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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5 PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

IN ZIMBABWE

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5.1 Introduction

While it has generally been accepted that non-professional media actors empowered by novel, digitally networked technologies are changing the media landscape in the West, this is less obvious in the case of sub-Saharan Africa. Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a diverse range of citizen media in Africa, empowered by digital technologies such as mobile phones, blogs, microblogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping. Through observational research and extensive interviews with selected experts and citizen-journalism practitioners, as well as a review of the existing body of research, this chapter aims to critically analyse existing and emerging patterns and trends in African citizen journalism, specifically exploring the Zimbabwean case, where citizen journalism appears uniquely non-integrated with traditional reporting, as journalists continue to question the ethical basis for commercially engaging, 'unverified' journalism. While others like the South Africa-based *Mail* and *Guardian*'s 'Thought Leader' continue to coerce citizen participation, evidence on the ground show that conventional media in Zimbabwe is still skeptical about the prospects of embedding the works of citizen journalists into their mainstream packages. Operating on their own, others like kubatana.net have thrived, however, further underscoring the perceived democratic value of citizen journalism. The research endeavors to studiously examine the success and overall potential of Zimbabwe's blogosphere and hopefully establish the notion that digital technology-enabled citizen journalism, though still restricted to a subset of African countries, provides a powerful counter-narrative to professional media that are often constrained, or even controlled, by national governments. Views of Zimbabwean journalists were sought in this research through face-to-face interviews.

Non-professional media actors, empowered by digitally networked technologies, are changing the media landscape in the West. In contrast, this is less obvious in the case of sub-Saharan Africa. Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a diverse range of citizen media in Africa, employing mobile phones, blogs, micro blogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping. Through observational research and extensive interviews with selected experts and citizen journalists, as well as a review of the existing research, this study aims to critically analyze current and emerging patterns and trends in African citizen journalism. Specifically, it will explore the Zimbabwean case where citizen journalism appears uniquely non-integrated with traditional reporting, as journalists continue to question the ethical basis for commercially engaging in 'unverified' journalism.

The pervasive availability of digital technologies has given non-professional audiences unmatched access to the tools of media production and dissemination.[231] Africa has not been spared the rapid emergence and seamless exposition of new media technologies, which have served as springboards for social and democratic change.[232] This chapter seeks to explain the extent to which Zimbabweans are actively engaged in participatory journalism, elaborating on their purposes and methods of participation before evaluating the overall impact of their involvement. Two key methodologies were employed in this research, which not only sought to deconstruct the Western notions of news, but also provide an assessment of different forms of contesting participation-based journalism initiatives and narratives in an African setting. Using observational research conducted in remote Zimbabwean villages and extensive interviews with media practitioners and bloggers living in the capital Harare, I argue that the concept of participatory journalism is not new to Zimbabwe. I also categorise the participation into two camps, namely the traditional African and the Western-sponsored form of participatory journalism. Observational research was carried in March 2008 during a one-month field trip to Murewa, a farming district located roughly 78km north of the capital Harare. A follow-up visit was also made in July 2011. Interviews with professional and non-professional

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[231] Brian Loader, 'The Citizens' Voice in a Wired World: Experiments in e-democracy,' paper presented at the ANA Hotel, Tokyo, 14 November 2001.
232 S. Craig Watkins, 'The Young and the Digital: What the Migration to Social Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future', (Boston, Massachusettes: Beacon Press, 2009) 18.

journalism actors were conducted during the second trip. The two-way methodology directly allowed me to elect a comparative study of behaviours and attitudes in participatory journalism from both a Western and traditional African context.

5.2 Review of existing body of research

Often referred to as "citizen journalism", "open source journalism",[233] or "user generated content",[234] participatory journalism embodies mass media-related content produced, published and distributed by non-professional journalists mostly for free consumption. Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis have been credited with coining the term "participatory journalism".[235] While examining its relationship with social movements, John Downing called it "alternative media".[236] In his attempt to define participatory journalism, Joseph Daniel Lasica argued that "when small independent online publications and collaborative news sites with an amateur staff perform original reporting on community affairs, few would contest that they're engaged in journalism."[237] An element of dynamic commitment is central to understanding participatory journalism with Alfred Hermida declaring "the underlying assumption behind the notion of participatory journalism is a shift from passive consumption to active engagement."[238] Bowman and Willis define participatory journalism as an "act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information."[239] But others like Hayley Watson believe "there is little consensus over what constitutes citizen journalism."[240]

233 Clyde H Bentley, C.H., et al., 'The Citizen Journalist Movement: Mymissourian as a case study', paper presented to the Communication Technology and Policy Division AEJMC Annual Convention (San Antonio, Texas: 10-13 August 2005).

