Chapter 30 — Bruce Mutsvairo

~~In search of political reform: How social media is contributing to democratic participation in Zimbabwe~~**Mapping social media trajectories in Zimbabwe**

Introduction

In today's globalised world, the growth of digital media is bringing about fundamental changes in the way people in sub-Saharan Africa think and act (Mutsvairo 2016). The availability of online movements provides a firsthand opportunity to critically examine current digital engagements among citizens and activists seeking political reform in Zimbabwe. The chapter argues that while social media is leading to a great deal of virtual awareness, very little action is taken to end the plight of citizens, thereby weakening the real impact of social media activism. ICTs, and more specifically the digital media, have radically changed the way cultures, economies, governments, and human beings interact with each other. Similarly, the development of global information and communication infrastructures has radically transformed ways in which knowledge and content are created, produced, and distributed. Conceptualizing activism in an African context requires a cross-disciplinary examination of factors facilitating and inhibiting its growth across the continent. This chapter therefore attempts to look at opportunities and challenges facing online protests in the wake of growing social media prevalence in Zimbabwe.

It is being assumed that with protests movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, #BlackLives Matter and #BringBackOurgirls taking centre stage, social

media is playing an instrumental role in driving the popularity of socio-political movements throughout the world. Online civic campaigns are also gathering momentum in Zimbabwe with netizens using social media platform to demand political change. For example, social media outrage was prompting civil society organizations and opposition parties to turn out in huge numbers countrywide during the 2016 anti-government demonstrations and rallies, which they hoped would force former President Robert Mugabe's government to resign, giving many a renewed hope for political change.

This chapter uses data collected from face-to face discussions with members of the Zimbabwean communities in the North East of the UK to determine ways through which digital participation among expatriate Zimbabweans is contributing to both online and offline activism in the Southern African nation. Focus group discussions with 10 participants were bolstered by further in-depth interviews with 15 other Zimbabweans, along with a case study analysis of current digital protest movements in the country, which are gaining ground on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. All interviews were conducted between January and April 2016. To this end, the study investigates how local Zimbabwean activists utilize digital and social media, identifying tactical similarities and differences to the use of these platforms in other regions of the world.

The chapter also explores the apparent advantages and disadvantages of using such platforms. Indeed, the suggestion by Dalton (2007:143) that a Chinese student at the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy rally held a poster that read, 'I don't know what democracy means, but I know we need more of it', potentially provides a powerful picture of the extent to which the notion of democracy is perceived and

comprehended across the world, including in Africa. For that reason, findings from this chapter will seek to demonstrate the real potential of cyberactivism insofar as strengthening or weakening increased online and offline democratic participation of Zimbabwean citizens is concerned. The chapter further questions whether online protests are indeed 'liberation technologies' as suggested by Diamond (2010: 70) and if so, ~~to what~~the extent to which they are. The main research question for this chapter is: To what extent is social media aiding and strengthening citizen participation in politics in Zimbabwe?

As political leaders in Africa, including longtime Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga, utilize digital technologies to communicate, reach out and debate their political agendas with citizens, the role played by platforms such as Twitter and Facebook cannot be underestimated, given social media's ability to virtually mediatize information and connect people. Content sharing and online debating is making citizens active participants in political decisions that affect them. This has led to the inevitable introduction of 'electronic democracy' on the world scene (Tsagaraousianou *et al* 1998). These scholars claim electronic democracy best describes the intermediary role of digital technologies in augmenting citizen participation in the political stratum. The flourishing usage of the internet has, for example, helped a string of blogs and websites establish themselves as leading providers of Zimbabwe-focussed digital news, drawing readers from the country's diaspora communities both in the West, Africa and beyond.

