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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2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces and assesses the methods that were used in this research, which was conducted in a contemporary situation. As such it reveals the potential challenges and differences between contemporary and traditional research, given the idea that new methods such as questionnaire interviews can, as was the case in this research, be conducted digitally. The Zimbabwean case is a very difficult one considering the political polarisation in the country. To this end, not everyone who was asked to participate in the research did so openly. Some people sought evidence that I was indeed enrolled as a PhD student, while others wanted written guarantees that their names would not be published. This chapter also reviews literature related to qualitative research methods, which were used in this research. The vigorous analysis of literature became somewhat of a method on its own since the work of key scholars in the field of research methodologies, digital journalism and participatory media were critically assessed.

In his assessment of the use of interviews in qualitative research, William Trochim singles out preparation as one of the key elements in gathering data.[34] That view is supported by Zina O'Leary, who goes on to refute the idea that some research methodologies are superior to others. Ensuring that one gets the right supervisory advice and guidelines is also crucial to the success of the research, O'Leary argues.[35] Following O'Leary's lead, I elected to principally use face-to-face interviews as principally the main research methodology, along with a content analysis of selected news sites. For the initial research, I resolved to carry out 50 interviews, 25 of which were questionnaire-based and the other 25 in person, with Britain-based Zimbabweans. In Zimbabwe, I also conducted 20 interviews with policy-makers and politicians, journalists and members of the NGO community, as well as Zimbabweans with relatives living abroad, in a bid to corroborate hypothetical conclusions of the Internet's contribution with realistic assessments on the ground. Engaging them would serve to verify or reject the hypothesis that Zimbabweans

[34] William Trochim, The Research Methods Knowledge Base (2nd edn.; Cincinnati: Atomic Dog Publishing, 2000) 23.
[35] Zina O'Leary, The Essential Guide to Doing Research (London: Sage Publications 2004) 18.

in the Diaspora made use of their exposure to the Internet to discredit Robert Mugabe in the 2008 elections, leading to his unprecedented loss. Since content analysis of websites is also a key methodology for my PhD, I elected to analyse four Zimbabwean websites. Altogether, I assessed 80 news items, including readers' comments, columns and editorials focussing on the period, February to March 2008. I decided to look into articles only in the month leading up to the elections simply because it is during this period that the sites were completely geared towards reporting election-related news. The same method of analysis also applies to the websites mentioned below. Multi-methodological approaches were used in this research, which not only used article analysis in *The Herald* newspaper, but also randomly selected online-based articles from Zimbabwean newspapers to examine the extent to which they were contributing to full democratic participation in the country. The following online newspapers, all run by Zimbabwean journalists living abroad, were explored: www.swafrica.com, www.newzimbabwe.com, www.zimdaily.com, and www.thezimbabwean.co.uk.

2.2. Content analysis

The foundations of content analysis can easily be attributable to Harold Lasswell's assessment: "Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect".[36] John Vivian brings forward the view that content analysis involves measuring media content to establish a database for analysis.[37] Similarly, Werner Severin and James Tankard contend that content analysis is a "systematic method of analysing message content".[38] While agreeing with Vivian along with Severin and Tankard, Joseph Turow puts emphasis on the fact that content analysis allows the researcher to "present the results quantitatively".[39] Perhaps a broader, all-inclusive definition of content analysis is provided by Kimberly A. Neuendorf, who says "content analysis is a summarising, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalisability,

[36]Donald H. McBurney, Theresa L., White, Research Methods, Eighth edition, (8th edn.; Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2009) pp.234.
[37] John Vivian, The Mass Media of Mass Communication, Seventh edition (7th edn.; Boston: Pearson Education Inc, 2006) pp.354.
[38] Werner Severin and James Tankard, Communication Theories: Origins, Methods and Uses in the Mass Media (5th edn.; New York: Pearson Education Inc, 2010) pp.35.
[39] Joseph Turow, Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communication (3rd edn.; New York: Routledge 2010) pp.46.

replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented".[40]

My research attempted to cover every aspect of Neuendorf's definition from the design to the analysis stage, incorporating key attributes such as the generalisability and replicability of data. Content analysis, according to Steve Stemler, also allows "inferences to be made which can then be corroborated using other methods of data collection".[41] Stemler's assumptions also fit well in my research since, apart from content analysis, I used other forms of data collection and analysis. Klaus Krippendorff and Mary Angela Bock suggest that six questions are central to the success of a content analysis: which data are analysed, how are they defined, what is the population from which they are drawn, what is the context relative to which the data are analysed, what are the boundaries of the analysis, what is the target of the inferences.[42] Content analysis of the four Zimbabwean websites in the period leading up to the elections was used as part of my research methodology. The main purpose of employing this methodology was to quantitatively measure the extent to which these websites published articles that had a slant towards the MDC, the results of which were assessed to see if they matched with outcomes of the interviews and questionnaire. For instance, if the website had content favouring the opposition and there is confirmation from a respondent that he/she disseminated such information to family and friends and home, that would mean the hypothesis has been affirmed.

