaning 'destroyers' or 'thrashing'. Varakashi – used as a noun here – is plural for murakashi, literally 'the beater' or 'one who thrashes others' (Tshuma et al., 2022). The Varakashi denotes the pro-ZANU PF trolling behaviour. These 'destroyers' and cyber-bullies use social media to promote the ideology of the party by launching attacks on perceived rivals such as pro-opposition users. Additionally, they are now able to create false narratives so as to portray those they support in a good light. This has led to the proliferation of 'fake news' and digital propaganda. The same is true for those supporting opposition leaders known as 'nerorists'. Their mandate is to push the ideology of their leaders at whatever cost. Chibuwe (2020) refers to 'nerorists' as followers of Nelson Chamisa and 'varakashi' as followers of Emmerson Mnangagwa and argues that online wars ensued between these two camps during the 2018 election season and these had an implication on democracy. Nelson Chamisa is the leader of the opposition. He led the MDC-T party following the death of its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, before becoming the former President of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). Chamisa lost two successive presidential elections in 2018 and 2023 to Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa is the leader of the ruling ZANU-PF party. Therefore, social media is critical in influencing political discussions despite the rise of cyber ghosts and netizens who come in to sire interests of those in power and end up engaging in cyber bullying.

Literature review

Social media has transformed journalism. Its introduction has not only changed how conversations take place but has led to different forms of journalism, and the relationship between newsrooms and their audiences has also been reconfigured. At the heart of this paper is the relationship between legacy media and social media platforms (X) in setting a news agenda. To begin with, instead of traditional news gathering methods, social media has provided journalists with a new way of sourcing, writing and disseminating

information (Lewis, 2015; Pathak et al., 2018). The landscape has been changed by the ability of social media to affect and effect content, community, conversations, capital (social), culture, collaboration and conversion (Rautela and Singhal, 2020). For this reason, news sourcing patterns have been ‘altered’ with some scholars arguing that instead of pursuing the public interest, legacy media is now more inclined towards publishing stories that are interesting to the public (Mabweazara and Mare 2021).

Social media has also become a platform where users discuss societal issues, some which need the attention of particular authorities. In Zimbabwe, X has played a significant role in electoral process, and in governance (Chibuwe 2020; Matsilele 2022; Ndlovu, 2024). During elections, X is used by different political parties and individuals to disseminate their ideologies. As such, the site becomes an arena for ideological contestation. Some of the deliberations will be based on legacy media coverage of electoral issues. But, who sets the agenda between social media and the legacy media? This is a pertinent question to pose in an ever-changing environment where the legacy media and social media are instrumental in shaping discourses in society. Thus, this paper examines the intermedia relationship between X and legacy media in Zimbabwe.

Previous studies on the relationship between the legacy media and social media have largely focused on the reconfiguration of journalism practices leading to the birth of different journalisms and new journalism cultures (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Mabweazara and Mare, 2021; Mellado and Alfaro, 2020). Scholarship on the influence between the two, especially on the inter media agenda or on who drives the agenda for the other between the two has remained scarce, especially in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. This study is building on the scarcity of this scholarship with its focus being on Zimbabwe media landscape. Writing on dominant literature on the relationship between legacy media and social media, Pathak et al. (2018) argue that social media has presented journalists with an opportunity of extended news coverage and a chance to disseminate their content to a wider audience. Goyanes et al. (2021) in their study on the influence of social media on journalism in Ecuador, conclude that the most important consequences of social media are related to the immediate nature of news, the changing identity of journalists and the growing wave of sensationalism. Studies in India have also concluded that changes brought about by the digitalisation of journalism in the global South have implications for the role that the press plays in politics and governance, particularly in terms of giving a voice to the marginalised.

