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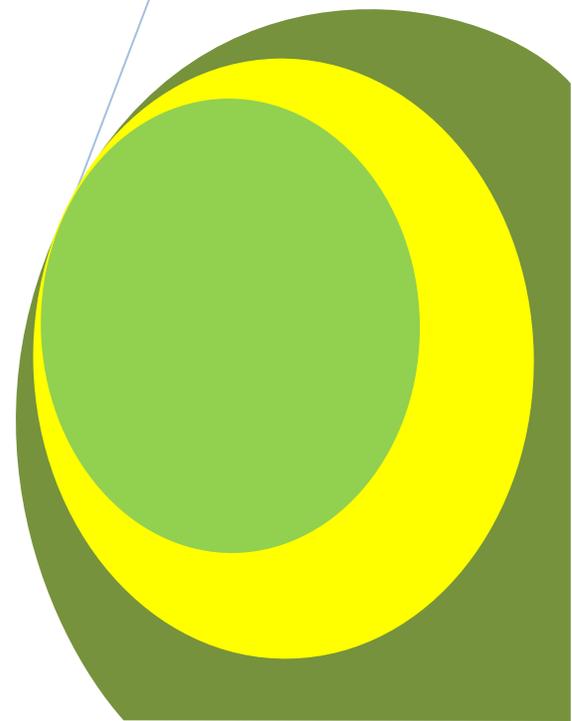
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By

Peter Chiridza

Jonathan Robert Mauto Chitsamatanga



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Examining the Place and Scope of Social Media in Contemporary Zimbabwe Politics

Peter Chiridza*¹ & Jonathan Robert Mauto Chitsamatanga²

Department of Journalism and Media Studies; Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Region, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe.

*Corresponding Author's Email: peterchiridza@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the place, scope, power, or lack thereof, of social media in Zimbabwean politics. This is so because there are a lot of problems that can be observed if one takes a close look at the relationship between social media and politics in Zimbabwe today. It has been observed that some political actors do not like or distrust social media. The research sought to ascertain whether social media can be seen as an all-powerful platform capable of being used to overthrow sitting governments like what happened during the Arab springs. All this was done to determine if social media can be powerful in Zimbabwe and other typical African countries with a large rural populace without access to the internet due to poverty and sometimes ignorance and lack of interest. Discourse analysis was used to examine political social media messages in Zimbabwe in the year 2016. Face to face interviews and Focus Group Discussions were employed to engage ZANU PF political actors to get their opinions concerning these issues under study. The research established that social media has become a partner for many political actors in Zimbabwe so much that it can no longer be ignored. Its power is however limited to urban centres where many citizens have access to the internet whilst in rural areas not much people pay heed to it. For the ruling ZANU PF party, social media is more of a partner in terms of informing and mobilising supporters but its power seems to end there, as supporters of the party would rather trust and listen to their leaders when they speak to them at rallies than trust messages that come through social media platforms.

Key words: social media, politics and power, mediation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A new phenomenon has been born and is haunting Zimbabwe politics; the phenomenon of social media. Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking (Alejandro, 2010). All political actors in Zimbabwe today cannot live outside the influence of social media as it pervades all spheres of the political, from mobilisation, rumour mongering and information dissemination. At some point this phenomenon was even discussed in the powerful ZANU PF politburo as some felt that it was being abused by party cadres (*The Herald*, 11 February 2016). For example according to Phillips (2016) "Facebook now dominates the news being read by young people and its domination is not just national – it is global. It may well be time to think about what societies need to do to counter this growing, global news monopoly. Facebook may not be in the business of news production but its impact on news is already profound and not always positive". In Zimbabwe this is also true as Facebook is always quick to pick and start circulating any political news. The factors of social media affecting public opinion and international support, rapid dissemination of news, widespread messaging, and the ability of the individual to spread information globally are relatively new phenomena in politics in Zimbabwe. Likewise, governments and opposition parties today can implement social media to meet their own agendas in never before seen ways. Tenhunen and Karvelyte (2015) note that "personal communication via social media brings politicians and parties closer to their potential voters. It allows politicians to communicate faster and reach citizens in a more targeted manner and vice versa, without the intermediate role of traditional mass media. Reactions, feedback, conversations and debates are generated online as well as support and participation for offline events. Messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared, which allow new audiences to be reached". This can also be witnessed in Zimbabwe where prominent political actors like Savior Kasukuwere, Jonathan Moyo and Emmerson Mnangagwa all have interactive Facebook and Twitter accounts. In cyberspace, the social restrictions that exist in reality in some places such as restrictions to gather as masses by the POSA, disappear, providing groups of people who might otherwise never meet and converse the opportunity to connect and recognize what they share in common. That the future of politics in globalized societies will involve social media is assured, but the degree to

which it will be involved is yet to be determined. This study is therefore an attempt towards establishing this degree in Zimbabwe where the use of social media is rampant in urban centres.

