

Sites of Protest: Alternative Online News Sites in Zimbabwe**Elizabeth Farisai Hove**

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Abstract: New media has become a site for alternative and activist voices on many issues in society. It is on this platform that most of these voices vent their political opinions without fear as opposed to mainstream media. In mainstream media in Zimbabwe, stringent media laws apply and self-censorship is exercised for fear of incarceration. The decade ensuing 2000 has witnessed much political upheaval in Zimbabwe and the internet has become a site to air diverse political views. This paper seeks to investigate the nature of online news sites to uncover the dynamics behind these sites. The paper argues that the very nature of these online news sites denote views and opinions of alternative voices that seem to have found a space in which to air their political views about the Zimbabwean situation. The study will employ mainly textual analysis to gather data.

Keywords: media, Zimbabwe, political views, self-censorship, alternative, online news sites

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Early 2000 can be documented as a watershed in Zimbabwean media history. The political upheavals that characterised this period and the introduction of media laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) (2000), Public Order and Security Act (POSA) (2002), Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) (2001) changed the media landscape. One of the early consequences was the major exodus of many Zimbabweans among them veteran media practitioners who were exiled or chose self exile. Examples of such include Wilf Mbanga, Geoffrey Nyarota, Eric Knight and Brenda Moyo, John Phiri to name a few. These had risen to become household names in newspapers and on television and radio.

It is these media practitioners who contributed to the setting up of alternative media in the UK, USA and South Africa. The rise of the internet provided a host and gave a space for many of these veterans and Zimbabweans in the Diaspora who wanted to make a contribution to issues about Zimbabwe. Online papers thus mushroomed on the internet where media laws as those mentioned above had no reach. These sites are termed alternative in this study. According to Lievrouw [6](2011) 'Alternative/activist new media employ or modify the communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected or accepted ways of doing society, culture and politics.' Papers such as *New Zimbabwe.com*, *Zim Daily*, *The Zimbabwean*, *Change Zimbabwe.com*, *Zim News 263*, *The Zimbabwean*

Situation, *Zim Online* among others will be the subject of this paper in a bid to uncover the dynamics of these papers.

The Media in Zimbabwe

The roots of Zimbabwe's media can be traced back to 1892 when *The Rhodesian Herald* came into circulation in October. Following closely was the introduction of *The Bulawayo Chronicle* in October 1984. It was clear from the onset that these two papers were out to promote the agricultural and mining interests of white settlers to the exclusion of the black majority. The introduction of official broadcasting in 1941 perpetuated white domination of the media. In a bid to represent the African majority, African Newspapers Company introduced *The African Daily News* in 1956 which claimed not to be on any side but was out to inform Africans [8](Saunders:1999).

Other newspapers included *The Bantu Mirror* (1936), *African Parade* (1953), *Central African Examiner* (1957) and *The African Times* (1957) from Lusaka, Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia). Most of the above were banned by the Smith regime under laws such as Law and Order Maintenance Act, 1960 (LOMA), Official Secrets Act, 1970 (OSA) and began to operate in exile. Newspapers such as these helped fight, motivate and offered hope for many Zimbabweans under the colonial regime. They constituted alternative media that operated from neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. They ushered discussion on nationalism as Saunders comments[8];

In the 1950's a new generation of young educated blacks helped play a key role in the revival of African nationalism. They used the new black press to full advantage to put across the new developments in black society and to provide a forum for political debate and mobilisation. (1999:4)

This black press offered an outlet to the main media which was mainly white dominated and issues to do with Africans were not entertained. It was not only the press that offered such a platform, alternative broadcasting also existed. According to Kumbula T[5].; From Ethiopia, Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania and elsewhere, the guerrilla forces clandestinely broadcast inflammatory news and information to African's majority. The broadcasts boosted the morale of the guerrillas and the African masses. They provided an alternative source of vital information from what the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation was transmitting. (1997:162)

These media provided a space for the debate of issues that directly affected the black majority and gave voice to African hopes and aspirations as *The African Parade's* motto claimed, 'the only magazine in Southern Africa edited and printed by Africans for Africans.' According to Saunders[8] (1999) through such avenues black journalists were no longer restricted to writing about mundane aspects of black social life, but had a space to deal with issues raised by nationalist politics.

