Power and participatory politics in the digital age : probing the use of new media technologies in railroading political changes in Zimbabwe
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1 INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the context, many people, from bloggers and veteran journalists to prominent academics, provide stimulating views on the political quagmire that has engulfed Zimbabwe for the past dozen years. But opinion has never been this varied and divided. There are varied solutions to problems that range from President Robert Mugabe's alleged disregard for human rights and democracy to his assumed role in the country's seemingly unmatched economic meltdown between 2000 and 2010. There have been repeated calls for Mugabe's ouster while others argue that only the 89-year-old leader has what it takes to hold the country together. Critics question why the United Nations Security Council has been "silent" on Mugabe's alleged disregard for human rights.

Some suggest the International Criminal Court should investigate allegations of torture and criminal misrule in Zimbabwe, while others argue Zimbabwe needs an African solution. They assert that the typically defiant Mugabe would not listen to Western resolutions to the predicament facing his once economically celebrated country. The Twitter and the Facebook worlds have been tormented with questions, largely from Western citizens, who cannot understand why Zimbabweans have failed to produce their own "spring", with reference to the seemingly effervescent Arab Spring which saw long-time Middle Eastern leaders deposed in popular uprisings in what the West hopes is a move towards democracy, whatever that means. All these views evidently point to increasingly divided opinion insofar as finding workable solutions to Zimbabwe's political difficulties is concerned.

The continued availability of new media technologies have forced some to thoughtlessly suggest, without bothering to give any empirical evidence whatsoever, that the Internet can help bring democratic changes in Zimbabwe. In fact, some are already suggesting that Zimbabwe is on the brink of a political revolution. To this day, there is little or no scientific research interrogating the potential relevance of social media insofar as Zimbabwe's political problems are concerned. Thus, talk of a Twitter Revolution

remains just street talk, evidently lacking foundation. The only reason why several people in the NGO and media worlds believe such a scenario may be possible is by alluding to the credit new media has received in spurring revolt against other autocratic regimes elsewhere.

Opinion may thus be divided, but there is at least one captivating notion: Zimbabwe is a scientifically virgin territory, suffering from a lack of top-notch social research, especially the exploration of new journalism and its impact on the country's political and social landscape. Politically speaking, there is a lot that can be said about Zimbabwe, but not everyone who has an opinion about this southern African nation of 13 million people can systematically back those views with traceable and travelable scientific data. This research seeks to modestly provide some key answers to complex questions by bridging the gap between what some consider as being part of the solution to the country's problems along with the hopefully original scientific findings of this study. This largely interdisciplinary study in the field of social sciences thus endeavors to examine the contribution of the Internet, specifically new media technologies, in railroading democratic changes in Zimbabwe.

When it comes to Zimbabwe, several narratives that cannot be ignored are connectedly at play. You could start with citizenship and identity. Who exactly is Zimbabwean and what constitutes being Zimbabwean? Think about Zimbabweans in the Diaspora. Are these people Zimbabweans? Circumstances at home have forced some of them to move and live in other countries for many years. Some have maintained ties with their country of birth; some have decided to cut those ties. President Mugabe's government has long outlawed dual citizenship but it is no secret that the majority of Zimbabweans living abroad have adopted the citizenship of their host countries. What constitutes citizenship then? You have to first consider what actually forced these people to move abroad. For many, political and economic instability was the main factor. There are many who lied about alleged political persecution and repression at home in a bid to seek greener pastures in the West. It is fair to say the country's widely covered economic problems were central to the migration en masse of Zimbabweans. Once settled in their new homes,

they found a way to read, analyse and disseminate information back home to friends and relatives, with the hope that those at home with supposedly reduced access to media diversity would see the "bigger picture" and come to terms with state media's "lies". To this end, mobility has never been this important, because it has redefined the real meaning of citizenship. According to the works of Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman, this mobility is centred on the role of the sense and feeling of belonging propagated by the peoples themselves or the state. [1]