Zimbabwean context

The open space provided by social media platforms is not only allowing some Zimbabweans to freely comment and critique news from an array of sources, but citizens are now sharing content with family and friends, helping spread news and information about events and issues that affect them. The possibility to provide comments to each published article has led to the creation of a new form of interaction as readers share comments and opinions with each other. These people have become the 'new journalists' of the modern day, gathering news and distributing them on social media forums. Those living in Zimbabwe are also able to access these platforms: a development which has challenged state media's monopolization of news. For example, the 2015 disappearance of human rights activist Itai Dzamara, allegedly at the hands of state agents, has confirmed social media's status as a venue for dissent, activism, and political campaigning, as citizens turn to Facebook and other social networks to criticise the government for allegedly engineering the activist's abduction. Government denials of involvement in Dzamara's disappearance have been met by revolts on social media, particularly on Facebook and WhatsApp. ~~With the country's 92-year-ol~~ Ed~~x-~~-president Mugabe had declar~~ed~~ing his interest of ~~in running~~extending his 37-year reign ~~during the 2018 elections~~before a military coup ousted his government in November 2017. While Mugabe, now 94, made sure ~~, in a country where~~ media laws prohibit~~ing~~ "insult~~s~~" to~~ing~~ his~~the~~ presiden~~cy stayed intact,~~t, activists turned to social media networks and the Zimbabwean blogosphere, which they ~~have been~~ flooded with debates on political reform, rising polarities and increasing interest in human rights activism.

While not every Zimbabwean citizen has access to the internet or social media in particular, online debates dominating the cyber-space point to a paradigm shift in terms of the gathering and sharing of new media content. Zimbabweans living in the

North East of the UK and elsewhere across the world have used their own access to social media and other digital platforms to spearhead campaigns that potentially have helped shape events at home, even though evidence on the ground still shows that their long-serving president is not giving up. But recent online protests are taking a cue from recent developments in the Middle East and elsewhere across the world where citizens have taken to new technologies to demand political reform. Uprisings in Tunisia (Lotan *et al* 2011), Egypt (Tufekci & Wilson 2012) and China (Yang 2012) were spearheaded and coordinated on various social media platforms.

~~In Zimbabwe~~Ahead of Mugabe's resignation, previously-unknown clergyman Evan Mawarire ha~~d~~s managed to harness social media for political engagement by using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in search of government accountability. He ~~has~~ beca~~o~~me a household name among Zimbabweans, who follow~~ed~~ his message to take the country's flag everywhere they go, demanding government accountability. The viral sharing of Mawarire's videos on social media platforms wa~~i~~s by no doubt rapidly stimulating online political activity and community activism. What ma~~de~~kes Mawarire stand out though wa~~i~~s his ability to engage officials both online and offline. When the country's reserve bank chief announced plans to introduce 'bond notes' to ease out the pending financial constraints, Mawarire used social media networks to oppose the move. Even better, he organized a meeting with the governor, with anti-government activists in attendance, to demonstrate his group's opposition to the idea. ~~Whether the government will listen or not, it is clear~~There is still no evidence as to what role social media played towards Mugabe's departure but signs of ~~Mawarire's ability to~~is turn~~ing~~ online interactions into offline realities made the clergyman and his supporters believe the online platform was giving them a unique voice.

: one thing that often has been a problem in countries where these online activist campaigns have been waged, including China and Iran.

Interestingly, protest music is emerging as a dominant form of civil and mass political participation movement in Zimbabwe. Thanks to a long and sustained relationship with political reform in Africa, the movement is using social media platforms to reinvigorate political songs as strategic tools for political and human rights activism. Zimbabwe's best-known musician, Thomas Mapfumo, has played a leading role through his music in the promotion of human rights, freedom and transparency, both in pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe. Mapfumo, who tirelessly sang against colonialism in Africa, is shifting his attention tomaintained his celebrity status on social media by posting anti- President Mugabe clips on YouTube 's gaccusing the former president's government of overnment, which he accuses of committing gross human rights violations, including its purported failure to guarantee citizens with freedom of assembly.

Freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to dissent, have all long been sensitive topics both in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe cannot be put in the same league as North Korea when it comes to totalitarianism. While anti-government journalists have in the past been targeted, the country's laws guarantee freedom of speech and association. Civil liberties are nearly non-existent, even though again the law allows for such freedoms to be guaranteed to citizens. Newspapers critical of Mugabe including the *Daily News, The Standard, The Independent* and *Newsday* have traditionally beenare allowed to publish, even though it is perhaps fair to say many journalists and indeed social media users, as confirmed

by focus-group interviews with Zimbabweans living in the East of England, self-censor for fear of reprisals. Mugabe ~~has continuously argued he cannot~~had maintained no one could ~~be~~ lectur~~eed~~ him on human rights because he ~~was the first to introduce democracy~~has fought for universal suffrage leading to the country's in~~dependence~~ ~~Zimbabwe~~ in 1980~~., ending years of perpetual British colonial rule.~~