The coming of independence saw a change; both print and broadcasting media represented the views of the black majority. The new government did not change much the laws and control on media especially in such institutions as broadcasting. The new ZANU (PF) government took control of electronic media and bought shares in the Argus Newspaper group. It also formed the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) to act as a buffer between the government and the media to ensure there was no political influence, however this was only in name as soon the ZMMT became ineffective due to lack of funds and political interference. Without this buffer public media organisations under the ZMMT such as Zimpapers, Ziana and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) soon became dominated by the ruling party's ideology(Windrich:2010).

The 1990's witnessed the liberalisation of the newspaper industry with the private press significantly expanding to allow new players; this soon became

known as the opposition press (this was also in connection with the formation and rise of the MDC) especially with the coming of *The Daily News* 1999 (closed in 2003 reopened in 2011) which was quite vocal in its critique of the ruling party. A charged and highly polarized media ushered in a new media scenario which has largely been maintained to this day in which the press and generally the media in Zimbabwe has been divided along two camps: Private/independent vs Public/State/government controlled. It is this dichotomy that gave rise to alternative avenues or outlets of information.

The promulgation of media laws such as AIPPA, POSA and the BSA further saw the restriction and censorship of all media. According to Chuma (2010:98),

'the duo of POSA and AIPPA became a systematic expression of the State's media policy in a crisis-ridden times, predicated on much like the Rhodesian policy during the UDI era- the need to eradicate 'the enemy within' who is supposedly being used as a puppet by the 'external enemy'.'

As a result journalists, for fear of incarceration and harassment resorted to self- censorship and this is not conducive for democratic open debate of issues that affect the citizenry. One was either for the State or against the State. The introduction and rise of online newspapers other than the mainstream papers opened up this restricted space. However, to uncover the dynamics of these news sites an in depth examination of the different views of the internet is necessary.

The Internet

The internet is simply a network of computers. Its origins can be traced back to 1969 in the U.S. during the cold war. According to Hassan[3],

"the aim was to develop computer information and command and control systems that could survive nuclear attack by the Soviet Union." (2004:15)

To this end a system known as Advanced Research Project Agency Network (ARPANET) was developed in which there was decentralization of information by creating a computer connected web. Building a system of this nature was expensive and cumbersome hence it was mainly restricted to military operations and science students in universities in the U.S. However it became public and popular in the 1990's, "it was the late 1990's that saw the internet 'explosion' the dotcom boom and the sprawling of networks upon networks." [3](Hassan 2004:15) This explosion changed the way people communicated and presented many opportunities to the ordinary people who depended on mainstream media. The convergence of the computer and the mobile phone further opened

up limitless opportunities as will be argued in the case for Zimbabwe. News could now be produced outside of the main news sources through social media, interactive media such as blogs giving a new impetus to journalism.

Several views however seem to emerge when it comes to the internet. It has been described as a new media that has a potential to influence society negatively, a Pandora's Box of whose evil contents we have not fully realised. Issues to do with pornography, child pornography, paedophiles, scamming, plagiarism, hacking, and virus attacks to name a few have been cited as the downside to the internet. Lack of social responsibility can be added on to the list as the internet allows anonymity and certain freedoms hence many have taken advantage of this to get away with unethical practices and crime. For most third world countries sovereignty and cultural imperialism are the main worries when it comes to the internet as it seems to defy national physical boundaries.

Media any media whether old or new has a role to be informative, and present citizens balanced accurate information on which they can make informed and knowledgeable decisions. Saunders (1999), Ronning (1994) assert that one of the building blocks of democracy is information and its effective dissemination. Reliable and balanced information helps citizens participate fully in the political affairs of their country. Higgins (2008) further outlines that one of the main aims of media is to help maintain a functioning democracy in any country.

At the same time it should provide a platform for open public debate. This then leads to a consideration of the media as a public sphere. Habermas, "notes that in the contemporary circumstances of mass suffrage: newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere" (cited in Higgins 2008:27), to this we can add new communication technologies and in this case the internet.