This study shall focus on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Disqus to gauge and establish their power, boundaries and potential vis-à-vis Zimbabwe's politics. This study recognises that in the 21st century, politics may not only be televised or mediated by print media, but more likely to be tweeted, blogged, texted and organized on Facebook as some recent experience suggests. For example, after analysing more than 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, a new study finds that social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring (Howard et al 2011). Lindsey (2013) notes that the "Arab Spring spawned a series of revolutionary movements that are unique in that they utilized social media as an effective means to spread information and promote insurgent agendas. This revelation deserves consideration in all future discussions of revolutions and the concepts of ideology, narrative, momentum and unifying motivations. The Arab Spring uprisings are the first collective movements of their kind in the Middle East after the internet and social media revolutions of the late 20th/early 21st centuries, and tactics, techniques and procedures utilized by resistance populations during the Arab Spring may affect future movements". Other scholars contend that the internet, which itself plays host to social media, has largely democratized and liberalized media space (Boulianne 2015). In other words here is noted that social media provided an organisational infrastructure, acted as a form of alternative press, and also generated awareness both domestically and internationally concerning the disturbances of the Arab spring. While these scholars see social media as having played a significant role in the Arab spring, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer (2013) argue that there are a lot of variables to consider before appropriating a great deal of power to social media. One variable to consider is that one cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate. The second variable is that, a significant increase in the use of the new media is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity or political mobilisation than to precede it. Other scholars researching elsewhere have noted that the "European context shows a simple but significant reality, that the media systems and political systems in European countries interact with patterns that protect each from excessive influence of the other. The existence of undoubted media power is counterbalanced and quite often exceeded by the power of political parties and institutions" (Mazolleni and Schulz 1999). The foregoing scholars comment on traditional media platforms of print and broadcasting. For social media as pointed by other scholars, the game changes and society is absolutely altered; "the power of social media to affect society is based exclusively on its social aspects: this means interaction and participation. In several different studies of citizen voting habits - ever since the classic Lazarsfeld investigation in the 1940s - results have shown that voting decisions are not usually based on one-step communication. More noteworthy is two-step communication, which means conversation with opinion leaders, colleagues, friends and acquaintances who can either consolidate or weaken the voter's opinion" (Auvinen 2016). These foregoing findings are more in keeping with Europe where the researches were carried out but may not be true for all geo-political entities. For example Koker (2013) notes that East European politicians have not yet mastered the art of Twitter and few have been able to exploit its full potential; "for now there are two main obstacles to twitter having same political impact in Eastern Europe that it has in the West (and especially the US.). First, while internet access in Eastern Europe is now close to Western European levels, smart phones with internet access are not as readily available to the ordinary citizen, so that much of Twitter's immediacy and spontaneity is lost". Yet other scholars have pointed out that social media makes politics today become unpredictable. Margetts (2016) notes that 'so as well as contributing to the unpredictability of political participation, social media can provide a solution to understanding it and, perhaps, even to prediction. Given that social media inject instability, unpredictability and even chaos into contemporary political life, it may be that scientific models of chaos theory in natural systems (characterized by non-linearity and a high degree of interconnectivity) can be applied in order to aid our understanding of a changed world' It is also therefore in the light of all these debates that this study seeks to situate similar questions and probing in the Zimbabwean polity to gauge the place, scope, power, or lack thereof, of social media. This is so because there are a lot of problems that can be observed if one takes a close look at the relationship between social media and politics in Zimbabwe today. First is that a lot of political actors do not like or distrust social media and the internet at large, for example Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has on several times castigated social media as full of filth (*allafrica.com* 2 April 2016, *newzimbabwe.com* 4 April 2016, *timelive.co.za* 4 March 2016, *The Herald* 11 February 2016). The question that follows is that why is there this distrust of social media by these political actors when it has been embraced by many elsewhere; is it because political actors do not understand or fully appreciate social media or that they are only against it when it is abused. When does the use of social media become abusive and who defines where good use of social media ends to become abuse? And as already observed is scholars writing about the Arab spring, can social media be seen as an all-powerful platform capable of being used to overthrow seating governments? Can these social media be so powerful in Zimbabwe and other typical African countries with a large rural populace without access to them due to poverty and sometimes ignorance and lack of interest? These questions posed above show how problematic it is to categorise social media especially its relationship to politics. The current study therefore seeks to make an attempt to

determine the place and scope of social media vis-à-vis politics in Zimbabwe by focusing on the dynamics of ZANU PF political developments in 2016. This shall be done by analysing social media discourses as well as examining political actors exposed to these discourses. Happer and Phillo (2013) contend that 'The analysis of media content – of what we are told and not told – is [therefore] a prime concern', hence the current research seeks to examine social media discourses. This examination could also reveal how social media discourses are impacting/affecting public opinion in the era of contested politics in Zimbabwe. In also echoing this pursuit, Happer and Phillo (2013) insist that 'all of the elements involved in the communications circuit intersect and are dynamic. Whilst in past research each element (e.g. content or effects of media) has often been examined separately, [we explain here why] it is important to analyse the inter-relations of each of these different components in any discussion of the media's role in social change'. In light of this, the current research will seek to respond to the following questions; What power does social media have vis-à-vis contemporary political dynamics in Zimbabwe?; and, in what category can social media be placed in the quest to understand the nature of Zimbabwe's contemporary contested political arena?

2. THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Richard (2009) contends that in modern societies, communication media, mass and high-tech or personal and low-tech, provide a means for nearly endless content to be transacted among human beings through perhaps infinite symbol systems. Thus the theoretical departure of this study is mediation. The concept of mediation is concerned with how interaction between human beings today is no longer only face to face but happens through various technological platforms. Studies in mediation today have increased so much that some scholars no longer see mediation as a concept but as a theory in its own right; for example Van den Bulck (2010) writes about two distinct realities in human life. There is the objective and subjective social realities. Van den Bulck (2010) writes:

Subjective social reality..... is the image people form of objective social reality. In order to be able to live and act in the world each person has to internalise objective reality. Each individual has to learn what other people expect, and has to learn to predict how they might respond to certain actions. He or she has to learn what his or her place in the social order is. People not only learn how others see the world, they learn to accept this as their own perception of the world.

What is described above is also called *socialization* by some scholars and it starts to happen as soon as an individual starts to interact with other human beings through symbolic communicative actions. By this socialization the individual "not only learns how others see the world, he or she learns that this is how the world quite simply 'is'. Successful socialisation, therefore, is 'the establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality ... [even though] totally successful socialization is anthropologically impossible' ((Berger and Luckmann 1976 in Van den Bulck 2010). Another type of reality called symbolic social reality can be added which is "any form of symbolic expression of objective reality such as art, literature, or media contents. There are multiple symbolic realities that differ from one another by various symbol systems' (Adoni & Mane 1984 in Van den Bulck 2010). In other words as Van den Bulck (2010) notes 'people construct a subjective social reality, or a personal image of reality, on the basis of their contacts with objective social reality (direct experience) and with symbolic social realities (communication). Communication can take the form of either face-to-face interaction with others or *confrontation with media messages*'. Mediation therefore concerns itself with how media platforms *represent* objective reality to individuals who also have their own way of perceiving this objective reality. In other words all perception of reality is rather a distorted or *subjective* way of seeing reality in that what is seen is not a true reflection of 'real' reality but a constructed reality. This becomes pertinent if we consider how pervasive social media has become today in Zimbabwean urban communities. Media messages churned out on social media are constructed by individuals who have their personal way of seeing the objective reality and these messages or symbolic realities, are also received by individuals who have their own way of perceiving them. Mediation as a theory or concept is therefore important to this study that interrogates the place and scope of social media in Zimbabwe politics because it helps the researcher to understand what happens in the coding and decoding of symbolic realities circulating on social media.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research will proceed from a qualitative approach. The research design will be the descriptive survey. This design is suitable because it is ideal for gathering original data for purposes of describing the role and place of social media in contemporary Zimbabwean politics. Leedy (1997) offers one advantage of the descriptive survey design when he says it 'describes what we see, hence reveals the actual picture of a situation through the emerging trends

from the study'. In other words in using this descriptive survey, the researcher will try to be as objective as possible, meaning that the study will wish to develop an understanding of the place and boundaries of social media and how it impacts on public opinion. The design chosen is therefore suitable because it will ensure that the researcher will be able to describe and explain how specific discourses from specific social media platforms correlate with views that shall come from the publics who will be respondents in this study.