I therefore looked at 80 articles (20 from each of the four news sites) published between 1 February 2008 and 29 March 2008, the day the elections were held. I carefully perused them and placed the results of my assessment into referential units for coding. These can be found in the discussion part of this dissertation. Referential units, posits Stemler, are useful when a researcher is pursuing inferences on attitudes, values or preferences. My research sought to investigate the values and attitudes of the four websites, which were then measured to see if the way they represented news allowed Zimbabwean exiles to

[40] Kimberly Neuendorf, The Content Analysis Guidebook Online [web page] (2002) http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/content , accessed 7 February 2011.
[41] Steve Stemler An overview of content analysis: Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 7/17 [web page] http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=17, accessed 16 February 2011.
[42] Klaus Krippendorff and Mary Angela Bock, The Content Analysis Reader (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2008).

circulate and share the news with voters at home, which is why I made a case to follow Stemler's lead. All articles were read and analysed with a view to gathering the extent to which they may have influenced reader perception of President Mugabe, and then coded into subsets that included the introduction, headline, length of article, presence of a photo and reader comments. Content related to broadcasts by SW Africa was also analysed using the same method, because even though the station transmitted broadcast material, it also has a website that is constantly updated with news. The assumption, according to Stemler, is that "the words that are mentioned most often are the words that reflect the greatest concerns". [43]

2.3 Interviews

One of my initial research targets was to ensure that the interviews would be complete. To reach that goal, one has to record and transcribe the interviews making sure that each and every interviewee's views are correctly represented. How accurate are the interviews, and more importantly how accurate is the interview sample? Good preparation appears very important in ensuring that the results obtained from interviews are accurate. There is a need to educate and inform the interviewees on the purpose of conducting this research, the contents of the research, as well as the implications of participating in the research. This is in line with Steinar Kvale's view that both parties involved in the interview process should value human interaction for knowledge production.[44] It is likely that when interviewees are informed of what is expected of them, they will be more inclined to provide accurate answers. Next to that, there is need to prepare and put together questions capable of allowing those interviewed to reveal their true feelings or assessment of the situation. These questions can normally be both descriptive and explanatory, requesting the interviewee to cover the 'what' and 'why' and 'how' aspects. From my professional journalism experience, I had learned that the manner in which a question is formulated subsequently plays a role in the accuracy of the responses one gets. Considering an estimated three million Zimbabweans were said to be living outside the country, a representative sample, which involves the selection of a small number of individuals

[43] Steve Stemler An overview of content analysis: Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 7/17 [web page] http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=17, accessed 16 February 2011.
[44] Steinar Kvale, An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996) p.14.

capable of representing a larger population, was used in the first, comprehensive overall study.

Gabriella Rundblad pinpoints the rationale for selecting a representative sample as a two-way argument, since firstly: "no one can test an entire population because even the smallest population would take too long to recruit and test and secondly most researchers seek general conclusions that apply to a population and not just a few individuals".[45] To that effect, results were extrapolated, allowing me to make generalisations about the entire Zimbabwean community in the UK. The biggest challenge of using a representative sample without a doubt is ensuring that all aspects of the population are being studied. Can the views of 50 people fully represent those of all Zimbabweans in the UK? To ensure accuracy, I endeavored to interview people from across the political, educational and racial divide. To be more precise, students currently studying in the UK on a Zimbabwean government scholarship; a Zimbabwean diplomat; Zimbabwean professors lecturing on UK Universities; nurses and factory workers; as well as undocumented Zimbabweans living in the UK, were all interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with former White farmers, representatives and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change in London, Zimbabwean musicians and several Zimbabwean journalists. In Zimbabwe, random selections of people with relatives abroad were used, as well as representatives of all of the country's ten provinces, even though they were not necessarily related to Zimbabweans interviewed abroad.

Of fundamental importance was my acknowledgement that my views about the subject under study were not relevant. To acquire the much-needed peer acknowledgment, every researcher needs to disregard any forms of bias in the research process. It is possible to question whether one cannot be biased in my case, considering the fact that I am a Zimbabwean. I obviously researched and wrote this dissertation according to my own worldview. Nevertheless, as a responsible citizen, I attempted to fairly represent views and ideas according to the way I received them. According to Mugo Fridah, sampling

[45] Gabriella Rundblad, 'Recruiting a representative sample', [web page] (2006) www.appliedlinguistics.co.uk , accessed 16 February 2011.

bias is defined as a tendency to favour the selection of units that have particular characteristics.[46] It is thus the researcher's responsibility to obtain informed consent from the respondents before the research process starts and to ensure that, among other things, their confidentiality is respected.

Structured and semi-structured interviews, which collect qualitative data by setting up a two-way communication-based interview with the respondents, who have the time and scope to reveal their opinions, were of particularly great value to my research design. According to Christa Wessel, Fredric Weymann and Cord Spreckelsen, semi-structured interviews signify two corresponding aspects: (a) the interviewer is aware of the topics and (b) the interviewee has the opportunity to talk freely on a certain point.[47] The use of semi-structured interviews is preferred largely because of their ability to get the respondent's opinion through the use of open-ended questions. The Zimbabwean elections provide an intricate situation due to the political sensitivities involved. From experience, many Zimbabweans, including those in Diaspora, are unwilling to openly discuss their political preferences with strangers. In such a given context, semi-structured interviews could be used because they can deal with complex questions and give informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms while – thanks to their flexibility – allowing the researcher to build trust and a rapport with potential interviewees ahead of the interview.