The internet has also been viewed as a public sphere. The public sphere emerged in the 18th century according to Habermas. It was in the coffee houses that debates on issues of the day flourished and found an outlet independent of the political characters of the day but with much influence on the political front. Higgins writes,

The public sphere emerges from a view of politics as a process of dialogue, and is meant to describe a platform for negotiating and reconciling competing interests, so that the formation of public policy is aided by the informed intervention of concerned citizens. (2008:27)

The internet has the capacity to reach a large audience all at once providing a platform in which participants can dialogue even though not present as in the coffee houses of the 18th century. Furthermore the internet especially mobile internet reaches those in far removed areas within a short time thus providing timely information to all concerned. As McNair argues,

This proliferation of technology and its extension into private spaces undermines a 'control paradigm' approach that sees power as the preserve of media institutions. Such technologies provide the means for media consumers to reinvigorate their credentials as citizens, initiate discussion on their own terms and according to their own agendas, and write and distribute their own journalistic content. (cited in Higgins 2008 :30)

The assumed power that media institutions possess can be traced back to the 19th century when it emerged as the fourth estate however it seems there is a need to revisit this concept with the arrival of the internet.

The concept of the media as a fourth estate can be traced back to the 19th century when the media began to be recognised along the three official estates of the UK government. It became the fourth estate after the clergy, peers of the realm and elected members of parliament (Higgins 2008). In fact media institutions become more powerful than the three. The media in this case traditional media (television, newspapers, radio) has thus been conceived of as the fourth estate since then, a vanguard of the public interest. However this view has been slowly eroded by political and commercial control of media institutions leading to the loss of credibility by audiences.

Hassan writes[3],

The fourth estate has now become the enemy, instead of championing the rights of the citizenry. For almost a decade, millions who now comprise the global civil society have been creating, almost by default, a 'fifth estate' through a network of networks. It is here that the 'enemy' is being confronted. Words and ideas that are questioning and progressive found no space in the occupied fourth estate, and so alternative texts and opinions were forced to find – or to create for themselves- other outlets. (2004:133)

The internet has come in as an alternative thus emerging as the 'fifth' estate in which views seemingly uncontrolled by political or commercial interests have found vent. Although for Africa and many developing nations this might seem a distant and far removed vision, Nyamnjoh [7] asserts that;

Limited though the implantation and impact in Africa might be, new communication technologies have facilitated communication and networking in ways that threaten the erosion of monolithic state control of information and communication. It is the hope of critical journalists, of alternative movements, who wish to avail themselves of an independent, inexpensive, non-state controlled, open communication network. (2005:5)

Africa has a long way to go in terms of making use of these new communication technologies as in some parts network connection is still a challenge. The result is that internet use has been mainly concentrated in urban areas and particularly among the urban elite who have knowledge on how to use these communication technologies. It has come in handy however for Africans in the Diaspora who can exchange information with those at home. It seems to have provided an outlet of information and gives them an opportunity to play an active part in the debate at home through online newspapers.

The Internet in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe ranks number 10 in Africa in terms of internet use (Internetworldstats,2013) By 30 June 2012 internet users in Zimbabwe were 1, 981,277 with a penetration of 15.7 %. The internet in Zimbabwe began in 1996 with Zimbabwe's first Internet Service Provider (ISP) Data Control. In 1997, the national Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (PTC now Telone) built a national Internet backbone and began selling bandwidth to private ISPs¹. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) oversees ISP licensing. However it was only at the end of 2008 that there seemed to be an increase in internet usage in Zimbabwe. This increase can be attributed mainly to the mobile phone. There are currently three main cellular networks in Zimbabwe namely Econet, Telecel and Netone. With the introduction of internet by Econet (one of the first to offer such a service in Zimbabwe), there was a marked rise in access to internet as most people could get connected. The number of mobile subscribers tripled from less than 2 million at the end of 2008 to reach 6.9 million at the end of 2010. Statistics show that more than 30% (1,8m) of the mobile operator's (Econet) 5,

¹ Frost & Sullivan report, 2011 <http://www.wireless.frost.com>

5m subscribers, now have mobile internet and it is used to text, chat with friends on social networks, different sites on the web and conduct business as well as read newspapers².