Legally, most of these people are no longer Zimbabweans, yet they still consider themselves Zimbabwean citizens. Even for those who have chosen to maintain their Zimbabwean citizenship while living abroad, problems are aplenty: Zimbabwean nationals living in a foreign country are by law not allowed to vote in national elections. So again, what exactly is citizenship if you are not allowed to cast your supposedly democratic vote simply because you choose to live in another country? Which country do you represent then? For its part, the government has argued that since most of its high-ranking officials are subjected to European and Western sanctions barring them from traveling to the West, campaigning would unfairly favour other parties if Zimbabweans living abroad would be allowed to vote. It is important to highlight these multifaceted issues because they point to the lopsided and variegated nature of Zimbabwean politics. For example, all of the four news sites that were used for content analysis as part of this research are run by Zimbabwean journalists, some of whom were chased away by the government or are not allowed to return to their country of birth. Zimbabwean journalists such as Gerry Jackson of the ferociously anti-Mugabe SW Africa radio station have been declared persona non grata in Zimbabwe. Can these people be expected to report anything objective about a government that has cancelled what they believe is their legal right to citizenship? Again, who are these people? They are Zimbabweans, yes, but on what grounds? Who determines what constitutes Zimbabweanness? Again, why do they choose to fight the regime using Western means such as digital technologies? What really are their motives?

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[1] Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh & Inge Brinkman (eds.) (2009) *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*, Bamenda/Leiden: Langaa Publishers/African Studies Centre.

But then again several journalists forced into exile by President Mugabe's government claim to have found a voice when they turn to the Internet and other digital technologies to disseminate information back to their home country. In as much as you might appreciate their desire for media diversity and freedom, you certainly have to question their motives. Whose voices do they represent? Take SW Africa for example. It is important to note that the radio station was initially, and still could be, funded by the US government. You then have to wonder whether they are not an extension of the West's regime change agenda in Zimbabwe, a view strongly held by Mugabe and his followers. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair once publicly proclaimed that his government was working with partners in the region to effect regime change in Zimbabwe.[2] From a widely accepted journalistic perspective, when newsmen unethically accept funding from governments, then you have to question their independence and objectivity. At the same time, the situation is not entirely unique. Media and politics are inseparable. Politicians over the world try to directly or indirectly coerce media attention. However, it is important to carefully assess the motives of new media players in Zimbabwe before celebrating their potential contribution toward full democratic participation in the country.

1.1 Politics in the digital age

Political parties have increasingly turned to computer technologies since the 1980s, both for internal organisational purposes as well as for direct communication with members and voters.[3] In today's globalised world, the growth of digital media is bringing about fundamental changes in the way people think and act. ICTs 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 briskly transformed ways in which knowledge and content are created, produced, and distributed. Also, recent technological innovations are rapidly changing political and democratisation processes across the world. Menno de Jong and Thea van der Geest, for example, are adamant that the Internet has risen to become one of the most widely used

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[2] Zimbabwe: I am working with MDC, admits Blair, (The Herald, 25 June 2004)
[3] Wainer Lusoli, Stephen Ward & Rachel Gibson, "Political organizations and online mobilization: different media - same outcomes?" New Review of Information Networking, Vol. 8. (2002), pp. 89-108.

forms of communication.[4] To that effect, Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors propound that "technologies have great implications for the content as well as the social relations through which communication is organized."[5]

This study presupposes the view that as digital technologies become more accessible and affordable, more people are able to easily coordinate, organise and advance their interests. It aims to critically examine the overall role played by the Internet in propelling democratic reforms in Zimbabwe and recognise how similar patterns have also dominated the African democratic space. To this end, the March 2008 national elections are used primarily as a reference period in the first primary study, scrutinising the extent to which Zimbabwean exiles made use of foreign-based news sites run independently by Zimbabwean journalists to channel pro-opposition information into the country, effectively leading to longtime President Mugabe's unprecedented election loss. Still, the role that citizen journalism and social media are playing in supposedly democratising African states in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions is one area that cannot be ignored. This study devotes three separate chapters to investigating and understanding the role and emerging trends of citizen journalism in Africa.