After a thorough analysis of literature related to research methods, I came to the conclusion that I would use both semi-structured and structured interviews to increase the likelihood of objectivity, even though my role as a participant seemed to confirm the inter-subjective approach. When all participants are asked to respond to a uniform set of questions and given an identical timeframe for interview engagement, their answers are likely to provide an objective analysis. Furthermore, providing a uniform context of questioning allowed me to aggregate the responses. To my own advantage, the use of a

[46] Fridah Mugo, 'Sampling in Research', (2008) [web page] http://neumann.hec.ca/sites/cours/51-651-02/Sampling_in_Research.htm Accessed 16 April 2011
[47] Christa Wessel, Fredric Weymann and Cord Spreckelsen Streamlining Qualitative Research Methods for Medical Informatics – A methodological approach, Publikationen, Aarchen University, 2006 (London: Sage Publications, 2006) p. 2.

common format made it easier to analyse, compare and contrast interview results. The overall applicability of the same tone of voice during all interview sessions is important according to David Gray, who argues that uniformity in this aspect ensures that the respondents' answers are not influenced by the interviewer's tone, perhaps another key element to ensuring accuracy.[48]

My main goal was to ensure objectivity in my research; therefore, I recorded, transcribed and analysed the non-verbal elements of the interview including gestures and pauses. I was aware of the constraints and limitations of structured interviews, including the fact that by using an interview guide I would possibly miss out on questions excluded in the guide, hence the assumption that restrictive questioning may also lead to restrictive answers. However, a structured interview was the best method to use in this particular research since it turned out to be relatively easy to quantify data that came from a uniform set of questions. I also, and more crucially, believe that data obtained from this particular type of interview is more reliable because the same questions were asked of all respondents. Of particular importance was also the fact that a standardised form of interview bode well with the generalisation element of representative sample, which, as already stated, was chosen in this research.

In addition, I used semi-structured interviews, even though Matthew David and Carole Sutton argue that they are primarily used when a researcher has no intentions of testing a specific hypothesis.[49] I do not fully subscribe to the idea that semi-structured interviews are better than structured ones because they allow the interviewer to probe all aspects of the research. It is also possible to look into several issues of the research when employing structured interviews, especially when the researcher has factual knowledge of the research under study. The key element, I suppose, is good preparation, for there is no guarantee a researcher will acquire some important data simply because he/she has engaged in a particular type of interview. An unstructured interview, on the other hand, did not seem ideal for this particular type of research because it does not allow the

[48] Gray, David, Doing Research in the Real World. (London: Sage Publications 2004) pp. 215.
[49] Matthew David & Carole Sutton, Social Research the Basics.(London: SAGE Publications, 2004) pp. 87

possibility of replicating data and, as O'Leary argues, unstructured interviews are not particularly generalisable to a wider population.

Face-to-face interviews were supplemented by questionnaire interviews sent directly to Zimbabweans living in the UK. I did not want to make a distinctive sample in this case because I feared results from the respondents would not be representative. I did this to ensure that separate methodological approaches were used with the view of comparing the different results. Through a network of friends and students, a surveymonkey.com questionnaire link was sent to Zimbabwean expatriates previously unknown to me through digital means. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender and professions. They were then asked to indicate whether they, directly or indirectly, participated in influencing relatives in Zimbabwe to vote against Mugabe; how frequently they read Internet news sites, and which ones specifically; how often they spoke with their relatives, and using which method; whether they felt it was unfair that they were not allowed to vote simply because they were not living in Zimbabwe; and to further elucidate their political preferences and their views on the economy, as well as which candidate they would have voted for had they been allowed to vote in the March 2008 elections. As stated earlier, Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe were interviewed so as to corroborate or deny the results of the data obtained in Britain. I wanted to know whether their voting choices were influenced by what was fed to them by relatives in Britain; who they voted for and why they voted for a particular candidate; what influenced them to vote for a particular candidate; how informed they were about the candidates; whether they attended any rallies; and whether they would vote for the same candidate again.

An interview is a qualitative data collection tool. According to Kvale, qualitative research interviews attempt to establish the meaning of people's experiences on a particular subject.[50] Thus, the main task in interviewing is attempting to make sense of what the interviewees say. Carter McNamara concurs with Kvale's observation, stating that interviews are principally useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences.

[50] Steinar Kvale, An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996) pp. 15.

Interviews, argues McNamara, allow the interviewer to comprehensively pursue information about a given topic.[51] For a research that seeks to expound the role played by the Internet in the Zimbabwe, interviews seemed more valuable as a qualitative method of research because they allow the respondents to freely share their opinions and impressions. Working directly with the respondent makes the interview personal and open, potentially boosting the quantity of information an interviewer can get as respondents share their opinions without restraint, further improving the quality of the interviews. However, quantity does not always reflect the quality of the material that an interview may bring to a researcher.

Kvale describes seven stages of an interview investigation as thematizing, designing the study so it addresses the research questions, the interview itself, transcribing, analysing, verification and reporting.[52] Thematization, which largely involves the formulation of the rationale behind the investigation, also seeks to illustrate the concept for the topic under investigation. It must be clear in the opening stages why the interview is being conducted and what the subject matter under investigation is. Explaining vividly why the interview is being conducted makes it easier to move on to how the interview will be pursued, argues Kvale. For the purpose of this research, in seeking to appreciate the role of the Internet in the Zimbabwean elections, research interviews were conducted to determine whether Internet-exposed Zimbabweans in the Diaspora had a hand in deciding the national elections in 2008. Since this is a comparative research, the same question was applied to the British case, albeit with a few alterations.