Methodology

Focus group interviews with Zimbabweans living in the UK were used as a principal methodology in this chapter. As part of an Empathy & Trust In Communicating Online (EMoTICON)-sponsored research project on social media and democracy in Zimbabwe, in which I was the principal investigator, a very small sample size was originally used for this research. This was deliberate, as the intention was to pursue frank and deep-seated discussions in a face-to-face setting with individuals involved in online participation. In pursuance of this objective, participants were invited to a workshop at Northumbria University in March 2016, with one Zimbabwean currently studying at the university acting as a key go-between between the project and the Zimbabwean community. The workshop, which lasted for close to seven hours, included presentations from members of the research team, along with open discussions with the participants, who were asked to share their experiences and views regarding diasporic influences towards democracy in the country. A blogging workshop, involving learning and sharing blogging skills, also featured on the programme. Apart from the student, who facilitated the meeting along with another member of the Zimbabwean community in the region, none of my research team members had previously met any of these participants.

Following the initial results from the workshop, 15 more interviews were conducted with Zimbabwean activists and journalists. Two of the 15 had participated in the workshop. These interviews were not only aimed at ascertaining the level of online participation that the interviewees were engaged in, but also examining whether they thought sharing information online was contributing to the enhancement of democracy in the country. The majority of those interviewed individually had originally wanted to participate in the workshop but had either pulled out or had shown preference to be interviewed individually. A trip to Zimbabwe in April 2016 completed a series of interviews as part of this project. In Zimbabwe, eight journalists were asked to share their thoughts on increased online participation and practices among Zimbabweans. They were also asked to share their opinions on whether they thought citizen journalism was crippling or boosting their work. Furthermore, they also had to share their perspectives on social media and its potential to free societies such as Zimbabwe's. Interviews were chosen as the primary methodology because I wanted to interact with the people who are using these technologies. Besides, interviews are widely used in qualitative research for various reasons (See Trochim 2000, O'Leary, 2004). In my case, I wanted to find out more about why people are engaging in online practices with the hope of making political changes, their worries, their predictions and their biases. I emphasized the participatory nature of data gathering, focusing on the people who participate in online deliberations in order to find out what they do and why they do it. The pilot study in Newcastle Upon Tyne also gave me an opportunity to mingle and socialise with members of the Zimbabwean diasporic community, all of whom confirmed their active use of social media to participate in social and political issues within their own communities and beyond. Data was processed and analysed inductively

in pursuit of what Marshall and Rossman (1999:154) describe as identifying 'salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief.'

Findings and discussion

Digital activism in Zimbabwe remains in an evolving stage even though it is precipitously spreading. Social media's transformative ability to appeal to multiple audiences is driving new forms of social interaction, exchange, dialogue and online collaboration, unquestionably helping transform lives by giving hope to the politically marginalized. Zimbabwe, in spite of its political quagmires, has 6 million internet users, which is half of the population (POTRAZ 2016). While clearly not all of these ~~internet~~ users are digital activists, 10 of the 15 interviewees confirmed that they believed easy access was enabling the participation of citizens in online political engagements. Results further showed that even though the majority of Zimbabweans see the potential route towards political change in the country as a direct result of the mass use of social media, issues such as the use of law to cripple online dissent are still a major concern. A~~Recently a~~ government minister under Mugabe's regime stated in 2017 that the government was looking at legal ways to ensure that social media users would be 'responsible' for what they say online. The introduction of such a law could have led to increased self-censorship, all ten participants in the workshop agreed. This did not stop Mugabe from appointing what perhaps was the world's first cabinet minister in charge of "cyber security," a ministry that was discontinued by his replacement, Emmerson Mnangagwa. ~~The introduction of such a law could lead to increased self-censorship, all ten participants in the workshop agreed.~~

It, however, must be noted that when it comes to the laws that govern the media, contemporary Zimbabwean media owes a lot to the pre-independence, White-led governments. If African natives did not have civil, political or social rights under colonial rule and the post-independence government has failed to meaningfully allow the flourishing of views opposed to the

state, then one can understand why the media has been at the center of state political control and manipulation of the masses both before and after independence in 1980. In the same vein, *The Rhodesia Herald* (renamed *The Herald* at independence), along with the Bulawayo-based *Chronicle* and their sister weeklies the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday News,* represented elitist White interests in Rhodesia. Repressive laws were used to protect these interests. Participants in the workshop tended to agree that the current government had used colonial era laws to punish dissent. In the same way (Mukasa 2003) concludes: 'The journalistic ethos of the times was to promote European cultural standards while denigrating African culture and political agitation as the nemesis of Western civilization and Christianity'. Participants agreed the current government had used state media to target and ridicule opponents.