Scholars such as Herman Wasserman have hailed the ICT revolution for its enabling ability to facilitate political participation and create social change across the continent.[6] On the contrary, political decisions, observes Dana Ott, tend to be reached through small-group, face-to-face communication, and that fact is set to remain despite the advent of the Internet. Nevertheless, Ott believes the Internet allows the citizenry to challenge the status quo. "(T)he Net can affect the process preceding decision making by establishing a new channel transporting the citizens' wants to the elite."[7] As shown throughout this research, that summation, it seems, best describes current trends and developments in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular.

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[4] Menno de Jong & Thea van der Geest 'Characterising Web Heuristics' *Technical Communication* Vol. 47 No.3 (2000) pp. 311-326.
[5] Birgit Meyer & Annelies Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 7.
[6] Herman Wasserman, 'Mobile Phones, Popular Media, and Everyday African Democracy: Transmissions and Transgressions', Popular Communication Vol. 9, No. 2 (2011), pp. 146-158.
[7] Dana Ott, Power to The People: The Role of Electronic Media in Promoting Democracy in Africa,[web page] http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issues3_4/ott/index.html, Accessed 5 February 2011

Internet usage has indeed been on the upswing since the Dakar Declaration on the Internet and the African Media of 1997. According to Alfred Kagan, the declaration specifically advocated the establishment of "a culture of online communications and ensuring African content on the Internet."[8] Tendai Chari calculates that Africa has enjoyed unparalleled Internet growth of 1,030.2 percent between 2000 and 2008 compared with the average world growth of 280.6 percent.[9] Better still, Simon Columbus and Rebecca Heacock declare without hesitation: "Despite economic difficulties, Zimbabwe has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in sub-Saharan Africa."[10] The continental growth of Internet in Africa has forced others, such as Mirjam de Bruijn, to assert that high access in mobile phones has risen from "1 in 50 persons in at the beginning of the 21st C to 1 in 3 just a few years later in 2008".[11] Despite these promising figures, I observe that the Internet is still very much controlled and accessed by members of an elite club, most of whom live in the major cities, thereby excluding the rural folk from participation. Buttressing this viewpoint is Sandra Nyaira's assessment that "the only problem in using online media for a country such as Zimbabwe, and indeed much of Africa and the Third World, is that these countries are not wired enough to allow the majority of citizens, who live in poor rural areas, to access the news and be part of the public discourse on events which affect them".12

The term 'electronic democracy' takes its roots from studies by a pool of scholars, including Rosa Tsagaraousianou, Damian Tambini, Cathy Brian, Andrew Chadwick and Christopher May.[13] Tsagaraousianou et al. claim electronic democracy best describes the intermediary role of digital technologies in augmenting citizen participation in the political stratum: "The way news is accessed is also changing. News can be down-loaded

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[8] Alfred Kagan, The Growing Gap between the Information Rich and the Information Poor, Both Within Countries and Between Countries - A Composite Policy Paper, presented at the 65th IFLA Council and General Conference (Bangkok, Thailand: 20-28 August 1999).

[9] Tendai Chari, Ethical challenges facing Zimbabwean media in the context of the Internet, Global Media Journal (African Edition) 3/1 (2009) 8.

[10] Simon Columbus, S. & Rebecca Heacock,. (forthcoming) Internet Access in Sub-Saharan Africa. Working Paper, Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

[11] Mirjam de Bruijn, 'The Telephone has gotten legs: Mobile Communication and Social Change in the margins of African Society', professorial inaugural address (Leiden University, September 2008).

