

Chapter 42

Rethinking the Democratization Role of Online Media: The Zimbabwean Experience

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ABSTRACT

Online publications have become critical sites for the expression of views alternative to those of the state. This is true in Zimbabwe as in many developing states where the mainstream media operate under onerous legislative frameworks. However, the real impact of these ‘new public spheres’ on the country’s democratization agenda is subject to contestation. This chapter examines the impact of online publications run by exiled Zimbabwean journalists on the country’s democratization process. The chapter evaluates the extent to which these online publications constitute genuine alternative spaces for the mediation of national discourses. Data is elicited through focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis. The chapter argues that a combination of technical, social, and economic factors which limit Internet access and professional shortcomings conspire against online publications becoming genuine alternative public spheres, thus minimizing their role in the democratization of the Zimbabwean state.

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium, Zimbabwe has witnessed a phenomenal mushrooming of online publications and news Websites. The promulgation of stringent media laws, ostensibly to tame an increasingly militant and ‘unprofessional press’, coupled with political instability and the worsening of the economic meltdown epitomized by hyperinflation, high unemployment rates and general social decay resulted in the closure of a number of privately owned newspapers. This trig-

gered an exodus of journalists, who emigrated to neighboring countries, mainly South Africa and Botswana, as well as European countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. In order to earn a living, and to continue their struggle for democratization, some of the journalists started online publications and news Websites that had a distinct focus on Zimbabwe. This was meant to provide an outlet for voices that were alternative to the political establishment. In a sense, most of these publications were a continuation of the closed newspapers, albeit online.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6114-1.ch042

This chapter examines the role and contributions of online publications operated by Zimbabweans in the Diaspora on the country's democratization discourses and other national debates, in order to assess the extent to which they have constituted real 'alternative public spheres' in the post-colonial context. In particular, the study examines consumption habits and patterns of online publications by Zimbabwean citizens living in the country, their perceptions of online publications and the roles they ascribe to them. The chapter also examines the ethical challenges and limitations faced by these online publications which might have militated against the prosecution of their democratic mandate. In so doing, the study hopes to open pathways for theorizing the role played by online publications in democratic processes in an African context. Whether online publications are able to broaden the democratic spaces or are simply 'private spheres' to a few who are able to access them is a key question spotlighted in this chapter. Thus, the chapter addresses the following two key questions: First, what are the online publication consumption habits and patterns of Zimbabweans living in the country and what are their perceptions of these online publications in the country's democratization process? Second, what are the main ethical challenges faced by online publications and how do these undermine their role in the country's democratization process? The study utilized in-depth interviews, a focus group discussions and textual analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select subjects for the in-depth interviews. Twelve respondents were identified and asked questions relating to their consumption of online publications. Respondents were required to comment on the ethical aspects of online publications and their role in the democratization process of the country. The use of purposive sampling was justified on the grounds that access to online news in Zimbabwe is mainly confined to urban centers and even there, not everyone has access to the Internet. The focus group comprised of fourteen

(14) randomly selected part-time journalism students at a private college in the capital, Harare. Their ages ranged between 21 and 40. Data was categorized into pre-determined themes and then subjected to extensive analysis using hermeneutic interpretation (Kvale, 1996).

The chapter makes two main assumptions. The first is based on Lee's observation (cited in Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 2) that effective democracy

...demands a system of constant interaction with all the people, accessibility at all levels, a public ethos which allows conflicting ideas to contend, and which provides for full participation in reaching consensus on socio-cultural, economic and political goals.

The second assumption is that for democracy to thrive there should not just be information, but quality information. This means that for the media to provide such information, they should be rooted in an ethical culture. As noted by Belsey and Chadwick (1992, p. 3):

The sort of alternative democratic participation and involvement that is required is impossible without information. Here, then as people of the world struggle for a worthwhile way of life within a sustainable future, is a role for the media, especially those that can still be called press, whether they are part of the print or broadcast journalism, so long as they follow the traditional role of the press as providers of information.

The remaining part of this chapter is divided into four parts. The first part gives a brief background of the media situation in Zimbabwe, starting from the country's attainment of independence in 1980 to the present. This part also discusses the information and communication technology (ICT) context of Zimbabwe, in order to understand the conditions in which online publications are consumed in the country. The second part deals with conceptual issues and literature review. The

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