234 Wolfgang Schweiger, and Oliver Quiring, 'User-generated content on mass media web sites - just a kind of interactivity or something completely different?' Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference (New York, 2006).

235 Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, We media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information, The Media Center at the American Press Institute (Reston, Virginia: Media Center, 2003) 7.

236 John Downing, Radical media: The political experience of alternative communication (Boston, Massachusettes: South End Press, 1984).

237Joseph Daniel Lasica, 'What is participatory journalism?' Online Journalism Review [web page] (2007) http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1060217106.php, accessed 1 October 2011.

238 Alfred Hermida, 'The Active Recipient: Participatory Journalism Through the Lens of the Dewey-Lippmann Debate', paper presented at the International Symposium on Online Journalism 2011 (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Austin, 2011).

239 Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information, The Media Center at the American Press Institute (Reston, Virginia: Media Center, 2003) 9.

240 Hayley Watson, 'Preconditions for Citizen Journalism: A Sociological Assessment', Sociological Research Online Vol. 16, No. 3 [web page] http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/3/6.html, accessed 18 October 2011.

Joyce Nip sees a difference between citizen and participatory journalism, asserting that under participatory journalism, non-professionals engage trained journalists to produce content, while citizen journalism is the work of untrained professionals working independently.[241] Nico Carpentier points to a need to make a clear distinction between participation 'in' the media and 'through' the media. [242] But similarities can be drawn between content from traditional outlets and that from citizen journalism, as was shown by Wilson Lowrey and Jenn Burleson Mackay's study of blogs, which concluded that "topics and information in news-oriented blogs are similar to those in traditional news content, at times uncomfortably similar."[243] Tom Johnson furthers the argument by claiming blogs rely "heavily on traditional media for information gathering."[244] Nevertheless, citizen journalism is redefining the whole essence of journalism, as the "wisdom of the crowds" has been shown to be more empowering than that of experts such as reporters and editors in terms of making good decisions and finding solutions to societal problems, posits James Surowiecki.[245]

Furthermore, the concept of citizen journalism is "literally as old as a rock" argues Clyde H. Bentley, who traces its origins to Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, whose 85 essays were published in 1787.[246] While Bentley's argument traces the traditional foundations of citizen journalism in the American context, my research sought to solidify and justify the viewpoint that participatory journalism was already in existence in Zimbabwe long before the arrival of the British colonialists in the 1880s. Regrettably, the news or journalism practiced in pre-colonial Africa, and particularly Zimbabwe, has not received any notice, which stems from the fact that no one has portrayed the traditional one-to-one or one-to-many exchange of information among Africans as

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[241]Joyce Nip, 'Exploring the second phase of public journalism', Journalism Studies, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2006) 212-236.
[242] Nico Carpentier, (eds.), Media technologies and democracy in an enlarged Europe, the intellectual work of the 2007 European media and communication doctoral summer school (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2007).
[243] Wilson Lowrey and Jenn Burleson Mackay, 'Journalism and Blogging: A test of a model of occupational competition', Journalism Practice Vol. 2, No.1 (2008) 64-81.
[244] Tom Johnson, 'Agenda Setting in the Internet Age'[web page] (2009) http://mediaconvergence.org/blog/?p=163 , accessed 1 October 2011.
[245] James Surowiecki, The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations (New York: Anchor Books, 2004) 5.
[246] Clyde H Bentley, 'Citizen Journalism: Back to the feature?' discussion paper   prepared for the Carnegie Knight Conference on the Future of Journalism (Cambridge, Massachusettes: 20-21 June 2008).

"news", since such a conclusion may not be in line with the Western conceptualisation of news.