[12] Sandra Nyaira, Mugabe's Media War: How New Media Help Zimbabwean Journalists Tell Their Story, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Discussion Paper Series (2009)

[13] Rosa Tsagaraousianou, Damian Tambini and Cathy Bryan, (eds.), Cyber democracy Technology, Cities and Civic Networks. (London: Routledge, 1998); Andrew Chadwick, and Christopher May, 'Interaction between States and Citizens in the Age of the Internet: "E-Government" in the United States, Britain and the European Union', Governance 16/2 (2003) 271-300.

as a podcast from news websites and watched at the audience's convenience".[14] In view of these notable changes, I was quite adamant that news distributed by Internet news sites were having an impact on the way the political battle was fought in Zimbabwe.

The flourishing usage of the Internet has, for example, helped Newzimbabwe.com establish itself as one of the leading providers of Zimbabwe-focussed digital news, drawing readers both in the West, Africa and beyond. Its concentration on social and political events has allowed it to provide the "Zimbabwean" viewpoint, as opposed to the mainstream news providers that Zimbabweans in the Diaspora have become accustomed to in their various locations across the globe. While the majority of Zimbabwean emigrants have moved to Western countries, some have opted to stay within Southern Africa. Many, especially academics, have moved to Botswana, Namibia and Lesotho.[15] But the reliability of news produced in a fast-paced digital environment has forced others like Jaap de Jong to revisit and reemphasise Aristotle's ethos paradigm, which credits image and reliability as fundamental cornerstones of any news organisation. Media representation of Mugabe, for example, has – as will be demonstrated in the later parts of this dissertation – not always been honest and accurate. De Jong concludes: "A good orator has to take three factors into consideration. First of all: ethos. He must appear to be reliable and honest. Secondly: pathos. He has to be able to touch the emotions of the public. Finally: logos. His reasoning must be sound".[16] The honesty and reliability of online news is one of the issues I have tackled in the final of the four empirical studies tied to this research.

It is assumed that in today's globalised world the emergence of new media technologies has jump-started the "democratisation" of media content in terms of its creation, publication, distribution and consumption. Andrew Chadwick and Nick Anstead argue that the Internet's increasingly influential role in election campaigning and voter

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[14] James Stanyer, Web 2.0 and the Transformation of News and Journalism: New Possibilities and Challenges in the Internet Age, in A. Chadwick and P N. Howard (eds.), The Handbook of Internet Politics. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
[15] 'A crumbling education system', [web page] http://www.educatedhorizon.org/news-events/81-a-crumbling-education-system, accessed 2 February 2011.
[16] Jaap de Jong, Professorial Inauguration Leiden University [web page] (4 November 2011) http://www.news.leiden.edu/news-2011/two-sides-to-the-reliability-of-news.html, accessed 27 March 2012.

participation was long predicted in the mid-1990s.[17] Alluding to the American case, Aaron Smith states that a majority of American adults went online in "2008 to keep informed about political developments and to get involved with the election."[18] While not every Zimbabwean citizen has access to the Internet, I was quite adamant that the nation's expatriates had used their own access to spearhead campaigns that helped shape events at home. Electronic mailing lists, chat rooms and blogs centering on the political crisis emerged before, during and after the March 2008 vote. Ahead of the elections, I interviewed opposition candidate Simba Makoni, who even maintained a profile on social networking site Facebook, and then-opposition senator David Coltart, who reached out to voters on his personal website, to gauge their sentiments on the potential boost from Web. They were equally upbeat. As this research aspired to find out, their efforts were sustained by Zimbabweans abroad who sought to use their Internet spotlight to "educate" others back home.

Several organisations have also pointed to a potentially positive effect of new media technologies in Africa, especially on the democratic and economic front. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) for example concluded in a report that ICTs had proven to be the engine for economic and social development in the 21st century. It added: "Since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, African governments have been far more proactive in pursuing policies and public-private partnerships that will bring affordable connectivity to their countries".[19] But democracy, often understood as "rule by the people", is a highly debatable process. Orwell argues that democracy is a difficult concept with no agreed definition,[20] as the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. In theory, Robert A. Dahl's view that democracy revolves around competition and participation – meaning candidates for public office compete in elections and citizens participate by determining who are the