Discourse analysis, face to face interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) will be the research instruments in the study. Discourse analysis shall be used to examine the media discourses whilst face to face interviews and FGDs will be used to gauge public opinion associated with the social media discourses on political dynamics in ZANU PF and Zimbabwe at large, since ZANU PF is the ruling party in Zimbabwe in 2016. The supposition in doing discourse analysis is that language, written or spoken is as performative as it is functional. It should never be treated as a 'neutral, transparent, means of communication' (Berger 1991). The implication is that language is constructive and constitutive of social, political, economic life including historical aspects of life. Language usage is also quite partisan hence its analysis may help the researcher to uncover underlying ideologies of those who package messages for social media. Face to face interviews shall have structured and semi structured questions that will ensure the researcher gets information about exposure, usage and susceptibility to manipulation of ZANU PF political actors to various social media houses. The researcher will approach a sample of 60 respondents out of 2400 ZANU PF political actors at the level of district in Chinhoyi constituency; and 25 respondents out of 150 ZANU PF political actors at the level of province in Mashonaland West. On the other hand, FGDs will also be employed in this study as they are a good way to discuss a specific topic of interest. The strength of FGDs is that participants are allowed to agree or disagree with each other so that the researcher gets an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinion and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variation that exists in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices. Participants in the FGDs will also be drawn from the two groups of political actors mentioned above.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social media in Zimbabwe currently is awash with all sorts of political messages. These range from messages that could belong to hard informative news that normally let citizens know about events that could have transpired. Some of these messages are directly picked up from online newspapers and circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook. These messages are however tinged with subjective outlooks of their authors as is always most the case with online news. Then there are messages that could belong to the softer side of news. These ones normally peddle angry opinions of those protesting or defending the government or one faction against the other in the major political parties of Zimbabwe which are ZANU PF, MDC-T and NPP. They are usually authored by known political actors who have taken positions for or against certain issues or individuals. Facebook messages by prominent figures like Fadzayi Mahere and Jonathan Moyo (Twitter) are often picked to be circulated on WhatsApp which is the more common social media platform among Zimbabweans. There are also mobilisation messages that are also circulated on social media in Zimbabwe. These normally exhort and call upon political actors to support a certain individual or standpoint. They are normally used by ZANU PF in factional fighting or when party youths are mobilised to attend events like the one million men march, President Mugabe's birthday or on numerous occasions where party youths gather to welcome President Mugabe from the airport. Although such messages are supposed to be factual in that they will be circulating information to tell people to gather at a certain point, in ZANU PF they have a factional and propagandistic tinge since they always originate from a group that will be competing with another for influence. Other messages are the banal announcements that might be calling for a meeting or announcing the death of another political actor and this are not much under focus of this study as they are more factual and not meant to influence opinion of the decoders.

Political actors who participated in this research acknowledged the power of social media in mediating contemporary Zimbabwean politics today. At least 67 percent of those who participated in the interviews and FGDs conceded that social media has become part and parcel of their mundane political activities. Platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook are used every day to communicate genuine and also untruthful political information. Rumour mongering and childish slandering have also become the order of the day. In today's age where fake news or alternative facts have taken centre stage, social media has become a willing partner to spread all sorts of political information. 86 percent of the research participants conceded that they were in some political WhatsApp group that kept them connected to other political actors all the time. These WhatsApp groups are formed on the basis of factionalism, geographical political boundaries and sometimes they are even constituted by players from opposing political parties. Some are formed on the basis of political party wings, like the youth wing, the women wing or that of war veterans. Most political information or political breaking news is therefore instantly shared on these groups in a manner that relegates traditional print and broadcast media to the role of corroboration and confirmation. This therefore brings one to the often cited problem of social media of whether it is reliable or reputable and to what

extent. It also brings one back to the original quest of this paper of gauging or ascertaining the power of social media vis-à-vis Zimbabwean politics. 48 percent of the participants of this research accorded a considerable power to social media and they were quick to cite the case of one Evan Mawarire, a pastor who caused a partial shutdown in Zimbabwe in 2016 after mobilising Zimbabwean citizens to protest against the government through Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. When one however analyses this case, it can be pointed out that inasmuch as social media had the power of mobilisation in this particular instances, the mobilisation was only successful in urban centres even albeit partially; most rural areas and smaller towns went about their daily routines as usual. In that regard 62 percent of the participants felt that they always took information from social media with a pinch of salt. Although they pointed out that they could not afford to imagine being completely switched off from social media, they noted that they always have to corroborate what they get from WhatsApp through traditional forms of print and broadcast media. Such a big percentage with a distrust of social media raises eyebrows as to how this social media managed to drive popular revolution in the Arab world. Is it because there are specific cultural or political contexts that must be present to warrant that what social media can do in the Arab world can also be reciprocated in Zimbabwe. What is clear from the results of the study is that the political climate in Zimbabwe is not yet ripe for a major upheaval as a result of social media. Social media can play the informative, mobilising and rumour-mongering function but it is only powerful to a certain extent which does not cause major shifts in the political terrain of the state.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is now clear that social media has become a partner for many political actors in Zimbabwe so much that it can no longer be ignored. Its power is however limited to urban centres where many citizens have access to the internet whilst in rural areas not much people pay heed to it. For the ruling ZANU PF party, social media is more of a partner in terms of informing and mobilising supporters but its power seems to end there, as supporters of the party would rather trust and listen to their leaders when they speak to them at rallies than to trust messages that come through social media platforms. It is therefore apparent that social media is a platform for the future in Zimbabwe and cannot be counted upon to mobilise Zimbabweans to such extents as witnessed during the Arab springs where some unpopular governments were overthrown.

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