Technically reinforcing Bentley's argument is the view that if the University of Missouri opened its doors to the world's first journalism school in 1908, it then means that anyone engaged in professional journalism work before that period could be considered a "citizen journalist" on the grounds that they did not receive any formal professional training. Kirsten Johnson and Susan Weidenbeck propose that lack of professional training is the central characteristic of citizen journalism.[247] The Internet has arguably been the key precipitating factor in the development of participatory journalism; "online journalist" is presently an acceptable professional term in journalism practice.[248] Hence, technological innovation has enhanced the work of citizen journalists, even though the concept is not entirely new. While scholars such as Frankson Banda consider the ICT revolution as a stepping-stone to improving democratic and developmental institutions on the continent,[249] others like Eli N. Noam are less optimistic. Whilst acknowledging the Internet's mediating role in facilitating direct access to public officials, Noam is keen to remind us that "only a few messages will get through."[250] For Noam, the Internet disconnects as much as it connects. In Africa, others argue that the historically negative depiction of the continent in the traditional Western press is the main driving force behind the surging need for alternative sources of media.[251] In its present form, the concept of participatory journalism is rather more appealing to those citizens opposed to the institutionalised coverage of African issues in Western press because it offers an enabling platform for participants to air and share likeminded views and opinions.

Participatory journalism is pioneering new ways of content development and content sharing, as suggested by Dan Gillmor. He says, "For the first time in history, at least in

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[247] Kirsten Johnson, & Susan Weidenbeck, 'Enhancing perceived credibility of Citizen Journalism Websites', Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Vol. 86, No. 2 (2009) pp. 332-348.
[248] Robert Hernandez, 'Online Journalism or Journalism Online. There is a difference', Online Journalism Review [web page] (2010) http://www.ojr.org/ojr/people/webjournalist/201009/1885/, accessed 1 October 2011.
249 Frankson Banda, Citizen Journalism and Democracy in Africa, (Grahamstown, South Africa: Highway Africa, 2006).
[250] Eli H Noam, 'Why the Internet is bad for Democracy', Communications of AMC, Vol   48, No. 10 (2002) pp. 57-58.
251 Bruce Mutsvairo & Lisa Kleeven, 'Seeking self-determinism through social media: A critical analysis of representation issues for Zimbabwean youths', paper presented at the International Conference on Youth and Media (London, England: University of Westminster, 12-13 March 2011).

the developed world, anyone with a computer and Internet connection could own a press. Just about anyone could make the news."[252] Gillmor's assessment, which is based on the Western conceptualisation of the news discourse, leaves several questions unanswered. What is news? Who determines what news is? Should news only be technologically deterministic as proposed by Marshall McLuhan? Can news still be conveyed or disseminated through any other formats outside the dominant means of print, broadcasting and new media attributes such as the Internet and mobile telephony? Geographic location does not hinder the production of news, with Randy Reddick and Elliot King suggesting the Internet allows journalists to "do their jobs better no matter where they are physically located."[253] Yet several factors have led to the indispensable spread of participatory journalism. Ben Scott argues that for the commercial press, the need to make profits has eclipsed journalism's traditional roles in healthy democracies, concluding, "it has become increasingly clear that the public service mission of democratic journalism has been abandoned by the commercial press in favour of expanding profit margins."[254] For Stuart Allan, "the spontaneous actions of ordinary citizens compelled to adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in the making of online news", is central to the rise of the concept of citizen journalism.[255]

5.3 Conceptual and theoretical discourses

Defining what constitutes "news" can be highly subjective. James Glen Stovall defines news as "information that journalists believe is important or interesting for their audiences."[256] Admitting that it is a difficult concept to define, Pamela Shoemaker simply says news is "what comes in the newspaper everyday."[257] Taking a cue from Harold Evans' definition suggesting, "news is people. It's people talking and doing",[258] I have defined news as the conveyance of previously unknown information to individuals and

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[252] Dan Gillmor, We The Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People, (California: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2004) p. 24.
[253] Randy Reddick & Elliot King, The Online Journalist (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1997) pp. 4.
[254] Ben Scott, 'A contemporary history of digital journalism', Television & New Media, Vol. 6, No. 1(2005) pp. 89-126.
[255] Stuart Allan, Online News: Journalism and the Internet. (Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press) p. 10.
[256] James Glen Stovall, Journalism: Who, what, when, where, why and how (Boston: Allyn and Bacon Publishers, 2005).
[257] Pamela Shoemaker, News and newsworthiness: A commentary, Communications, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006) pp. 105-111.
[258] Beth Whittaker, 'Shout it out', Viva Communications (2010) p. 8.