The planning stage centres on designing the questions to be used in the interview. Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison say this stage involves the translation of research objectives into the questions that will make up the main body of the schedule.[53] Questions should thus reflect the objectives of the research. The format and response mode – taking into consideration the aims of the interview, nature of the subject under

[51]Carter McNamara, PhD research General guidelines for conducting interviews, Minnesota [web page] (1999) http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/intrview.htm , accessed 11 September 2011.
[52] Steinar Kvale, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996) p. 88.
[53] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge Fermer, 2000) p. 274.

investigation, kind and circumstances of the respondents to be used, and anticipated information to come from respondents – should also be considered. David Morgan mentions focus groups as another method that allows for considerable flexibility in how questions are asked.[54] Unlike targeted interviews, he argues, focus groups give respondents a chance to supply in-depth answers. In a focus group, respondents are grouped together and they answer questions at the same time. According to Fatemeh Rabiee, focus groups aim to understand, and explain, the meanings, beliefs and cultures that "influence the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of individuals".[55] I considered the possible engagement of focus groups, separately sampling groups of Zimbabwean-educated nurses who had moved to the UK in search of greener pastures upon graduation. Even though on paper they seemed more likely to be willing to openly give their views because they felt they shared similar backgrounds and experiences, I felt I would be not be able to gain credible, open and unbiased data since naturally Zimbabweans tend not to openly enjoy discussion about their political affiliations in public.

I also considered using purposive sampling to bring together Britain-based victims of alleged Zimbabwean repression. The reason for purposive sampling was to investigate how many Zimbabweans were exposed to the Internet and how many of them visited, read and then shared political information from news websites with family members who then voted out President Mugabe. Selecting a smaller, more manageable number of people to interview seemed more logical simply because talking to the entire population is not only impossible, but would require more time and perhaps more interviewers. Purposive sampling limits the researcher to only a specific group of people one feels will be beneficial to the research. While a certain group of people, for instance Zimbabwean nurses, may have been considered under purposive sampling, it could have proven difficult to elucidate on how their views represented the entire exile community with people from various professions. Nurses may have represented the views of educated or degree-holding members of the community, meaning Zimbabweans without a university degree would have been excluded under purposive sampling. The advantage of using a

[54] David L Morgan, The Focus Group Guidebook, edited by Morgan, D. L. and Krueger, R. A. Vol. 1, The Focus Group Kit. (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p. 30.
[55] Fatemeh Rabiee, 'Focus-group interview and data analysis', Proceedings of the Nutrition Society (2004), pp. 63, 655–660.

random selection is its ability to eliminate potential bias, but using it as a methodology also means one needs be prepared to come across citizens who have not been exposed to the Internet and are thus not useful for the purposes of this research.

It was also my responsibility to clearly spell out the target groups of people to be interviewed, in addition to clarifying reasons for their inclusion or exclusion. To put this into context for the research, I looked at the circumstances that forced expatriate Zimbabweans out of the country in order to fully comprehend their contribution in the elections. For instance, it is highly unlikely that a Zimbabwean studying in the UK on a bursary from the Zimbabwean government would be involved in spreading an anti-Robert Mugabe tirade to relatives back home, since he or she may be thankful for Mugabe's generous funding. On the other hand, those who were allegedly forced out of their jobs by the regime or those whose relatives were supposedly killed by the militias linked to the president, had a higher chance of pursing a strong, anti-Mugabe agenda. Moreover, considering the sensitivity of the subject matter, some people may be uncomfortable giving their full names and addresses or some may not actually like the idea of tape-recording the interview.

Laying down the research design allows the researcher to determine what kind of questions are to be used. Information sought attempted to ascertain the respondent's opinion, background, behaviour, feelings or knowledge on the subject matter, hence the need to define whether the questions used in the interview were open or closed questions and whether they should be direct or non-direct questions. An example of an open question which was asked to the respondents is: "Do you see the Internet as a major factor in improving democratic participation in Zimbabwe?" An indirect question posed was: "Why do you not trust news reports on Zimbabwe?" Specific and non-specific questions were also employed. "Do you think Zimbabweans should be left to sort their own problems? " amounted to a general question while, "What is your major source of news??" was rather more specific. One also needs to decide the types of interviews to be conducted. If it is a standardised, open-ended interview, then the question is whether an identical set of questions should be used for each interviewee. Is it an informal,

conversational interview with no clearly thought-out questions, or is it a telephone interview? Highlighting the importance of clarity prior to, during and after the interview, William Foddy introduces the symbolic interaction theory, arguing that if questions are not clear, respondents will constantly try to reach a mutually shared definition of the situation to which the research may or may not ascribe.[56]

In the interviewing stage, Kvale notes that the interview should have a reflective approach to the knowledge sought. Important at this stage is the setting. The interviewee needs to be comfortable with the setting of the interview. Some may want privacy, so it is important to ensure that their privacy is guaranteed. Body language may also play a role. Obviously, if you cannot look into the interviewee's eye, some people may see that as lack of interest. However, it should be noted that while in the West making eye contact while talking to someone is a sign of interest and attention, in some African and Asian countries this could be offensive. Planning is also important. The interviewer needs to ask one single question at a time. It also is important to check if your audiotape is working. Taking notes is also encouraged. I followed these steps as given by Kvale, which obviously helped improve the quality of my interviews, considering it was very clear to the interviewees what the purpose of the study was and what their participation meant to the success of the research.