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[17] Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick, Parties, election campaigning, and the Internet: Toward a comparative institutional approach, in Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 56.
[18] Aaron Smith, 'The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008', Pew Internet & American Life Project (Washington, 2008).
[19] Theoretical Study, Democracy and ICTs in Africa, SIDA Report (Stockholm: Edita Press, 2009).
[20] George Orwell, Politics and the English Language
http://iis.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Politics_%26_English_language.pdf Accessed 10 January 2012

winners and losers – appears comprehensible.[21] However, in practical terms there is a wealth of evidence revealing unequal patterns of voter access to balanced media, for instance. In addition, when everyone is claiming to respect democracy, how is a true believer or defender of democracy distinguished from the rest? Despite leading the country uninterrupted for more than 30 years, President Mugabe still maintains his allegiance and commitment to democracy, even though critics openly talk about his alleged failures to guarantee equality and freedom to members of the opposition.[22]

During the political crisis, Mugabe's government made decisions that some critics said demonstrated the regime's contempt for press freedom – another key element of democracy – by launching a crackdown on media firms perceived to be against Mugabe's policies. The president and his party have always maintained that they have done nothing wrong, arguing every country has its own sovereign laws by which citizens must abide. Mugabe argues that he is, in fact, a champion of democracy who overthrew the racist White regime of Ian Smith that never allowed Blacks to vote or to enrol in schools.[23] It's an argument that resonates among supporters at home and around Africa. Mugabe justly claims credit for not only bringing majority rule with independence in 1980, but instituting policies that have given Zimbabwe the highest literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations.[24]

1.1.2 Role of new media in democracy

It has been repeatedly claimed that freedom of speech and expression is the lifeblood of democracy. Media and democracy appear inseparable, as the two words are often used interchangeably. "We should care about journalism because it's central to democracy, citizenship, and everyday life, and we should care about journalism studies because it

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[21] Robert Dahl, "Is Post-National Democracy Possible?", In Sergio Fabbrini (ed) *Nation, Federalism, and Democracy. The European Union, I t a l y, and the American Federal Experience, 2001* (Bologna: Editrici Compositori).

[22] Sebastian Berger, 'Blair: Mugabe should be toppled', The Telegraph (22 July 2009) 7.

[23] Mugabe's speech at the United Nations 5 October 2007 http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-africa&month=0710&week=a&msg=eqG63ZfDaXjAqMl0P8gz7w&user=&pw= Accessed 12 September 2012

[24] UNDP, 'Zimbabwe has highest literacy rate in Africa', The Southern Times (16 July 2010).

helps us understand this key social institution," explain Karin Wahl-Jorgenson and Thomas Hanitzsch.[25]

The power of the media, however, is sometimes overrated. Can media alone instigate change? As noted. some have pointed to recent developments in North Africa to support the school of thought that media can indeed foster change. In the case of Zimbabwe, new media may certainly be helping advance democratic change, but it could also be argued that it takes a combination of factors. These include the political climate in the country, infrastructure, access to the Internet, and illiteracy. Eric Bucy and Kimberly Gregson are of the view that the emergent form of technology-driven democracy goes beyond net activism, taking into broader consideration the participatory engagement of citizens online and the wide exposure to political messages.[26] Their position further strengthens the view that even though new media has the power to effect change, people in a particular country still need to have access to the digital technology. This gap can, however, be drastically reduced if one considers the potential mediating role played by the Diaspora, as is the case in this research.[27]

Democracy, explains Benjamin Barber, is a process of learning and sharing information.[28] This view strengthens the deep-seated relationship between media and democracy. Martin Nkosi Ndlela concurs when he says, "One of the main justifications for freedom of expression is therefore that it is a vital part of democracy, facilitating participation in decision-making, facilitating the formation of public opinion".[29] New media technologies are impacting this seemingly ever-changing relationship between the two paradigms. Using China as a case study, Randolph Kluver and Indrajit Banerjee say they are supportive of using Internet as a good apparatus for promoting democracy. Online news and social media are considered democratising tools for the Internet. However, other