masses. This also means that gossip, or a professor introducing a new concept to students, could also be seen as providing news. The universally accepted characteristics of news include the fact that it needs to be relevant to a large number of people while being timely and sometimes unusual. In line with Shoemaker's argument, the providers of news, including television, radio and newspaper outlets take an intermediary role of seeking, editing and publishing news for the readers. Apart from having an audience following, they are also widely considered knowledge providers, argues Inge Brinkman. [259] Most of these agents seek to make profit for their services and are also guided by a set of ethics. Similarly, in the traditional African setting, newsagents, as was the case in the Murewa villages, are either paid or unpaid servants who convey news to the villagers on behalf of the headman, for instance. They deliver news through word of mouth, a less popular medium in the technologically-rich West. After news has been delivered in one homestead, the family members take on the role of informing others within their community about the new development. This way, word spreads speedily. Inaccuracies are widespread, as also frequently occurs in the technologically-enabled news on TV, print or digital mediums.

Exploring the historical origins of news, contemporary media scholar Melissa Wall recognises the assumption that "news itself can be said to have existed since people needed to exchange information between villages or tribes". [260] Des Wilson, making a case for traditional forms of communication, argues that customary African communication methods are mostly considered antagonistic and inferior to modern ones developed in the West. [261] That assumption is not always accurate. When a funeral occurred, one village headman told me, it would not be broadcast on TV or published in a newspaper, yet mourners would gather literally within hours of the initial announcement. While his subjects would deliver the news to selected groups of villagers and the word would spread from there, the use of membranophonic drums and aerophones was a more

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[259] Inge Brinkman, 'What is News?' Guest lecture (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University College, 3 October 2011).

[260] Melissa Wall, 'Blogs as black market journalism: A new paradigm for news', Journal of Education, Community and Values, Vol. 11, No.10.

[261] Des Wilson, 'Traditional Systems of Communication in Modern African development: An Analytical Viewpoint', Africa Media Review, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1987) 87-104.

effective way of grabbing the villagers' attention. Villagers are traditionally familiar with a range of sounds and their meanings and hence will be aware of an upcoming funeral.

No million-dollar technology is used here, yet news is meticulously delivered. Also, the practice of seeking medical or psychological treatment from witch doctors is common in several African cultures. It could also be argued traditional healers "break the news" about their clients' source of misfortune, for instance, in the same way a weather presenter would warn viewers about an impending typhoon on TV. The only difference is that in the Western context, seeking medical assistance would not be classified as "news". Nor do witch doctors consider themselves newsmen as such, even though they unknowingly deliver important news just like a commercial TV channel. The only problem with calling this "citizen journalism" might be the fact that the notion of "citizenship" could be applicable to every profession, including "citizen professor" or "citizen lawyer". I consider citizen journalism an informal version of the profession, and there can be no better place to find unofficial versions of professions than in Zimbabwe. Moreover, to understand citizen journalism in the African traditional context, one needs to accept the perception that it is not a profession but rather a practice, which has and will always be available for everyone to pursue. It is indeed like politics, which is open for anyone who dares to join.

In the West, news and advertising depend heavily on each other. In traditional African communication, advertising is present in many different forms. In Murewa, villagers use tree stumps and mountain paintings to showcase their products. Vendors selling products also perform door-to-door advertising. Most of these vendors also convey news. Singing and drumming, as was the case with Inge Brinkman's findings in remote southern Angolan villages, also play a crucial role in disseminating news or advertising events. In Murewa, I have attended several ancestor-appeasing services known in local language as *bira*. Nobody is allowed to sleep on this day and villagers sing and dance in honour of the deceased. They also listen to the music of *mbira* or the thump piano, as well as the rattling sounds of *hosho*, a round-shaped gourd filled with kernels.

According to A. J. Liebling, "the function of the press is to inform, but its role is to make money."[262] This assertion also explains the reason behind the near-collapse of journalism we are witnessing. Journalism is in crisis, hence the confusion as to what exactly constitutes news. This is the case not just in Zimbabwe but everywhere throughout the world. The Jason Blair affair at *The New York Times* is a perfect example. A young and thriving journalist made a name for himself by fabricating stories based on interviews that never happened. Readers must question: What exactly is news? Who determines the news, and how trustworthy is the news we get? It is for that reason that citizen journalism has gained momentum, with others seeing it as a good alternative to traditional journalism. Whereas in the old days "good journalism" was about reporting important issues such as people dying in wars or starving to death due to hunger, many of the stories that sell these days are about celebrities like Lady Gaga, David Beckham or Charlie Sheen. Developments such as these have indirectly popularised participatory journalism, with participants deciding what should be on the news agenda rather than being spoon-fed by mass media. Therefore, instead of mass media deciding what is important for them, citizens have embarked on a mission to self-decide. The business focus of journalism is right at the centre of these changing dimensions. For instance, a story about African immigrants sinking in a boat off the coast from Morocco in their attempt to reach Europe is considered less appealing to readers than Jennifer Aniston going on holiday in the Bahamas. Business-minded editors will argue that they try to report what readers want.