Kvale's transcribing stage involves preparing the interview material for analysis, which normally involves the time-consuming process of dictating the oral speech into written text. Justifying tape-recording and transcribing the data, Alan Bryman argues that qualitative researchers do not just need to focus on what people say, but also on the way in which they say it.[57] Verbatim transcription means everything recorded in the transcript is typed up, including possible coughing or pauses. It allows the researcher to have the interview as it is, word-for-word with no edits. In an intelligent verbatim transcription, the typist edits out repetitions or laughter, paying attention mostly to what he feels is important. This research uses verbatim transcription in order to remain accurate and focussed on everything that the interviewees say, thereby staying in line with Daniel G.

[56] Willam Foddy, Constructing Questions for Interviews (Cambridge University Press, 1993) 21.
[57] Alan Bryman, Interviewing in qualitative research: Social Research Methods (2nd edn.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 321.

Oliver, Julianne M. Serovich, and Tina L. Mason's argument that transcribing data could strongly affect the way participants are understood, the information they share, and the conclusions drawn.[58]

The analysing stage follows next with the researcher having to decide on appropriate methods of analysis. Scholars like Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen consider coding, shaped by one's central questions or hypotheses, as a first step in analysing interviews. [59] Coding becomes apparent when the interviewer analysing data comes across words and phrases that highlight an issue of importance to the research. The process of assembling these words is defined as coding. Daily interpretive analysis is one way of looking at interviews; it involves assembling and analysing data collected on each day.[60] Content analysis could also be employed in assessing interviews. Steve Stemler suggests that the most commonly accepted notion in qualitative research is that a content analysis involves engaging in a word-frequency count. He argues that when conducting a word-frequency count an assumption is made that the words that are mentioned most often are the "words that reflect the greatest concerns".[61] The material needs to be analysed step by step, following rules of procedure and devising the material into content-analytical units.[62] Philipp Mayring argues that the objective of qualitative content analysis can be all sorts of recorded communication including transcripts of interviews, discourses, and protocols of observations, videotapes or other documents.[63] The verifying stage of the interview ascertains what Kvale calls the generalisability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. Reliability is based on the consistency of the results while validity tries to establish whether the intended goals of the research have been met by the interview. The final stage involves communicating the findings of the study and the methods applied.

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[58] Daniel G. Oliver, Julianne M. Serovich, and Tina L. Mason, 'Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription: Towards Reflection in Qualitative Research', *Journal of Social Forces*, 84/2 (2005) pp. 1273-1289.
[59] Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen. Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods (3rd edn.; Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998) p. 67.
[60] Charles H Wood, Collecting and Analysing Interview Data, [web page] (2000) http://www.rsmas.miami.edu/IAI/Inst2000/lectures/wood_jul20/reading/qual_appr_2.pdf , accessed 14 September 2010.
[61] Stemler, Steve, An overview of content analysis. Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation [web page] (2001) http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=17, accessed 8 March 2010.
[62] Philipp Mayring 'Qualitative Content Analysis', Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung, Vol, 1, No. 2 [web page] (2000) http://217.160.35.246/fqs-texte/2-00/2-00mayring-e.htm#g2, accessed 8 March 2010.
[63] Phillip Mayring Qualitative Content Analysis Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, Vol 1, No 2 (2000) [web page] http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/rt/printerFriendly/1089/2385 Accessed 16 June 2011

2.4 Qualitative approach

Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman agree that when thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptive worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspective worlds that can only be captured through face-to-face interactions.[64] But in a changing environment, new methods are presently the order of the day thanks to technology. In the digital age, interviews are conducted online. There is no evidence as far as I am concerned to suggest that the inner feelings of a person can only be accessed through the use of face-to-face interactions. When people are on their own, they also freely express their own views in writing. I do not think the authenticity and reliability of a research should be focussed on whether respondents reacted online or through face-to-face interactions. Realising these difficulties, I employed both means, the more traditional face-to-face interviews and the digital questionnaires, which are increasingly used by new researchers. I decided to employ both measures because I was well aware of the fact that some Zimbabweans would not be comfortable speaking in person with a stranger about their political choices. Randomly sampled respondents thus shared their views online. By any means, it is difficult for researcher to deal with a deeply politically-sensitive case like mine. I was not particularly afraid of being targeted by any political party, given the fact that academic researchers are well respected in Zimbabwe. Academics have been spared from arrests or threats in Zimbabwe, something that is not a common trend for journalists, for example. To the best of my knowledge, no academic has been arrested for criticising the president since the political upheavals began in 2000. In fact, one of Mugabe's staunchest critics was the late University of Zimbabwe Political Science Professor John Makumbe.

Qualitative methods have thus been preferred largely because of the nature of the research, which inherently lends itself to a qualitative investigation based on the view that it is the 'how' instead of 'how many' question that needs to be explored. According to Mildred Patten, qualitative methods should be used when little is known about the topic,

[64] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B Rossman, Designing Qualitative Research, (4th edn.;, London: Sage Publications, 2006) 14-56.

when participants belong to a culture that is secretive, and when potential participants are available for extensive interactions and observations.[65]

The research objectives fit well into Mildred Patten's description if one considers that this study was carried out with the hope of establishing the first thought-provoking assessment of the way Zimbabwean exiles have used the Internet to influence voting patterns in Zimbabwe. Studies on the momentum that the Internet has gained over the years, especially with specific reference to citizens' political participation in Africa and particularly Zimbabwe, are limited. Zimbabweans in the Diaspora tend to remain secretive when it comes to issues concerning their political association, possibly for fear of reprisals. Furthermore, it can also be concluded that there was plenty of time to conduct interviews with Zimbabweans at home. It goes without saying that human experience is a strong characteristic of qualitative methodology, which I was keen to explore.