Studies on the inter media agenda between different mediums as indicated above have mainly been done in the Global North. Lee et al. (2005) study on the U.S gun control movement compared gun related agendas across different media both online and offline, and found significantly different agendas between these. This study used intermedia agenda-setting with a focus on the role of activism/advocacy media and ephemeral websites in shaping the movement discourse in news outlets. The findings showed that activities of ephemeral websites can contribute to “disrupting the agenda-setting effects of activism media by amplifying false and hateful narratives targeting activists” (Lee et al., 2005:150). In a different study by Berger (2013) on intermedia agenda between online versions of international newspapers and X during the Papal elections in 2013, the findings showed that international newspapers and X influenced each other in setting a news agenda. Researching on the South Korean 2000 general election, Lee et al. (2005)

found that discussions on the internet bulletin boards influenced legacy media coverage of the plebiscite. Thus, the internet set an agenda for the legacy media in the country. The discussion above suggests that social media platforms play an important role in setting an agenda for legacy media. Therefore, the contemporary dominance of social media platforms calls for more academic scrutiny especially its relationship with legacy media. As such, it remains ideal to understand the nature of intermedia agenda setting dynamics between social media and legacy media in various regimes.

Intermedia agenda setting

Agenda setting theory is attributed to Lippmann's work in 1922 and also researches by [Mabweazara \(2010\)](#). The theory unpacks how the media influences what is discussed publicly (agenda) through emphasis ([Lee et al., 2005](#)). The media tend to present events in a particular way as an attempt to influence and shape public opinion for example on political news or during election periods. While the theory has been developed over the past years, at its inception it showed that the media set an agenda through the issues it carried, and that the media set a public agenda by addressing issues that affected the general public, and lastly, there was policy agenda-setting where the media was found to be bringing up issues that policy makers/legislators should take note in policy making ([Berger, 2013](#); [Danielian and Reese, 1989](#); [Mellado and Alfaro, 2020](#); [Takeshita and Mikami, 1995](#)). Hence, the above studies have been looking at the first and second level of agenda setting theory with the latter mainly looking at how the media's framing of a general issue affects people's understanding of the issue ([Lee et al., 2005](#)). The latter which is the first level of agenda-setting considers the transmission of issue salience ([McCombs et al., 1998](#)).

As time passed by within the discourse of agenda setting theory, intermedia agenda setting theory was developed. The theory assumes that media organisations mirror each other's news agenda with the news agenda of one medium influencing another ([Hadland, 2011](#); [Lee et al., 2005](#); [Sikanku, 2011](#)). The theory is premised on the question "When the media sets the agenda, who sets the agenda?" The intermedia agenda-setting function is therefore reinforced when a certain issue is related to news norms because journalists tend to be concerned about deviant events as that which constitute newsworthiness. The theory measures the extent to which news content transfers between media with the highly regarded media exerting influence over their peers ([Atton and Mabweazara, 2011](#); [Hadland, 2011](#)). The concern according to [Dzisah \(2018\)](#) is how media agendas are being shaped instead of how they shape the public's agenda. The scope and nature of intermedia agenda setting therefore becomes more important and interesting in an era where social movements have gone digital, and such activities have a large bearing on legacy media's coverage of social issues. In this paper, the theory helps to understand the journalistic work in relation to issues that are propagated on social media networks. Therefore, by studying the relationship between legacy media and digital technologies, one could provide new perspectives in understanding and expanding our understanding of intermedia agenda setting especially in semi-authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe where there is a tight control of media spaces.