Technological determinism is defined by Bruce Bimber as "what is really a variety of distinct views about the relationship of technological enterprise to other aspects of human activity."[263] The theory has been attributed to Karl Marx, Bimber says. However, others like Roderick Munday have linked the theory to Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" dictum. [264] Is technology the force shaping society in Zimbabwe? Do the rural folk need technology to speed up the way they communicate? Do they understand

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[262] William S Solomon, The Newspaper Business, (Eds) In Alan Wells, Ernest A. Hakanen, Mass Media and Society (Greenwich, CT: Albex Publishing Corporation), 1997, p. 71
[263] Bruce Bimber "Karl Marx and the three faces of Technological Determinism" Social Studies of Science Working Paper 11 pp. 1-22
[264] Roderick Munday "Marshall McLuhan declared that "the medium is the message." What did he mean and does this notion have any value?" 20003 http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/ram0202.html Accessed 6 October 2011.

technology and does it positively change their lives? It is indeed being celebrated as a potential catalyst for democratic change, but there is little evidence to support this school of thought. Technology is overrated. It is dangerous to conclude that technology is good for the rural dwellers in Murewa, because some of them have never encountered mobile phones; if they were offered laptops, they would not know how to use them, and might not even be willing to learn. The determination of the people can effect democratic changes in Zimbabwe. Technology may have little to do with it. There are societies where technology has been credited with spearheading democratic changes. Zimbabwe is a different case. For instance, state security agents have in the past confiscated solar-powered radio transmitters said to be broadcasting anti-Mugabe propaganda. NGOs were behind this campaign. Eventually, when all enabling technology was impounded, the people still had to start afresh.

The agenda-setting theory is based on the assumption that mass media retains plenty of power, influence and authority on audiences, in terms of what stories they should regard as more important than the others and how much prominence they should give to these stories.[265] Introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, the theory followed the authors' examination of the 1968 US presidential campaign in North Carolina.[266] It is believed that under the agenda-setting model, if audiences follow the media, the things they will consider important will likely be the same. McCombs and Shaw concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign. The results of the study indicated an almost perfect correlation between the media and public agendas, inferring an extremely strong connection between what the media provides the public and the public's perception of important issues. Although prior, similar surveys had been conducted to link public and media agendas, Shaw and McCombs were the first to suggest the agenda-setting theory. The mass ability to participate in online activities in Zimbabwe has instituted a paradigm shift from media-agenda setting to content-agenda setting. But this

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[265] Brian Brooks, George Kennedy, Daryl R. Moen &Don Ranly, "News Reporting and Writing," Seventh Edition. (Bedford: Missouri Group) 2007, p. 27
[266] Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly Vol. 36, No. 2, 1972, pp. 176-187.

trend is more noticeable in the more affluent city cultures than in villages, where subsistence methods of communication are still in place.

Government documents show that currently there are four separate pieces of legislation governing regulatory powers over the ICT industry in Zimbabwe. These are the Postal and Telecommunications Act of 2000, which gives the government full powers to monitor email usage; the Broadcasting Services Act of 2001; the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2002; and the Interception of Communications Act of 2007, which gives the government legal authority to intercept mobile and email communication.[267] In June 2009, the new coalition government proposed the Information Communication and Technology Bill, which is set to replace the Broadcasting Services Act and the Postal and Telecommunications Act, setting up a single authority to regulate the ICT sector. Presently, regulation of the ICT sector is shared among the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), POTRAZ, and the Media and Information Commission (MIC), which are all accountable to the Minister of Transport and Communications as well as the Minister of Media, Information, and Publicity. Both are controlled by the ZANU PF party. The future of these entities, particularly POTRAZ, may be hanging in balance should the new bill, proposed by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC party, become law. The bill is currently awaiting Cabinet approval before heading to the Parliament for debate. It is likely to face hurdles from President Mugabe's ZANU PF party, which may be unwilling to lose its long-time control over regulating the broadcasting services. To date, the pro-state Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) is the only outlet allowed to broadcast on national airwaves. The new bill could bring the ZBC's broadcasting monopoly to an end.