Several challenges stand in the way of social media activism. The generational gap is visibly one of them, results showed, as interviewees were able to highlight this as a major challenge facing digital activism in Zimbabwe. While youths around the country have been early adopters of social media, recognizing the profound opportunities that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are offering, Mugabe's generation does not understand social media. This may sound like an advantage to activists, but the problem is when it comes to engaging politicians online, very few are willing to take part because not all of them understand the dynamics of social media. Besides, there simply is no defined policy on how to react to social media insults. Aside from the generational issue, not everyone understands social media, young or old. Even when they do, they may not know how to use it for the purposes of activism. A comment by one of the interviewees sums up this dilemma: 'I may know how to use social media but my grandmother in rural Chibi has never heard of it. I don't know how to educate her about it and besides what is the point of doing that?' Indeed, it may not be in the interest of an 80-year-old

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struggling to feed herself to know how to use social media for the purposes of activism. What is come down to is the fact that it is a matter of priorities. Those starving will first seek food. Joining Facebook therefore becomes a luxury.

Events in the past were forcing those interviewed in Newcastle to self-censor their participation online. Some said they had two Facebook accounts: a 'real one and a fake one. When I use a fake account, I say whatever I want, when I use my real name, I have to censor what I write on Facebook'. It is widely reported that Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, senior journalists from the weekly *Standard* newspaper, were arrested and tortured by state security agents in 1999 following publication of a story in which they alleged — citing military sources — that some senior army officers had been detained in connection with a coup attempt on ~~President~~ Mugabe's government. Chavunduka died in 2012 while Choto has since relocated to Washington DC, where he <u>worked</u>~~is currently employed at~~<u>for</u> Voice of America. While incidents like this were forcing some to self-censor their content, all eight journalists interviewed in Zimbabwe confirmed that safety was not a major worry among them. Instead they were more critical of the government's desire to curtail freedom of speech, especially on social media platforms. Apart from the skirmishes involving Chavunduka and Choto, as well as inestimable threats and possible arrests against some of his journalists, Trevor Ncube's *Standard* and *Independent* weeklies, as well as the *Newsday* daily, have been publishing in the country for years, despite their fierce and formidable anti-Mugabe stance. Social media, journalists agreed, was making it difficult for government to target its critics as several activists make anonymous contributions.

AIPPA, or the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy law, which was introduced in 2002 and gave the Media minister authority to determine who could work as a journalist, was proving difficult to enforce because in the digital age: 'everyone can be a journalist', a freelance journalist told me. Signed to become law by ex-President Mugabe on 22 May 2013, the new constitution, in unprecedented fashion, includes a bill of rights, which stipulates freedom of expression. In a departure from the past, artistic expression and academic freedom are also recognized in the new constitution. While participants in the initial workshop welcomed the new constitution, they still were ~~sceptical~~skeptical about the government's commitment to respecting freedom of expression. They pointed to the fact that the current situation had been better compared to the past when journalists were targeted dubiously through the use of AIPPA. In the year of its inception, at least seven journalists including the *Guardian*'s American-born correspondent Andrew Meldrum were arrested for violating the law's provisions. Other victims of the law in 2002 included local journalists Dumisani Muleya, Chris Gande, Farai Mutsaka, Bornwell Chakaodza, Geoff Nyarota and Fungayi Kanyuchi. The availability of social media was making it difficult for government to target specific people.

Again, to suggest social media platforms provide a potential to facilitate political and social changes, provides a falsely alarming assumption that despotic regimes are not seeking to regulate and restrain these supposedly liberating spaces. African governments, especially those with a history of stifling freedom of association and assembly, will certainly be watching who is saying what on Facebook, which without doubt has been widely adopted as a mobile communicative tool across Africa. For example, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's government forcefully

reacted against social media-coordinated political protests in April and October 2011, banning protests, arresting organizers and blocking access to social networking sites. In Zimbabwe, an activist was arrested in the second city of Bulawayo in March 2011, accused of attempting to use Facebook as a platform for dethroning ~~President~~ Mugabe's government. The activist had posted a message on what was believed to be opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai's Facebook wall, saying Zimbabweans should replicate the Arab Spring protests in Egypt. The legitimacy of social media-led political activism has not just attracted debate in Africa.