Artwood (cited in Frost & Sullivan 2011[10]) says of this growth in mobile phone usage, "the mobile web has great potential because it is interactive, participatory, and to some degree democratic and anonymous"³ Once connected the internet can be accessed cheaply by anyone and anywhere rather than the newspaper which costs on average a dollar. Furthermore mobile internet allows one to read as many newspapers as possible all for under a dollar. Hence one is exposed to many views and angles on any issue. Ndlela echoes [9] this when he says, "the new technologies especially the internet, stand today as mobilizing tools both socially and politically in Zimbabwe and they offer linkages to fragmented and dispersed dissenting voices."⁴

Online Newspaper websites in Zimbabwe

The political atmosphere in Zimbabwe from 2000 saw the exodus of many Zimbabweans into the Diaspora. Many went in search of greener pastures in a bid to eke out a living for their families back home. To be constantly in touch with events at home especially during the 2007-2008 period which was a particularly politically and economically volatile period in Zimbabwe, newspapers and websites that sought to give a different view to the situation on the ground were formed. Over 13 of these websites exist today (T. Chari :2013).

The Zimbabwean

The Zimbabwean was one such paper. It first appeared as a hard copy on the streets in Zimbabwe in 2005. Its success as hardcopy newspaper was particularly difficult as at one time one of its delivery trucks was hijacked and burnt allegedly by 'Zimbabwean authorities' on its way from South Africa where the paper was published. Such difficulties in transporting the paper and heavy duty drastically affected the paper and soon it was restricted to publishing as a hardcopy on Thursdays and Sundays only (Mbanga: 2011).⁵

The Zimbabwean has since become more of an online paper and claims to be a voice for the voiceless. The editor of this paper is Wilf Mbanga[11] founder and first Chief Executive of Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, the publishers of *The Daily News* who now lives in exile in Britain. In its introduction *The*

² ibid, 2011

³ ibid 2011

⁴ Ndlela 2009:93 <http://www.books.google.co.zw>

⁵ Source interview by Chiara Caprio with Wilf Mbanga Afronline the Voice of Africa 2011 <http://www.afronline.org>

Zimbabwean states, “We are a group of committed and professional Zimbabwean journalists and friends from around the world who have come together to start the first newspaper for Zimbabwe in exile. (*The Zimbabwean*)”⁶ A simple definition of a Zimbabwean would be someone who is a native or inhabitant of Zimbabwe thus from the name of site, it denotes belonging, belonging to Zimbabwe, identifying with Zimbabweans.

The Zimbabwean Situation

The name implies a set of circumstances peculiar to Zimbabwe particularly the political situation since 2000. It is another online news site that claims to represent Zimbabweans as it introduces itself as a ‘created by Zimbabweans for Zimbabweans with the endeavour to facilitate an open news forum for Zimbabweans’ (*The Zimbabwe Situation*)⁷. This paper was the initiative of Shepherd Yuda a former prison official in Zimbabwe who fled to the U.K in 2008 and is currently in exile. The staff as with the Zimbabwean is mainly Zimbabweans and the news on this website is about events in Zimbabwe and in the Diaspora.

New Zimbabwe

New Zimbabwe seems to register hope of a new day in Zimbabwe, an anticipated Zimbabwe that most Zimbabweans in the Diaspora hoped for in 2000 and still hope for, a Zimbabwe those in exile might be able to return to. It is based in the UK, with marketing agents in South Africa. The site further claims to have kept a record of the atrocities in Matebeleland and Midlands produced by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (1997) (*New Zimbabwe*).

Change Zimbabwe

The rise of the MDC as the first formidable opposition party seems to have inspired this news site. *Change Zimbabwe* ‘aims to promote peaceful change in Zimbabwe’ (*ChangeZimbabwe*)⁸. The site offers current news analysis and commentary on events in Zimbabwe and abroad. “Changezimbabwe.com stands for a wider perspective on Zimbabwe News, in-depth analysis of the weeks’ news, daily breaking stories and deeper discussion on the agenda for change.”⁹ The agenda for change implied here being that of a change of the current ZANU- PF led government to a new political dispensation.

ZimDaily.com

From the name a site that provides Zimbabwean news on time, everyday. Taking from the

commonly used noun ‘Daily’ that has become a part of many newspaper titles in the world e.g Daily News, Daily Gazette to mention a few. “Voice of the voiceless” News, business, sports, health, discussion forums, a non-political, non-civic, non-governmental, independent online, newspaper that is an initiative of former professionals now based in the U.K, US and Canada with headquarters in Chicago, Illinois.

Zim Online

The name of this paper ties it to new communication technologies. Being online or offline all refers to connectivity or presence on the net. Is a daily independent online newspaper, “The Zim News Online is published under a project that has been set up by seasoned journalists and lawyers. We need to create a daily alternative media voice on Zimbabwe to expand the democratic space being shrunk by repressive media laws being selectively used to eliminate the independent media. The only space it seems they can register their presence is then the internet.