Blogs, argue Stephen Quinn and Stephen Lamble, have played a leading role in the increasing recognition of citizen journalism. They define a blog as "a type of Web site where entries are written, or posted, the same way you would update a journal or diary."[268] Blog reports have much to do with the writer's "personality, passion and point

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[267] "Strategic Plan 2010-2014" Ministry of Information Communication Technology (MICT) (Harare: 2010) pp. 1-54.
[268] Stephen Quinn & Stephen Lamble. Online Newsgathering: Research and Reporting for Journalism. Amsterdam: Focal Press, 2008. p. 31.

of view" says Bornie H Nardi et al.[269] While American Jorn Barger is credited for starting

the world's first blog in 1997,[270] blogs failed to garner momentum in Zimbabwe until the

height of the country's political crisis in the 2000s. Zimbabwean blogs are epicentres of

political activism. These include Sokwanele.com, or enough is enough in local

vernacular. Quinn and Lamble recall Salam Pax, a blog run by Baghdad resident Salam

al-Janbabi, which gained global recognition in 2003. Zimbabwe's most recognised online

advocacy platform Kubatana.net was established in 2001, but only launched its first blog

five years later. "The repressive environment over the last 8 years made Kubatana

develop online activism to regularly encourage Zimbabweans to use the information

communication technologies (ICTs) that they have access to and advocate, mobilize and

lobby",[271] commented one of the platform's co-founders, Bev Clarke.

Breaking away from the old characteristic of mass communication, which denotes a

complex relationship between media outlets and the audience in terms of disseminating

feedback messages, traditional news outlets such as the pro-state *Herald* newspaper now

accept web-based comments and in some cases even news stories from readers. "Internet

has brought us more closer to reality. Everyone can reach us from everywhere",

commented a *Herald* reporter.[272] Correspondingly, non-professional interview

respondents also said they only had become regular visitors to *The Herald*'s online page

upon realizing it was possible for them to comment on the newspaper's stories,

underscoring that active participation increases public trust for a certain publication. *The

Herald* is not alone in allowing citizens to comment on its web-based stories. Other

newspapers including *Newsday, The Standard* and *The Independent* offer the same

service to readers as well. Facebook links are also available for citizens to comment on

and otherwise react to stories. *The Sunday Mail* also offers blogging opportunities for

readers. This seemingly unprecedented development reduces the previously noticeable

gap between readers and journalists. However, it must be noted that the "Letters to the

Editor" section already existed in these newspapers long before they went online, another

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[269] Bonnie H. Nardie, Diane J Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, Luke Swartz, "Why we Blog"
Communications of ACM , Vol. 47, No. 12, pp. 41-46, 2004.
[270] Rebecca Blood, "How blogging software reshapes the online community," Communications of ACM
Vol. 47, No. 12, pp. 53-55, 2004.
[271] Technology for Transparency Network http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/kubatananet
Accessed on 30 September 2011
[272] Interview with a Herald Reporter conducted 17 July 2011.

reason to believe participatory journalism is not a new concept. However, while Zimbabwean citizen journalists in Harare were equally convinced that they had embraced "journalism" through their active online participation, their counterparts in Murewa, despite abstaining from calling themselves "journalists", could also be considered citizen journalists because they do not need a trained journalist from Harare or anywhere else to tell them what is news. They determine what is news on their own and literally deliver and systematically share news among each other in their communities on a daily basis. Hence the notion that "everyone is a reporter".