Methodology

The study sought to examine the intermedia agenda between X and two selected national daily newspapers in the country- *NewsDay* and *The Herald*. The two are leading daily papers 'representing' the two dominant forms of journalism in the country. The unit of analysis for measuring the media agenda is the news story related to the general elections. The period selected for this research is between 14 August and 27 August 2023. This marks a week before the voting day and after, the reason being that a week before the election-day, there was an increased intensity in coverage while a week after is often characterized by skirmishes, protests and court battles due to alleged irregularities. More so, the reason for selecting the number of days is based on earlier scholarly argument that "the time lag for traditional news media to affect online discussions should be relatively short" (Dzisah, 2018: 455). Researching on inter-media agenda setting effects on Korean election, Lee et al. (2005) argued that the time span for examining inter-media agenda effect should be shorter when examining inter-media agenda setting effect between online media and traditional news media. As a result, we also adopted a relatively short time lag to examine inter-media agenda setting effects between X and the selected legacy media. Python software was used for generating data on X. To begin with, discussions around Zimbabwe's elections were centered around the two hashtags #ZimbabweDecides and #ZimElections. For this reason, data was collected around these hashtags. Through python, we used the above-mentioned hashtags which enabled us to produce data around the elections. Some of the notable benefits of the tool as related to the study are that it (python) is able to show the key themes/discourses that were being produced through the chosen key words/phrases. Second, python enabled us to identify trending topics per day, and generally, for the entire study period. During the selected period, seven key issues were flagged up to have been dominant on X, and these were: Polling Station, Voter intimidation, Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF, Chamisa/CCC, ZEC, SADC, Judiciary.

Issues selected for the content analyses during the selected period were identified by reviewing the news coverage. Content analysis was carried out as follows: Firstly, a number of topics were identified from X and newspapers, and this led to broad issues that were common across the media. Secondly, we went on to scrutinize the topics further to group related issues together, for example, topics such as FAZ and arrest of opposition political parties, were grouped together to fall under voter intimidation. Seven issues were selected and coded and these were Polling Station, Voter intimidation, Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF, Chamisa/CCC, ZEC, SADC, Judiciary. The idea to streamline the topics was to ensure we could easily ascertain media agendas. Lastly, in-depth analysis of the content was done to ensure that we fully understand the content, patterns, and context. Table 1 below shows the percentage distribution of issues within each time during the period understudy. Time 1 period was August 14 to August 17, Time 2 period was August 18 to August 21, Time 3 period was August 22 to August 25 while Time 4 period was August 26 to August 29.

For analysis, Rozelli campbell intermedia agenda cross-lagged correlation method was used. The cross-lagged correlation works through assuming that if X causes Y more than Y causes X, then $PX1Y2$ should be higher than $PX2Y1$ (Lee et al., 2005). More so, the inverse that if Y causes X more than X causes Y, then $PX2Y1$ should be higher than

Table 1. The newspaper and internet issue agenda.

Themes	Newspapers				X			
	Time 1 (N = 1752)	Time 2 (N = 2628)	Time 3 (N = 4064)	Time 4 (N = 1666)	Time 1 (N = 1089)	Time 2 (N = 4017)	Time 3 (N = 5029)	Time 4 (N = 2267)
Polling station	2.16	15.67	13.23	6.66	0	9.55	9.70	4.32
Voter intimidation	8.16	11.64	12.42	16.74	4.95	6.79	7.07	7.85
Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF	25.85	17.08	21.67	24.12	31.86	31.56	25.19	26.64
Chamisa/CCC	26.59	23.97	13.75	12.66	39.76	36.66	32.41	30.39
ZEC	14.44	15.82	10.06	11.10	14.96	11.84	9.20	6.17
SADC	12.15	9.58	19.06	20.10	0.55	2.58	14.49	17.51
Judiciary	10.61	6.20	9.76	8.58	7.89	0.97	1.90	7.10

PX1Y2 is also assumed. The cross-lagged correlation analysis provides two advantages for testing hypothesis. First, it allows researchers to test two competing hypotheses simultaneously. Second, “the strength of the hypothesized relationship vis-a-vis a hypothesis asserting exactly the opposite” will be examined or assessed through Rozelle/Campbell baseline. According to Lopez-Escobar et al. (1998, 233), while using the Rozelle/Campbell baseline, the baseline is “the level of correlation to be expected on the basis of the autocorrelations and synchronous correlations alone.” There are six correlations in the two-variable cross-lagged situation: the synchronous correlations PX1Y1 and PX2Y2, the autocorrelations PX1X2 and PY1Y2, and the cross-lagged correlations PX1Y2 and PX2Y1 (Kenny, 1973). Rozelle-Campbell baseline value is calculated by using this formula $\frac{[(PX1Y1 + PX2Y2)/2] \{[(PX1X2)2 + (PY1Y2)2]/2\}}{2}$ (Chuma, 2010; Ragas, 2010). The results of the calculation are explained in detail below.