Yet Mugabe has never been the one to lightly take criticism. Criticizing Mugabe ha~~d~~s long been a taboo. However, in the social media age, protesters attack the president willy-nilly. While he still retains power, the opportunity to pass a negative comment against the feared leader is something many illustriously accept as a positive shift in circumstances. For this reason, many consider social media as a democratizing space, given its ability to give them an opportunity to anonymously voice their concerns against Mugabe and his government. From sharing social media memes of his dramatic fall at the airport in 2015, to peacefully confronting his government on the streets, Mugabe ~~is~~ be came ~~coming~~ a subject of constant ridicule; his stranglehold on power appear ing bes ~~to~~ waning in the wake of spirited protests, most of which are coordinated online.

It seems as if the most difficult challenge facing social media's potential to transform societies like Zimbabwe politically is the issue of coordinating people online. With people freely saying what they want as they wish, it is difficult to tell people what to do, because in many instances you are dealing with people you do not know. As noted by one interviewee: 'there is indeed democracy online. People say what they

want but I don't think Mugabe cares what is being said online because the people who vote him into power are not even online'. Remarkably, this comment demonstrates the fundamental problems associated with using social media for political purposes. What the interviewee was alluding to is the fact that most of the ruling party's supporters live in rural areas where they hardly access social media; and if they do, having access to the internet is not their main priority as they are faced with various other challenges. These are the people that Mugabe and his party wereare concerned with. They do not have, in most cases, digital literacy skills. Their main priority is to get food on the table instead of 'liking' or signing an online petition.

'With mobile phone penetration in Zimbabwe almost hundred percent, there is great scope for successful citizenship journalism initiatives', a veteran journalist said. 'More and more Zimbabweans are seeking cheap alternative sources of news and mobile phones, through social media platforms, have become instant hits. Citizen journalists have grabbed the momentum and find it easy to circulate news on social media' This view is shared by several journalists who were adamant that citizen journalists are not a threat to their profession. They see the diversity of news sources and platforms as a healthy sign of a democracy. Still, it is very easy to underestimate the importance of internet literacy when assessing the real impact that technology, and particularly citizen journalism, could have in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa. Many people use the internet for a purpose that they are familiar with. Not everyone is aware of the internet's multi-purpose functions. Moreover, not everyone with access to the internet understands what it is, or is keen to invest in trying to find out — something that confirms why the digital divide is still a real threat to progress. Worse still, in the case of Zimbabwe, unless you access the internet using

free wireless networks, the costs involved are so high: meaning unless you are an activist, accessing the internet for political purposes does not become your immediate main priority.

Conclusion

While it certainly would be wrong to underestimate the kind of potential that social media could have in enhancing democracy in Zimbabwe, it is quite clear more ground needs to be covered in terms of accessibility and education. It may seem easy for those living in the Diaspora to see the remarkable potential that social media carries, but the reality on the ground begs to differ. There is widespread hunger in the country and many people are surviving on selling fruit or vegetables, which means that unless the quality of life among Zimbabweans changes, it is very difficult to conclude that social media will bring more democracy to the country, since access to it is a mere luxury. Opportunistic social media campaigns, such as Mawarire's, do not always lead to real reform.

The sizeable number of people following Mawarire on Twitter does not point to any success in transforming his online initiative into a radical street movement. However, other copycat protest groups such as #Tajamuka or 'We have said No' have risen in the aftermath of Mawarire's campaign bearing the brunt on state's resolve to crackdown on protesters. Protest musicians are also providing an alternative medium of critique to the regime, but interviewees believed musicians such as Mapfumo would have a real impact if they were criticizing Mugabe from within the country, because not everyone of their supporter in active on social media. Hashtag activism, they argued, was new to Africa and carried with it a form

of elitism, which citizens from low income areas were not keen to quickly identify themselves with. Besides, they were adamant, the number of followers online or their determination to seek change should not measure the level of success for these groups, which means that their ability to force change or to influence Mugabe to rethink his policies would be seen as a major victory because the authoritarian rarely accepts defeat. The low level of activism attributed to self-censorship by the interviewees also stands in the way of the successes of online engagements. Even those living in England are still very careful about the language they use in criticizing Mugabe for fear of unknown consequences. Thus while it's true to say social media is impacting the lives of Zimbabwean, it will take more time for it to actually have meaningful contribution towards political and social change given the country's public sphere is still very much constrained.

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