According to Last Moyo, Zimbabweans are no longer "helplessly bombarded with messages by mass media: they are actively producing news and initiating news flows among themselves."[273] Stand-alone sites dedicated to unedited blogging are another form of participatory journalism, as suggested by Steve Outing.[274] LivinginZimbabwe.com is one such site. It says it is "open to content submissions on anything to do with Zimbabwe.'[275] Furthermore, 3Gmedia, a Diaspora-based company that publishes seven online newspapers dedicated to Zimbabwean news including Zimdaily.com, unveiled its citizen journalism programme in July 2009, claiming it would offer "accurate, unfiltered news".[276] Using what it calls "e-activism", Kubatana.net has made use of Western funding to provide a platform where Zimbabweans are encouraged to lobby and mobilise (mostly politically engaged) initiatives through the use the information communication technologies (ICTs). The majority of people in the rural areas have not heard about it. In the three Murewa villages sampled for this research, several people owned pre-paid mobile phones, which they called "receivers", meaning they mostly waited for someone to call them. It is generally expensive for them to top-up credit available at $1 each. They have other priorities such as buying basic food for their families. Their financial predicaments meant SW Radio Africa's free SMS campaigns were more appealing. Villagers acknowledged benefiting from the campaign launched in December 2006 by

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[273] Last Moyo, "Blogging down a dictatorship: Human rights, citizen journalist and the right to communicate in Zimbabwe" Journalism Vol. 12 No. 6, 2011, pp. 745-760.
[274] Steve Outing "Eleven layers of citizen journalism" http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/69328/the-11-layers-of-citizen-journalism Accessed 7 October 2011
[275] Living in Zimbabwe, 'About' [web page] http://www.livingzimbabwe.com/about, accessed 7 October 2011.
[276] 3MG launches Citizenship Journalism Programme', [web page] (22 July 2009) http://gmricapital.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=103, accessed 6 October 2011.

the London-based radio station, which sent headlines of its largely anti-Mugabe news packages to subscribed telephone numbers in Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans in the Diaspora would send an email to the newspaper containing the phone numbers of relatives and friends whom they wished to receive the news.

5.4 Citizen Journalism: Roles and Criticism

Journalism's fundamental role in a society, according to Randy Reddick and Elliot King, is to act as public watchdog, seeking truth, operating independently and transparently, disseminating the message to the audiences and readers.[277] However, the Internet can facilitate the redundancy of professional journalists, as claimed by Jo Bardoel and Mark Deuze.[278] It has also, however, facilitated affordable communication on "a one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many basis", acknowledges Jamie Cowling.[279] Still, citizen journalism has had its own share of criticism. While proponents of citizen journalism, including Mark Glasser, believe that citizens potentially contribute important information that otherwise gets ignored by traditional media,[280] citizen journalists lack transparency, especially by choosing to remain anonymous when they publish or broadcast their work. Kirsten A. Johnson and Susan Weidenbeck believe that unless they carry by-lined stories, stories by citizen journalists will lack credibility.[281] It must, however, be noted that the non-use of by-lines is also prevalent in professional journalism. Many papers carry stories by "staff writer" or "own correspondent". Others, such as Leonard Pitts Jr., reject the importance of citizen journalism because it fails to honor ethics and standards of the profession: "Journalism – like any profession worthy of the name – has standards and

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[277]Randy Reddick & Elliot King, The online Journalist (Dallas, Texas: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994).

[278] Jo Bardoel & Mark Deuze, Network Journalism: Converging Competences of Media Professionals and Professionalism. Australian Journalism Review, Vol. 23 No. 2 (2001) 91-103.

[279] Jamie Cowling, 'Digital News: Genie's Lamp or Pandora's Box? Digital Manifesto Project', [web page](2005) http://www.ippr.org/uploadedFiles/research/projects/Digital_Society/news_and_info_jcowling.pdf , accessed 6 October 2011.

[280] Mark Glaser, 'Your Guide to Citizen Journalism', Public Broadcasting Service [web page] (2006) http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/your-guide-to-citizen-journalism270.html, accessed 1 October 2011.

[281] Kirsten Johnson, & Susan Weidenbeck, 'Enhancing perceived credibility of Citizen Journalism Websites', Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Vol. 86, No. 2 (2009) 332-348.

ethics, and if you don't sign on to those, I can no more trust you than I can a doctor who refused the Hippocratic oath or a lawyer who failed the bar exam."[282]

Stephen Reese et al. have shown through content analysis that work produced by citizen journalists lacks originality.[283] Identifying a gradual decline in the quality of traditional journalism, Axel Bruns credits citizen journalists for displaying "persistence and determination both in uncovering political and other scandals and in highlighting the shortcomings of professional journalism".[284] As noted, the ethical standards and overall credibility of citizen journalism has been the main point of discussion among journalists and academics alike. This is despite the fact that in a global trend, traditional media organisations have also launched citizen journalism initiatives.[285] Wilson Lowrey, for instance, concluded that most of the content on blogs run by professionals is commentary on news stories.[286] Scholars such as Melissa Wall have argued that content produced by citizen journalists can be considered 'news,' since others within their ranks have equally adopted universal norms recognised by professionals.[287] This view is not shared by Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, who are convinced that online activists use new media voices such as blogs to promote their own agendas and interests, a view that strongly contradicts the demand for 'balanced and fair' coverage embedded in traditional ethics of journalism.[288] Discussions on whether citizen journalists should be accountable to journalistic integrity will always attract attention and debate and predictably, there will be no consensus on this topic.