Results

The study sought to find out the intermedia agenda setting between X and the legacy media in Zimbabwe, namely, *NewsDay* and *The Herald*. The two publications represent the polarised Zimbabwe media system and the broader socio-economic and political landscape. Findings demonstrate that X influenced legacy media’s reportage on elections during the given period. However, there were strong correlations between X and *NewsDay* as compared to *The Herald*. While correlations show such a relationship, it does not explain the reasons behind such a relationship. Despite such being the case, the strong correlation between X and *NewsDay* are mainly influenced by the latter’s oppositional stance which tends to resonate with dissidence voices on social media platforms (see Chuma et al., 2020; Matsilele, 2022; Ndlovu, 2024).

Intermedia agenda between X and NewsDay

The table below (Table 2) shows strong correlations which suggest that X and *Newsday* often align in their coverage, particularly on themes like “Polling Station”, “SADC” and “Voter Intimidation.” The strong alignment in coverage, particularly on key themes, indicates that X may influence *Newsday*’s reporting. As such, the strong correlations with *Newsday* in several themes indicate a close relationship in agenda-setting between X and *Newsday*.

The strong correlation matrix on the three themes and a moderate positive correlation on ZEC presents an interesting perspective, especially when read against a weak negative correlation of the two lead contestants and their respective parties- Emmerson Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa. However, the findings confirm key electoral issues that often characterise Zimbabwe’s elections, and these are voter intimidation and the alleged electoral rigging which also plays out at the polling station (Mavengano and Chirongoma, 2023; Laakso, 2000; Santos and Ndhlovu, 2016). On the latter, one of the common accusations is that there are ghost polling stations which are then used by the state to manipulate the electoral process to favour the ruling ZANU-PF party. Despite that being the case, the strong correlation on voter intimidation and polling station is due to two reasons. First, the state used an affiliate of the dreaded CIO, FAZ, to intimidate people at

Table 2. Correlation matrix between X and *NewsDay*.

Theme	Correlation with <i>NewsDay</i>	Correlation
Polling station	0.86	Strong positive correlation
Voter intimidation	0.79	Strong positive correlation.
Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF	−0.49	Weak negative correlation.
Chamisa/CCC	−0.08	Weak negative correlation.
ZEC	0.70	Moderate positive correlation.
SADC	0.83	Strong positive correlation.
Judiciary	0.21	Weak positive correlation.

the polling station through what they called the exit poll strategy. Before then, the opposition rallies were being banned by the state which made the opposition players fail to freely campaign. Second, there was voter suppression in urban areas where the electoral commission printed less ballot papers in these centres which are the opposition’s strong holds. Hence, the critical discussions were to centre on the polling station, and voter intimidation.

Given that *NewsDay* is positioned under oppositional journalism that criticises the ruling government and the state, and often foregrounds issues around human rights abuses by the state (Chuma, 2010; Santos and Ndhlovu, 2016), the paper was bound to have a strong correlation with X because the social media platform is a safe place for citizens who are afraid of openly challenging the state in fear of harassment, abduction, and death. Therefore, the correlation is largely because the paper propagates discourses that are also common on social media. On a different note, SADC became a ‘rare’ dominant feature, among the key themes mainly because, for the first time, the regional block condemned the elections as illegitimate owing to various factors. Therefore, *NewsDay* joined the chorus online to reject the results. Above all, digital activism on X correlates with the *NewsDay* coverage of elections. This is not surprising given the fact that private press is a heavy critic of the nation-state.