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[25] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (eds.), Handbook of Journalism Studies (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) xi.
[26] Eric Bucy & Kimberly Gregson, 'Media participation: a legitimizing mechanism of mass democracy', *New Media & Society* 3/3 (2001), pp. 357-380.
[27] Kluver, Randolph and Banerjee, Indrajit, 'Political Culture, Regulation, and Democratization: The Internet in Nine Asia Nations', *Information, Communication & Society*, 8 (2005), pp. 30-46.
[28] Benjamin Barber, 'Which Technology and Which Democracy?' Democracy and New Media (ed.), Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (Cambridge: MIT, 2003), pp. 33-48.
[29] Martin Nkosi Ndlela, 'Mediating Democratic Engagement: Reflections on the role of the media in electoral processes', paper presented at Election Processes, Liberation Movements and Democratic Change in Africa conference (Maputo, Mozambique: 8-11 April 2010).

forces such as email also play a bigger role in communicating messages among activists. In 2006, the Zimbabwean government introduced the Interception of Communications Bill, which would have allowed the military, intelligence services, police and the office of the President to monitor email correspondence, and telephone conversations. Even though the bill became law in 2007, the lack of technological capability, manpower and monitoring equipment needed to intercept communication appears to have scuttled the government's plans. No arrests have been made.

1.2 Rationale behind the study

Covering the Zimbabwean elections in 2008 for *The Associated Press* indirectly influenced my decision to conduct this research. I was the news organisation's only accredited journalist on the ground on a secondment from the Amsterdam bureau. Rumours were spreading that journalists were either being abducted or facing imminent arrest. State security agents were scattered across the country as international interest in Zimbabwe's political landscape reached fever pitch, with the European Union and the United States clamouring for 'free and fair' elections. Mugabe ignored their calls, rhetorically arguing that Zimbabwe had successfully organised democratic elections since 1980 and therefore had nothing to learn from the West. It is common knowledge that Mugabe mocked former U.S. President George Bush's election victory after the disputed Florida recount in the United States.[30]

While in Zimbabwe, I talked to a number of people as part of my newsgathering tasks for the *Associated Press,* many of whom appeared eager to convince me that the source of their news went beyond the Zimbabwean borders. As a Zimbabwean, I knew that a state media monopoly was historically prevalent, if not accepted. The rural areas were technically less developed and marginalised, with some districts, such as the border town of Beitbridge, receiving no local television and radio signals until July 2011. Suddenly, these areas became hotbeds of political activism. What was causing this impulsive change? Opposition activists were making inroads in these areas, which traditionally had

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[30] Mugabe slams Bush Blair, (The Hindu, 6 August 2002)
http://greenhouse.economics.utah.edu/pipermail/rad-green/2002-August/004038.html Accessed 16 March 2011

supported the ruling ZANU PF party. I was curious to find out what the main instigation of this sudden change was. NGO activity was quite noticeable, but as I had been confident of, there was more.

As someone who had lived outside Zimbabwe since 1999, I was well aware of the political crisis that was engulfing the country, forcing millions to flee. With such a huge Diaspora community, it was quite evident to me Zimbabweans were maintaining their roots by forging and extending ties with relatives back home. That meant those fortunate enough to have secure jobs abroad would send home money to support relatives and friends in then economically-ravaged Zimbabwe. I was in that situation myself so I knew exactly what was going on. I talked to a lot of Zimbabweans who expressed concern over a law that made it illegal for expatriate Zimbabweans to vote. For some, the government was taking away their democratic right to vote. Faced with this situation, many Zimbabweans, I concluded, found ample reason to support the opposition. In addition, it was common knowledge at that time that several Zimbabwean-run online newspapers were supporting the opposition's call for change. I was eager, then, to find out whether the expatriates were actively supporting the opposition and whether they had any influence on the political choices of their relatives back home. And if so, how did they sell their message?