Making a simple distinction between quantitative and qualitative empirical research, Keith Punch concludes that the two are separated by the fact that numbers, which are central to the success of the former, have no major part to play in the latter.[66] Be it in a quantitative or qualitative research, question development is key to understanding the process. A researcher needs to clearly identify and lay out the questions to be researched, also explaining robustly the motive of the research before deciding which methodology to use. According to Punch, different questions require different methods to answer them. Patten agrees with Punch's view. Arguing that observations and empirical research are inseparable, she says that prior to a research engagement, a researcher needs to clearly outline the main motives for undertaking the research, who is to be observed, how and when to carry out the observations. The significance of well-defined objectives cannot be over emphasised, she argues, adding that the 'why' question establishes the main motive for the research and outlines its potential. For example, funding bodies are more inclined to assess the research aims before deciding whether to fund it or not. In fact, clarity on

[65] Mildred L Patten, Understanding Research Methods, (Greendale CA: Pyrczak Publishing, 2005), pp. 21.
[66] Keith F Punch, Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches, (London: Sage Publications 2005) pp. 24.

the questions to be investigated is largely in the researcher's interest as it simplifies the process of looking for answers.

Patten sees case studies as research strategies that focus on the exploration of a complex phenomenon and related contexts, stating they are mostly useful when exploring the 'why' and 'how' questions. This research's main objective has been clearly spelt out as intending to explore the extent to which Internet exposure may have helped Zimbabweans in the Diaspora share and spread anti-Mugabe information, effectively discrediting the long-serving president. The intervention of online journalism – especially websites run by Zimbabwean journalists living in the Diaspora – in presumably discrediting President Mugabe's candidacy was also explored. Thus, can the Internet influence the outcome of an election, and if so, to what extent? There were plenty of questions that logically could not be ignored. For example, how many Zimbabweans have left the country? Where have they gone to? Why did they leave the country? How many of them had access to the Internet before and during the elections? How many of them encouraged relatives to vote out President Mugabe? Was that decision based on what they had read on the Internet? How many of them would be willing to disclose their political affiliation? What evidence is there to prove that their relatives and friends followed their advice not to vote for President Mugabe?

Having outlined the research questions, one has to consider the methods to be used. Following Immy Holloway and Stephanie Wheeler's assertion that the aim of a qualitative researcher is to explore people's experiences, feelings and beliefs, this research chose to prioritise qualitative research methods.[67] An ethnographic approach was effectively used as a form of methodology in this research, considering the interviews were embedded in ethnography. In addition to analysing the data, I spent an extended period of time identifying, studying and observing any cultural trends and patterns among exiled Zimbabweans that helped me explain, approve or dismiss the above-mentioned hypothesis. I concluded that community engagement played a crucial role in sharing information among Zimbabweans. Churches provide good examples of this. While

[67] Immy Holloway & Stephanie Wheeler Qualitative research for Nurses (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 1996) pp. 4.

people may be entitled to their own opinions, visiting the same church meant that people shared the same ideology and values. One such example is a confirmation by a church pastor during an interview that while his congregation tried as much as they could to stay away from politics, the majority of its members were openly critical of Mugabe's policies.

Ethnography is a multi-purpose qualitative methodology involving participant observation, interviewing, and discourse analyses of natural language. Defined by David F. Fetterman as a credible, rigorous and authentic story, ethnography thus involves extensive fieldwork under which one abandons any preconceived assumptions of a particular group of people in order to effectively learn something about them.[68] Punch says listening to what people say, asking questions and collecting any relevant data is central to understanding ethnography, which he argues is based on the assumption that the shared cultural meanings of a group of people helps define their actions and behaviour.[69]

Some scholars, however, believe ethnographical work cannot be separated from grounded theory, which assumes one has to abandon any preconceptions or hypotheses before engaging in research. To this end, Fetterman argues that the beginning phase of an ethnographic study often involves considering all biases and preconceived notions that the ethnographer may have. Arguing that biases may have both a positive and negative impact on the research and are indeed part of the research process, he says the choice of a problem, geographical area or the people to study, in itself demonstrates a degree of bias. Grounded theory, which largely involves the inductive discovery of theory from data collected, has indeed been considered as a potential research methodology for this research. However, since a clearly defined hypothesis has been developed, engaging grounded theory would possibly conflict with the hypotheses to be tested. However, as a theoretical contribution of this research, it is inductively provided in the final chapter of this research.

[68] David F Fetterman, Ethnography: Step by Step, (London: Sage Publications, 2010) pp. 1-10.
[69] Keith F Punch, Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches, Sage Publications (2005) pp. 150.