One of the most interesting perspectives is the relationship between X and *NewsDay*, as they both represent critics of the nation-state. For this reason, cases of X influencing *NewsDay* issue agendas are high as the social media platform ‘houses’ critics of the government who can freely express their perspectives online due to the repressive state (Santos and Ndhlovu, 2016). Therefore, X and *NewsDay* are arguably drinking from the same well. To show the influence of X over legacy media, there was strong influence of X on Time 1 to *NewsDay* issue agenda on Time 2 with ($r = 0.78$), the value which is higher than the baseline ($r = 0.69$). Much of the talk on Time 1 was on voter intimidation, and the refusal by the state to grant permission to the opposition to campaign. X became a platform for providing evidence which then led to *NewsDay* to also run stories related to the matter. With X and *NewsDay* ‘drinking from the same well’, there is bound to be cases where the relationship between the two is reciprocal as seen on Time 2 where X issue agenda on *NewsDay* issue agenda on Time 3 ($r = 0.73$) exceeded the Rozelle/Campbell baseline of 0.58. Although there was reciprocity, the higher correlation was on *NewsDay* issue agenda on Time 2 with the X issue agenda on Time 3 ($r = 0.74$).

Intermedia agenda between X and The Herald

The correlation between X and *The Herald* provides an interesting perspective in understanding state-controlled media and its relationship with digital media. As demonstrated in Table 3, there are ‘mixed correlations’ between X and *The Herald* which suggest that while there are some areas of alignment, there are also significant differences, especially in themes like ‘Judiciary’ and ‘Mnangagwa/ZANU PF’ where the narratives diverge. Interestingly, there was no data on voter intimidation because *The Herald* didn’t cover the issue.

While most of the discourses on X are of people who are against the nation-state, on the other hand, *The Herald* is the flagship of the state-controlled stable that propagates hegemonic discourses under the rubric of patriotic journalism (Chuma, 2010; Ranger, 2010; Chuma et al., 2020; Matsilele, 2022). Through patriotic journalism, the state, and the ruling ZANU-PF government are cast in good light by eliminating negative publicity while attacking the opposition, and critics of the nation-state. With this in mind, it is not surprising that there was no data on voter intimidation as *The Herald* would not cover issues that threaten the legitimacy of the elections. This is also the case with SADC, and Judiciary which while they were dominant discourses on X, they were given less coverage by *The Herald* since they had negative correlation, which communicates that as X increases its discussions on certain agenda issues, *The Herald* would decrease the coverage of an issue agenda. For these two-issue agenda, *The Herald* had to decrease or not cover the issues because they were also going to paint the electoral outcome in a bad light. In fact, SADC received less coverage as the legacy media opted to focus on other observer mission bodies like the African Union (AU) which did not condemn the electoral process. The legacy media dedicated its time on SADC few days later, a period which falls outside the scope of this study. Hence, weak positive correlation indicates limited alignment with *The Herald’s* reporting. The table further shows that there is moderate negative correlation which indicates that as X reports increase, *The Herald’s* coverage decreases, suggesting differing narratives. X reportage was mainly painting the Judiciary, Polling Station, and Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF in a bad light while the narratives from *The Herald* were the opposite, and in some cases, received less coverage.

There was also a modest correlation ($r = 0.26$) between the X issue agenda on Time 1 and *The Herald* issue agenda on Time 2. However, there was a level of reciprocal

Table 3. Correlation matrix between X and The Herald.