Zimbabwe Situation

This site is not particularly a newspaper but rather a collection of stories gleaned from the majority of newspapers that are online.

‘Early in 2000, Zimbabwe’s political leadership demonstrated once again how it’d turned on the people. Land invasions heralded the start of a new era for the country, its people, their children, the environment, agriculture, commerce and industry. In March 2000, a handful of dedicated people chose to turn the other cheek by gathering and posting press clips that the rest of the world seemed to ignore. Most of which politicians would prefer we forget about. They are archived here and someday we hope that this history will be correctly rewritten, be understood and properly acted upon’.¹⁰

Most of the stories from this site are mostly stories that are not ordinarily reported in the mainstream press and usually take a different angle from that presented by the dominant media.

As Alternative Voices, Sites of Protest

A brief survey of all these papers show that they are an initiative of journalists in exile, expatriates, students and political activists who are disillusioned about the situation in Zimbabwe. Ndlela[9] (2009) says, ‘the websites are driven by a focused political

⁶ Source About Us the Zimbabwean <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk>

⁷ Source About Us the Zimbabwe situation <http://www.zimbabwe-situation.org>

⁸ Source About Us <http://www.changezimbabwe.com>

⁹ www-sul.tanford.edu/depts/ssrg/Africa/Zimbabwe/zimnews.htm

¹⁰ Source About Us the Zimbabwe situation <http://www.zimbabwe-situation.org>

agenda aimed at democratic reforms in Zimbabwe.’¹¹ These news sites represent alternative voices and sites of protest. The names of these news sites make a statement on the state of affairs in Zimbabwe today.

The sites are edited and uploaded in South Africa, the U.K and U.S.A .What is common with most of the papers on the net is that most of these papers do not have physical addresses in Zimbabwe. Most of the media practitioners are Zimbabweans in the Diaspora with the exception of a few correspondents on the ground who feed these papers with stories. Most of these use pseudonyms for fear of arrest.

The advantages of the internet as a medium also apply here. It is one aspect that all papers online can boast of; there is room for interaction with feedback, an advantage that does not come with the hard copy. This interactivity is only unique to new media, online readers get to interact with the issues presented airing their views anonymously without fear of being victimised. In such an environment meaningful contributions can be made to issues independent of political or commercial influence. These sites have offered opportunities for journalists and ordinary people to write their own story. To put it clearly is one of the promises by *The Zimbabwean* ‘In short we will do everything the government newspapers in Zimbabwe are not allowed to do!’¹² In other words what mainstream media does not present online sites do. Such media have also offered an opportunity for the exchange of information to and from Zimbabweans in the Diaspora.

The internet has opened up and continues to open up spaces as shown by the papers above. Issues that would not be ordinarily represented in newspapers in Zimbabwe find space in these newspapers and the ordinary people are given a voice thus presenting a public sphere in which all can participate without fear. Boyd-Barret [2] (1995:231) echoes this when he writes, Some media, some of the time – clearly do still serve as a forum for discussion of issues of public interest among people who are knowledgeable, interested, able to speak on behalf of broader social interests, and whose discussions have the potential of being of political influence.

However one cannot ignore certain realities, such as the fact that the internet continues to be dominated by educated urbanites in the cities and the majority of Zimbabweans are yet to access the internet. A cursory look at the above newspapers reveals that

many of the issues discussed are skewed towards Zimbabweans living in the Diaspora who have access than the majority at home.

Conclusion

The naming of these sites denotes protest against the political situation in Zimbabwe. The gravity or intensity may not be equated with that of the Arab Spring and may not come to that but these sites have opened up an otherwise restricted media space in Zimbabwe. The internet has the potential to affect even the political scene in Zimbabwe. Mainstream media has become dominated by political and commercial interests thereby squeezing out or silencing any other views, the internet can give communities an opportunity to have their interests and concerns see the light of day. The use of mobile internet makes this more of a reality. In a nutshell it can be concluded that there is hope for Zimbabwe yet through new communication technologies.

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¹¹ Ndlela 2009,p93-94 <http://www.books.google.co.zw>

¹² About Us <http://www.thezimbabwean.com>