Interviews were aligned to ethnography, as the researcher in the field does not just make observations but also talks to the people involved. As noted earlier, face-to-face and computerised questionnaire interviews were also used in this research. Using web-based questionnaire interviews, I attracted respondents to questions by randomly sending survey questions to readers. The use of questionnaires was driven by the view that information from a large portion of the group would be potentially collated. Also considering my own budget constraints, I chose web-based interviews as they were considerably less expensive to administer. Besides, I felt it would be more interesting to see if results based on two contrasting methodologies would draw the same conclusions.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Social science scholars need to make several ethical considerations when studying human behaviour and attitudes. In a broad sense, they safeguard the interests and rights of the people involved in or affected by their research. David B. Resnik defines research ethics as standards of conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the process of conducting research. John Prosser, Andrew Clark and Rose Wiles consider mutual respect, non-coercion and non-manipulative support for democratic values to be the most basic codes for good ethical practice in social science research.[70] The issue of the researcher's moral integrity is thus important insofar as the general understanding of research ethics is concerned. Fundamental ethical guidelines for the conduct of research were codified by the Nuremberg Code.[71] The code, which emerged in 1947 in the aftermath of the gruesome atrocities conducted under the guise of scientific research on Jews in the Nazi concentration camps, gave birth to ten conditions to justify research involving human subjects. Chief among these are the voluntary consent of the subjects involved in the research, and that 'something good' for society has to emerge from the research.

Ethics not only promote best practice among researchers but they also help establish and maintain accountability. Research misconduct involves what Denise Carter calls

[70]John Prosser, Andrew Clark and Rose Wiles, Visual Research Ethics at Crossroads Realities Working Papers, Working Paper 10, p.10
[71]Nuremberg Code Accessed http://www.cirp.org/library/ethics/nuremberg/ 1April 2010

"fabrication, falsification or plagiarism in proposing, performing or reviewing research or in reporting research results".[72] Fabrication involves making up data or results and recording and reporting them. In order to reign in potential cheating, professional bodies have developed specific guidelines for ethical codes of conduct for researchers. For example, many universities have a research ethics policy, which all researchers must adhere to. These policies are mostly intended to help researchers appreciate the rights of the participants, consider a risk assessment of their research and observe equally important matters such as confidentiality and informed consent.

While deception should always be avoided, Jamie McIntosh argues that researchers frequently use it nonetheless.[73] This possibly explains why not only scholars but also educational entities across the world have developed norms and guidelines for making research practice more acceptable. McIntosh argues that deception should be kept out of any form of research unless one determines that there is no other way of getting information. Thus, the potential use of any form of deception needs to be justified before the research is carried out. However, the question is: can deception be defended when honesty is considered a paramount academic virtue?

McIntosh is of the opinion that researchers conducting a study on how students of different races interact would be excused if they chose not to reveal the purpose of the study, so as to counter the possibility of participants acting unnaturally during the research.[74] However, researchers would still have an obligation to inform participants about the use of deception no later than at the conclusion of the research. Deception is potentially dangerous because it may harm participants. Afflicting harm on someone may point to a failure by the researcher to respect human dignity and privacy. Eleanor Singer observes that failure to guarantee confidentiality is the most serious harm to which

[72] Dennis Carter delivering a lecture during the University of Hull's 2010 Easter School
[73] Jamie McIntosh, Ethics in Social Science Research: Scholars Must Follow a Code of Ethics to Maintain Integrity. http://scientificethics.suite101.com/article.cfm/ethics_in_social_science_research#ixzz0icShoWdj Accessed 16 April 2010
[74] Jamie McIntosh, Ethics in Social Science Research: Scholars Must Follow a Code of Ethics to Maintain Integrity. http://scientificethics.suite101.com/article.cfm/ethics_in_social_science_research#ixzz0icShoWdj Accessed 16 April 2010

participants in social research are exposed.[75] Harm resulting from participating in research may be physical, social, psychological, emotional, financial or legal.[76] To put this ethical requirement into context of this PhD research, there was always a chance that participants in a politically-centred probe into the influence of Internet in the 2008 election would risk victimisation from either members of the president's party or opposition cadres if the research findings were publicised without their consent. Insensitive exposure of attributes and opinions could lead to the political marginalisation of the participants, their friends or families, which is why various scholars including McIntosh argue that it must be avoided.

While informants and other research participants should be accorded the right to remain anonymous and to have their privacy and confidentiality respected, it is the researcher's responsibility to obtain informed consent from the respondents before the research process starts. The procedure involves an agreement reached with the participants to take part in the research after potential risks, benefits, purposes and uses of the research have been thoroughly explained to them. Prosser, Clark and Wiles argue that not only is gaining consent a key requirement to the process of getting good quality data, but it also helps develop and maintain a rapport of trust between a researcher and participants.[77] Consent could come in various forms. It could be written or implied, meaning if someone for instance agrees to an interview and answers the questions, then implied consent has automatically been obtained. Prosser, Clark and Wiles argue that consent may have different meanings in other cultures and worse still, it may be not be possible to gain consent from every participant in the research. Such a development leaves a researcher in a position where he/she has to evaluate the need to continue with the research.

