

Chapter 1

Digital Public Sphere's Role in COVID-19 Mitigation in Zimbabwe: Government-Citizen Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the dynamics of government and citizen interaction in Zimbabwe concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular emphasis on the digital public sphere. As technology emerges as a vital player in information dissemination, understanding the balance between official government sources and informal channels is pivotal. Using qualitative interviews, the authors examined the influence of these channels on public perceptions. The results highlighted a lack of trust in the government, reliance on informal networks for counternarratives, and widespread misconceptions about the virus. The study further underscores the significance of tailored communication strategies, considering socio-economic, linguistic, and digital divides. The findings have broad implications for future pandemic response strategies, emphasizing the importance of trust, clarity, and accessibility of information.

INTRODUCTION

In this study, we explore the crucial dynamics of government and citizen engagement and participation in responding to the spread of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. A focal point of our investigation is the

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significant role played by the digital public sphere in these efforts. We investigate the intricate interplay between official government information sources and informal channels of information dissemination. By analyzing the influence of these sources on public perceptions and behaviors, the research aims to provide valuable insights into the challenges of managing information flow during a crisis and the consequent implications for public health outcomes. Moreover, understanding the dynamics of information dissemination can aid policymakers in developing more effective communication strategies that address misinformation, build trust, and foster more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to crisis response and containment efforts.

There is a growing consensus that the global community “failed its test of preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic” (Frieden, Buissonnière, & McClelland, 2021). Moreover, experts predict that global pandemics are likely to recur in the future, and a substantial proportion of people are expected to experience an extreme pandemic like COVID-19 within their lifetime (Marani, Katul, Pan, & Parolari, 2021; Osterholm, 2020).

The epidemic unfolded in a distinctive era characterized by the emergence of the “digital public sphere” (Schäfer, 2015). This concept denotes the online realm that facilitates public discourse, discussions, and debates on matters of interest and concern. It encompasses various digital spaces, including social media platforms, online forums, blogs, news websites, and more, where citizens can engage in the roles of information consumers, distributors, and creators. In Zimbabwe, cellphone technology has played a particularly significant role in shaping the digital public sphere, with applications like WhatsApp becoming indispensable tools for communication. As technology continues to rapidly evolve, it is evident that the digital public sphere will assume an increasingly crucial role in shaping societies’ responses to future pandemics.

BACKGROUND

Context plays a critical role in influencing how individuals seek information and determine whether to use it or not. As noted by Rauchfleisch, Vogler, & Eisenegger (2021), during times of crisis, like a pandemic, the public sphere undergoes a shift into “crisis mode.” In the realm of related research, Chatman made significant contributions to our comprehension of how personal factors and social norms intertwine to shape the reception and interpretation of information. This understanding was gained through insightful ethnographic studies focusing on marginalized and disadvantaged populations.

The first COVID-19 case in Zimbabwe was officially announced by the Ministry of Health on March 21, 2020. This case involved an individual who had recently traveled from the United Kingdom. By August 12, 2020, the number of reported cases had reached 4,893, with 122 fatalities. Consequently, the Zimbabwean government declared COVID-19 a “formidable epidemic disease” through the implementation of Public Health Regulations. According to the constitution, the state was obligated to take all available preventive measures, including education and public awareness programs, to curb the spread of the disease. Furthermore, the declaration also necessitated the equitable allocation of resources to prioritize healthcare services.

During the pandemic, a crucial aspect of the context revolved around the citizenry’s profound emotional involvement in the situation. This emotional investment manifested in various anxieties related to illness and the fear of potential illness. Additionally, the challenges of loneliness due to isolation and social distancing, along with increased stress from adapting to new routines and grappling with financial

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