Theme	Correlation with <i>The Herald</i>	Correlation
Polling station	0.53	Moderate positive correlation.
Voter intimidation	N/A	N/A
Mnangagwa/ZANU-PF	0.54	Moderate positive correlation.
Chamisa/CCC	0.68	Moderate positive correlation.
ZEC	0.17	Weak positive correlation.
SADC	−0.62	Weak negative correlation.
Judiciary	−0.53	Moderate negative correlation.

influence because the influence of X issue agenda on Time 1 on *The Herald* on Time 2 ($r = 0.40$) exceeded the Rozelle/Campbell baseline of 0.24. Although there was reciprocity, the higher correlation was on X issue agenda on Time 1 with *The Herald* issue agenda on Time 2. There was also strong influence of X on Time 2 to *The Herald* issue agenda on Time 3 with strong correlation ($r = 0.92$), and this is higher than the Rozelle/Campbell baseline of 0.48. However, there were also instances where *The Herald* influenced X discussions. On Time 3, *The Herald* had great influence over the X issue agenda on Time 4 as seen by the figure ($r = 0.55$) which is higher than the Rozelle/Campbell baseline of 0.53.

While the large part of this paper was looking at the intermedia agenda between X and the legacy media, the varying differences between the two legacy media outlets and X led us into examining the intermedia agenda between the legacy media on the same period. This section provides an interesting view into the intersection between the two competing forms of journalism in Zimbabwe— oppositional and patriotic journalism. *The Herald* had an influence on Time 2 where its issue agenda ($r = -0.47$) is above the baseline -0.52 to *NewsDay* issue agenda on Time 3 ($r = -0.81$). *The Herald* influence over *NewsDay* is mainly on days when the former propagates discourses around ZANU-PF/Emmerson Mnangagwa. With *The Herald* campaigning for the ruling ZANU-PF, its narratives provided an opportunity for *NewsDay* to counter, and produce an alternative assessment of the situation. This is however not surprising as *The Herald* and other state-controlled media houses are known to be praise singers of the government and the ruling ZANU-PF party (see Ndhlovu and Santos, 2022; Mpofu, 2017). There are instances where *NewsDay* influenced *The Herald* like on Time 3. On Time 3, *NewsDay* had influence ($r = -0.43$) over *The Herald* issues agenda on Time 4 (-0.61) with the Rozelle/Campbell baseline standing at -0.48 . It is also interesting to note that correlation between *NewsDay* and *The Herald* on these different days was greatly negative meaning that as one media house increases its reportage on an issue agenda, there is a decrease on the other. This indeed reflects and confirms the nature of news reportage between oppositional and patriotic journalism where these forms of journalism pull from different directions.

Discussion

The study sought to mainly examine the intermedia agenda between X, and the country leading legacy media establishments— *The Herald* and *NewsDay*. These two daily newspapers represent the two dominant journalismisms that reflect the bifurcated nation-state. To begin with, this study was able to show the nuances and intricate issues within the media systems in semi-authoritarian regimes something which has been missing in some studies which assume that the legacy media is similarly affected or influenced by social media agendas. The findings showed an interesting relationship between X and *NewsDay* who on many occasions had either a strong positive relation or moderate correlation, for example, the correlation base value on polling station was 0.86 indicating a strong positive relation. A moderate correlation was observed on the ZEC theme where the baseline value was 0.70. On some cases, findings suggest possible influence between mediums, and the possible reason for such positive correlations is that both X and

NewsDay propagate similar anti-establishment discourses. The history of social media platforms in Zimbabwe is heavily linked to their use in social movements (Mpofu, 2017; Moyo, 2011), and these spaces became critical spaces at a time when the state was closing down the private press, and harassing journalists for being critical to the state (Sachikonye, 2011; Ranger, 2004; Saunders, 1999). Hence, the correlation confirms the long-standing relationship between the two where social media platform, X, propagates similar discourses that are churned by the *NewsDay* because the former house 'dissident influential voices' (Matsilele, 2022) whom some are in exile due to the repressive semi-authoritarian regime.