According to David B. Resnik, publishing one's work should be in the interest of the advancement of research and scholarship, not the researcher's own career. That way,

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[75] Eleanor Singer Ethical issues in surveys in Edith de Leeuw, Joop Hox and Don Dillman, (2008) International Handbook of Survey Methodology p. 90. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[76] Chris MacDonald and Nancy Walton, Research in the Social Sciences & Humanities. Available on the Internet http://www.researchethics.ca/social-science-humanities.htm Accessed 16 April 2010

[77] Jon Prosser, Andrew Clark, and Rose Wiles "Visual Research Ethics at Crossroads" Realities Working Papers, (University of Manchester 2008).

wasteful and duplicative publication should be avoided.[78] Furthermore, there should be no economic exploitation of individual informants, translators and research participants. This principle aligns itself with the need to consider conflicts of interest when conducting research. For a researcher who is on the payroll of the opposition party in Zimbabwe, conducting research that involves the ruling party may attract issues involving conflict of interest. Equally important is the thorny issue of objectivity. Resnik suggests a researcher should avoid bias "in all aspects of research including experimental design, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, personnel decisions, grant writing, expert testimony, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required".[79] Debriefing is another important element of the research ethical framework. According to Pattern, debriefing takes place when the researcher reviews the purposes and procedures used in the research or shares research results with the participants.[80] One key element of debriefing is an assurance that data will remain confidential, further stressing the importance of confidentiality in research.

I made sure that the right to privacy and informed consent was guaranteed to the interviewees and survey participants. Guaranteeing participants their right to informed consent also offers them the right to refuse being surveyed or interviewed. My research therefore ensured that participation in the interviews was purely on a voluntary basis. This procedure involves reaching an agreement with the participants after the purposes, procedures, time period, risks and benefits of the research have been thoroughly explained to them. In a cover letter inviting candidates to participate, I explained how interview data was to be used, how harmful it could be for them if their privacy were not maintained and how I intended to safeguard their privacy. The cover letter also gave assurances that their privacy was to be respected, as they would not necessarily need to give their full names and addresses, and all information gathered would likely not be shared publicly. However, I also explained to them that unless they had reservations, research data could be made available for use by other researchers.

[78] David B Rensik, What is Ethics in Research & Why is It Important? Available on the Internet http://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/whatis.cfm, Accessed 17 December 2011
[79] Ibid
[80] Mildred L Patten, *Understanding Research Methods* (Los Angeles: Pyrczak Publishing, 2005) p. 25.

The issue of confidentiality underpins all qualitative research, according to Jack Fraenkel.[81] It is also one element I strongly feel should be guaranteed to potential participants because it is highly likely most of them will seek those assurances before participating. The failure to respect the principle of confidentiality may expose their political affiliation, potentially leading to political marginalisation back home. Since all interviews were audio-taped, I explained to them that transcripts would identify interviewees by coding and not by name to protect their privacy in the unlikely event of the tape or transcript getting lost or stolen. I also gave them a guarantee that I took the sole responsibility for transcribing the interviews, as some may feel uncomfortable with hiring third parties for the transcription process. Fraenkel is of the view that the return of interview transcripts to interviewees is another way of showing concern about protecting their interests. I also intend to return the transcripts as a sign of courtesy. They may choose whether to receive the transcripts or not. A cover letter also gave details on the interviewee's rights during and after the interview. These included their right not to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable as well as their right to abandon the interview whenever they felt it was appropriate to do so. It was also in their right to choose the interview location.

Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer and Dianne Wynaden argue that researchers have the obligation to anticipate the possible outcomes of an interview and to weigh both benefits and potential harm.[82] Research involving Zimbabwean politics is normally considered delicate among citizens both at home and abroad. For this reason, the ability to enlighten respondents with sufficient information is important, as participants will base their decision to take part or not after evaluating the information they receive. It has to be clear to participants that the purpose of the research is to investigate the contribution played by the Internet in the Zimbabwean electioneering process of March 2008. The potential benefits of conducting this research, the participants were informed, were to gain knowledge, understanding and insight into previously uncovered information on the

[81] Fraenkel, Jack, *How to design and evaluate research in education* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990) pp. 43.
[82] Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer, Dianne Wynaden, 'Ethics in Qualitative Research', Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33/1 (2000) pp. 93-96.

contribution of Internet news sites to the Zimbabwean elections, thereby contributing to overall national political scholarship on the subject.

John Prosser, Andrew Clark and Rose Wiles argue that not only is gaining consent a key requirement to the process of getting good quality data, but it also helps develop and maintain a rapport of trust between a researcher and participants.[83] I believe developing trust is an important element in my research. Since some may have considered the topic sensitive, participants sought assurances that anything they said would not potentially endanger their lives or that of their relatives or friends back home, which is why establishing a good working relationship with them was crucial. They were, as I noted, most likely to share their true feelings and opinions when they felt comfortable and confident that there were no prospects of being targeted by political opponents back home. While attempting to determine the role that the Internet plays in national elections, the Zimbabwean case specifically analyses content on websites set up by its citizens in the Diaspora including www.newzimbabwe.com

Without any doubt, ethics are important. They helped me establish a path for conducting research. Defining a sample involved a strict adherence to research ethics and so did selecting the subjects for interviews. For example, I needed to give respondents assurances that I would not use the interviews for journalistic purposes. It obviously was difficult to keep all the data for a long time knowing for sure that I could have caught the eye of several readers by publishing a newspaper account from my interviews. Attempting to be objective was a difficult task. However, I would like to believe that I fairly represented the views of the subjects interviewed in the research. I obviously made assumptions and generalisations based on my own assessment of the data, so one could question if I were entirely objective.

[83] John Prosser, Andrew Clark and Rose Wiles, Visual Research Ethics at Crossroads, Realities Working Papers, (University of Manchester 2008) pp.10.