Traditional journalism, which supposedly values standards and ethics, has nevertheless attracted criticism over the last two decades. Notorious instances of plagiarism and of fabricating stories have stained the reputations of some of the most respected of

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[282] Leonard Pitts Jr., 'Citizen journalists? Spreading like a cold', Miami Herald, [web page] (10 June 2010) http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/10/06/1859362/citizen-journalists-spreading.html, accessed 1 October 2011.
[283] Stephen Reese, Lou Rutigliano, Kideuk Hyun, Jaekwan. Jeong, 'Mapping the blogosphere: Professional and citizen-based media in the global news arena', Journalism, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2007) 235-261.
[284] Axel Bruns, 'New Blogs and Citizen Journalism: New directions for e-Journalism', in Prasad, Kiran (ed.), e-Journalism: New Media and News Media (BR Publishing, Delhi, India) pp. 101-126.
[285] Jonathan Weber, 'Citizen Journalism and the challenge to credibility', The Times of London, 6 October 2008.
[286] Wilson Lowrey, 'Mapping the journalism-blogging relationship', Journalism, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2006)477-500.
[287] Melissa Wall, 'Blogs of war: Weblogs as news', Journalism, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2005) pp. 153-172.
[288] Richard Kahn, & Douglas Kellner, 'New Media and Internet Activism', New Media & Society, Vol. 6, No.1 (2004) pp. 87–95.

publications, including the cases of the *New York Times*' Jayson Blair and *USA Today*'s Jack Kelley. Supporters of participatory journalism will most likely argue that it is better to have no ethics than to cheat on those we have. Also, if professional journalists solicit money from readers to enable them to cover an event, how objective and balanced can their information be? For instance, freelance science journalist David Appell, according to Glenn Harlan Reynolds, "asked his readers to finance an article on the World Health Organisation's relations with the sugar industry; readers contributed more than he had requested within a few days."[289] Despite its shortcomings, the Internet remains curiously more appealing because it offers a different and unmatched set of dynamics, argues Robert W. McChesney, who is adamant there is no evidence that the Internet will be subject to "corporate control as have broadcasting and traditional media".[290]

Yet, all 12 Zimbabwean journalists interviewed for this research agreed that activities oriented to online participation do not constitute journalism. While citizen journalism offers a unique platform where nonprofessionals are free to share their opinions, journalism was bigger than this, they said. Their unanimous view was that journalism goes beyond sharing opinions. They suggested that by granting access to everyone to air their views, citizen journalism ideally presents a more personalised form of reporting. But that contradicts the central call for a balanced and objective approach, itself a non-negotiable principle of traditional Western-based journalism, known to the Zimbabwean journalists interviewed in this research who all graduated from colonial tertiary institutions that supported this model.

5.5 Conclusion

In the common understanding that new media has revolutionised the process of producing and sharing content, unsubstantiated claims have emerged that attribute increased democratic participation to citizen journalism. This chapter has argued that while the potential of citizen journalism to democratise the political space cannot be

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[289] Glenn Harlan Reynolds, 'Weblogs and Journalism: Back to the future' Nieman Reports
http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101063/Weblogs-and-Journalism-Back-to-the-Future.aspx
Accessed 5October 2011
[290] Robert W. McChesney, 'The Internet and US Communication Policy-Making in Historical and Critical Perspective,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* Vol. 1 No. 4 (1996) pp 98-124.

underestimated, participatory journalism is a misunderstood concept. New technologies have indeed helped activists build up their case against tyranny. However, technology only plays an enabling role. While the technological use of social media can relatively be considered a new concept, there certainly is nothing new about citizen participation. Citizens will always participate in issues that affect their communities and even though they may find citizen journalism an interesting platform, they may as well do without it.