Besides the intricate relationship between these two institutions, the findings do speak to earlier studies that have shown that social media has reconfigured the journalism practice where audience metrics are central in determining news stories (see Mpofu, 2017; Carlson, 2017). Given that the discussions on X align with the *NewsDay*'s editorial policy or stance, metrics further 'push' to either tap into the discussions on X, and vice-versa, that is, come up with stories that are 'palatable' to their online audiences. However, there were cases of interest where on some days, there were negative correlations meaning that as one dataset increases, the other tends to decrease. The explanation for such a unique relation, as one expects X and *NewsDay* to pull in the same direction, is because during the said period, *NewsDay* specialised more in addressing underlying issues that often characterise Zimbabwe's elections and these were voter intimidation, and irregularities around the setting up of polling stations. On the other hand, X focused on the personalities of the electoral players and these are Mnangagwa and Chamisa. For this reason, there was a negative correlation between the two. This provides an interesting view as it shows the validity of earlier concerns on the influence of metrics in news making. Scholars argue that the danger of metrics is that they result in news stories that negate serious issues of concern as trivial issues that are interesting and dominate social media spaces as opposed to issues of interest to the public (Moyo et al., 2019; Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016). Hence, we argue that *NewsDay* focused on issues that are of interest to the public which clearly define the electoral practices in Zimbabwe. Interestingly, such issues were also raised by the SADC electoral report which, for the first time, condemned the country's elections. It can be argued, based on the findings, that the intermedia agenda can only take place when the social media spaces raise issues that are of interest to the public as opposed to interesting issues.

The correlation between X and *The Herald* confirms the long-standing relationship between the state-controlled media and institutions that are deemed to be anti-state. *The Herald* as a flagship of the Zimpapers stable acts as the first and last line of defence for the state and government. For this reason, there were cases where X was setting the agenda for *The Herald* as the latter ought to defend the state's position or refute some allegations and claims that were being made on the social media platform. With the 2023 elections being described as the worst in the country due to a plethora of irregularities that were also flagged up by the SADC election observer mission, *The Herald* reportage indicated a move to defend the polls and paint them as fair, peaceful, and credible, as at the heart of patriotic journalism is to diffuse a crisis (see Santos and Ndhlovu, 2016; Mabweazara, 2011; Mpofu, 2017). There were instances where *The Herald* set an agenda for X as seen in the correlation on Time 3, and the possible reason is that the paper was celebrating the

ZANU-PF victory citing that the elections were free, fair, credible, and peaceful. However, this could not stand a degree of truth as netizens had evidence of irregularities, intimidation which was in contrary to the paper's position. Therefore, X became a counter-hegemonic space for the alternative, and a safe space for citizens to illegitimise the electoral outcome. Such diverging views, despite overwhelming evidence on electoral malpractices as was witnessed where opposition stronghold experienced voter suppression as ballot papers were not enough to cater for the population, might suggest that 'media trust' is being eroded (see [Lewis, 2015](#)). To move on, the negative correlation between *NewsDay* and *The Herald* confirms that the two media houses are pulling from different directions, and serving different publics. The polarised media system ensures that on many occasions, these two differ on various issues, and second, they also give a different perspective on similar issues. Hence, negative correlation shows that as *NewsDay* increases on its coverage on issues, there is a decline in the coverage on similar issues by *The Herald*. The coverage suggests that Zimbabwe is largely a bifurcated society which rarely agrees on political issues ([Matsilele, 2022](#); [Rautela and Singhal, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

The study concludes by noting that social media has great influence on legacy media with the former news agendas informing news reporting practises. In bifurcated communities, especially in semi-authoritarian regimes where the state and government have a tight grip on the media, the private press serves as the conduit of voices and discourses being produced on social media platforms. For this, there is a strong correlation between the private press and social media. This is however not the case with state-controlled media which rarely correlates with social media news agendas as the media is used as platforms to defend the state and government positions. As a result, the relationship between the two, especially on political matters, yields a negative correlation. One of the weaknesses of this paper is that it only looked at two mainstream newspapers in a society where there are many papers operating from different parts of the country, serving different interest and being influenced by different factors. As such, a broader study might be needed. More so, for future research, a study that examines the inter media agenda between social media and digital newspapers might be needed given that most of these papers are now playing a critical role in news dissemination.

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