Having spoken to Zimbabweans abroad as well as those living in the country, I established a direct correlation between what the anti- and pro-Mugabe camps were trying to achieve. Obviously, to have any sort of influence on their relatives back home, Zimbabweans abroad were using some form of communication, I concluded. Their rigorous exposure to the Internet meant they not only knew what was happening in the country but they also had the means to relay the information to their family and friends back home. That assumption alone helped me establish my initial hypothesis, which asserted that the Internet had a major influence on the outcome of the elections, which saw President Mugabe lose an election for the first time. As a researcher, however, I was quite convinced there was no room for unsubstantiated and unverifiable assumptions such as this, so I sought to corroborate my claims by pursuing this PhD.

1.3 Research aims

Generally speaking, the research seeks to answer two key questions: Did the Internet in broad terms, and online news media specifically, play a role in Mugabe's election loss to Morgan Tsvangirai; and if so, then to what extent, how and with what impact? Furthermore, in what way and with what success and potentiality is the Internet influencing and enhancing democratic reforms in Zimbabwe and Africa at large? The four empirical chapters led the way by identifying and proving through data analysis what roles the digital media was playing in enhancing democratic participation in Zimbabwe. These chapters also helped back or disprove the overall hypothesis, which sought to share positive views regarding the Internet's role as a potential game changer in Zimbabwean politics. My initial research used the first round of voting won by Tsvangirai – and not the run-off of 27 June 2008 – as a point of departure in my attempts to understand the impact of new media developments in Zimbabwe. Simon Badza dismisses the June 27 runoff as "inexcusably flawed and therefore discredited, particularly by the West,"[31] which is perhaps one reason why I chose to disregard it. A critical analysis of news articles published by so-called dissident websites also helped this research investigate the overall influence of the Internet in shaping the 2008 outcome.

As noted above, the first part of the empirical section was based on an already-developed hypothesis asserting that Zimbabweans in the Diaspora played a crucial role in determining the first-round result in March 2008, and thus were essentially exerting great influence on politics at home. Facing a grim future because of a struggling economy back home and angry that Mugabe had denied them the right to vote, they hammered friends and relatives with anti-Mugabe messages. It is in this context that this research is dedicated to proving or disproving the contention that the largely Britain-based community of Zimbabweans, deliberately or not, used the Internet as a communications tool to discredit the Mugabe government and encouraged relatives back home to vote for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Additionally, further research sought to explore the role that citizen journalism is playing in helping to free up the African democratic space. It also sought to test whether this pro-opposition Internet

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[31] Simon Badza, 'Zimbabwe's 2008 Harmonized Elections: Regional & International Reaction', African Security Review, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2009), pp. 149-175.

onslaught, which led to Mugabe's first electoral loss since independence, effectively enhanced democratic participation in a country where local publicity was dominated by the pro-Mugabe, agenda-setting dogma. Overall, the research seeks to establish the contribution of all Internet facets such as social media and citizen journalism in the democratisation process in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe.

The introduction of ICTs, powered principally by the ever-increasing usage of Internet and mobile phone networks and based on their perceptible potential, provides an excellent opportunity for changing the operations of political landscapes in Africa and beyond. The digital media's potential is indeed detectable. In 2009 alone, there were an estimated 2.2 billion mobile phones in the developing world and 305 million computers.[32] This research questioned and sought answers to the view that widespread exposure to online news could have promoted citizen participation in the 2008 election and that the Internet was used effectively as a platform for political change. It also sought, as noted, to establish the contribution of citizen journalism to African democracy. Under e-democracy, participating citizens have the sovereignty to use information and communications technologies to influence a political process. Indeed, cyber democracy could be seen as an essential element of free expression that could be used in Zimbabwe or elsewhere as a building block of public participation. Brian Loader argues that the ICT revolution has offered citizens a chance to engineer change in democratic institutions and practices.[33] Thus, the new media, just like the voters, could play a critical role in influencing political and governmental change. Is such a scenario applicable to the Zimbabwe case?

1.4 Structure outline

In the first part of this dissertation, I will explore the historical aspects of Zimbabwean politics and media. This is a significant part of the research, as it introduces the reader to the roots of political and social despondency in contemporary Zimbabwe. This historical perspective elucidates on how and why things have polically gone badly in contemporary

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[32] Help desk Research Report, New ICTs for Development, Governance and Social Development Research Centre (2010) www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HD691.pdf, accessed 1 February 2011.
[33] Brian Loader, 'The Citizens' Voice in a Wired World: Experiments in e-democracy', paper presented at the ANA Hotel, Tokyo, (14 November 2001).

Zimbabwean society. The British colonial involvement is the crucial backdrop to the nation's present politics.. I will introduce Zimbabwe's contested land reforms, in which the bone of contention stems from a 1980 conference in Britain that laid the groundwork for the establishment of the state of Zimbabwe. This chapter, which also includes an up-to-date profile of President Mugabe, will also explore Zimbabwe's media history, critically looking at its supposedly stringent media laws and the role they play in society. Literature related to changes in political communication, as a direct result of the market penetration of ICTs, will then be analysed, after which I will profile dissident news websites run by Zimbabweans in the Diaspora and assess their impact and contribution towards political participation at home.

The methodological part of this study will explore the key research methods, largely reviewing qualitative research mechanisms in social science research. This chapter provides a broader perspective on research methods in communication sciences, which is also one of my key research interests. This part only explores literature and key concepts in qualitative research and is not entirely integrated with the methodological practicalities and findings employed in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. Conceptually, this chapter feeds into the findings from the four empirical chapters, but structurally it seeks to justify, through an analysis of relevant literature related to social science research, why I chose to use ethnographical interviews and observational research stemming from my role as an active participant and member of the Diaspora, as well as a comparative content analysis of dissident and pro-government and citizen journalism news sites to measure the impact they had on the electorate.

Chapter 4, which is the first empirical chapter, looks at the gaps and ideological differences between new and traditional media. Through an article analysis of a newspaper criticised by some for allegedly being a Mugabe mouthpiece, I intend to show the importance of traditional media to regimes with a traditional school of political thought such as Mugabe's. As a method of research, I analysed the content of the articles it publishes, evaluating headlines, pictures and choice of words. Interesting for this research, traditional media such as *The Herald* have also been forced to adopt new media

characteristics. I question: What does this mean, then, for a conventional political leadership, which is skeptical about the influence and power of the Internet and new media voices? *The Herald* assessment will go as far as looking at the paper's historical ties with Mugabe, how it is surviving in the digital age and whether it has supposedly lost its monopoly as the country's provider of news. While the Internet has been credited with disseminating information on the victims of violence as the government attempted to suppress the media, this research will specifically look at the Internet's role in empowering the electorate with pro-opposition news material. Chapter 5 will be based on a slightly transformed version of a paper I co-wrote and presented with Simon Columbus and Iris Leijendekker, at the 13th Symposium on International Journalism at the University of Texas, Austin in April 2012. Two more empirical chapters will examine trends in citizen journalism, one focussing on Zimbabwe and the other giving a critical reflection of ethics in African online journalism. In short, one overarching research aimed at investigating the Internet's role in the Zimbabwean democratic space is supported by four more quasi-independent empirical researches, which also sought to verify the contribution of Internet in buttressing democratic participation in Zimbabwe specifically, and Africa in general. In Chapter 8, the reflection and conclusion discuss the overall general, scientific, theoretical and empirical assessment attached to this research. I will attempt to revisit the main questions raised earlier in this research as well. The conclusion will also summarise arguments on why I think the Zimbabwean Diaspora has played a major role in democratic participation, and how this has occurred. The chapter will also provide an analysis on how dissident journalists as well as citizens living in the Diaspora could maintain and reinforce their momentum on the Internet and help sustain democracy at home, while also reflecting on the major challenges they face. Here, I will also assess opportunities for future research in this field and discuss its limitations.