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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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8 DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

8.1 Results overview

This chapter presents an overview as well as reflections and implications of the research's findings. An analysis of these results, which are found in the Appendix, is also given. This chapter looks at the specifics from the content analysis as well, exploring the methodology as well as findings from this part of the research.

8.2 Reflections and Implications

Herman Wasserman is keen to remind us of the contested nature of the debate over the efficacy of new media technologies in bringing about social change.⁵⁰² When I started conducting my research I was quite convinced that the Zimbabwean Diaspora movement was playing a prominent role in advancing democracy at home. The research results were fairly mixed, however. As a member of this disenchanted Zimbabwean Diaspora, I observed that websites run by Zimbabwean exiles were indeed helping foster political participation. To their credit, these websites are enabling Zimbabwe expatriates to engage in political and social activism. These websites are at the forefront of introducing a completely different and unprecedented information-gathering and information-sharing spectrum. But are they helping boost the number of citizens participating in the country's political processes? Not entirely, according to the findings of my research. You cannot fault the websites or the brains behind them for failing to do their work. There are several reasons why they fall short of achieving their goals, if encouraging the masses to participate in political engagement is one of their aims. Zimbabwe has a unique political context, one that is often misread by people, especially and perhaps mostly, by those who think they have the solutions.

There was a great deal of renewed hope among Mugabe's opponents that the Internet could be a tool to remove him from power and usher in a new era of democracy. For some, the Arab Spring could have been a point of departure to unseat the long-entrenched

⁵⁰² Herman Wasserman Mobile Phones, Popular Media, and Everyday African Democracy: Transmissions and Transgressions, *Popular Communication*, Vol. 9 No. 2011 pp. 146-158

president. But Mugabe's image in the West in recent years has been one-dimensional, lacking nuance or historical context. Despite his noticeable mistakes, is he the evil caricature often portrayed in the Western media? Possibly not. Does Zimbabwe need democratic changes? Maybe. But then again, what exactly is democracy? As this study has shown, democracy is a contested subject – theoretically discussable, but practically difficult to implement.

From the findings from the interviews, it became clear that Zimbabweans were actively involved in the political process back home. All 50 respondents, for example, acknowledged transmitting and to some extent sharing news with friends and relatives at home. However, not all of them said they had distributed anti-Mugabe views. Two students, who both admitted to having relatives within Mugabe's party for example, said they saw it as useless to relay anti-Mugabe news back home because it would have little impact, since most of their relatives were Mugabe supporters and would vote for him in any case. In Zimbabwe, some respondents admitted being influenced in their voting choices by relatives from abroad, but still chose to vote for a candidate of their own choice. This, therefore, leads us to question whether Mugabe was entirely disadvantaged by the views from the Diaspora. As has already been shown in this study, Mugabe himself has a large following among the Diaspora, contrary to the popular belief that Zimbabweans living abroad exclusively approve of Tsvangirai's policies.

Clearly, new media technologies played a crucial role in selling the image of the opposition party. Some pro-Tsvangirai respondents admitted telling their parents they would stop sending money home if they voted for Mugabe. They said they were convinced Zimbabwe's economy would improve if Tsvangirai took over the leadership, thanks to Western aid that his government presumably would receive. Notably however, six of the 20 respondents interviewed in Zimbabwe said they had planned to vote for Tsvangirai whether they had been advised by relatives and friends abroad or not. This confirms that relaying information to relatives abroad in some cases had a minimal effect on the voting patterns. Still, the Internet offered Tsvangirai an unmatched platform for

political campaigning, considering the state media gave minimal coverage of his political campaign compared to that of Mugabe.

The involvement of Zimbabweans in the Diaspora in the country's political affairs was always going to be there. After all, Zimbabwe is not the only country that has citizens abroad. The need to improve the political situation at home was one of the main answers I got when I asked respondents why they were particularly using new media vices as a way of communicating with those at home. While some were bluntly clear that they were eager to effect regime change, the majority of them said they were not concerned who was the political leader in Harare as long as their families and friends could afford the basics. The regime change agenda purportedly instigated by Western powers has been one of the major bones of contention between President Mugabe and his erstwhile allies in the West. Interestingly, only three respondents suggested that they were seeking regime change in Zimbabwe at all costs, including the possibility of a Western-backed military action. For the rest, a "free and fair" democratic election was the only way to solve the problem even though they expressed reservations that the possibility was slim given the history of violence-led voting in Zimbabwe.

What made my involvement in this research more interesting, I believe, is the fact that I consider myself an active participant in Diaspora's efforts to find political solutions at home. Far from just accepting unsubstantiated claims that the Internet was contributing to political participation in Zimbabwe, I saw my involvement as a member of the Zimbabwean Diaspora community as an opportunity to further examine these optimistic claims connecting new media technologies to increased political participation. When I started conducting my research, I was very optimistic that the Internet was at the centre of furthering democratic participation in Africa. I read several articles that supported this hypothesis and I talked to people especially in the NGO communities, who understandably also backed these claims since most of them were being funded by Western governments to advance this cause.

Two years into my research, I started analysing my data and I for the first time started questioning some of these claims with the help of my data. The Internet, it seemed, offered plenty of opportunities in terms of mobilizing, informing and disseminating information to the citizens. Whether it increased political participation remains an area of debate, offering opportunities for further research. There is no doubt that to some extent, it did change the dynamics of participation. However, unlike in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, Zimbabwe is a completely different case. In general, even though they had information about what was going on around them, the majority of Zimbabweans were afraid to even participate in a peaceful demonstration.

As an active member of the Zimbabwean Diaspora, how did I ensure that I was not biased in the first place? First of all, I wanted to make sure that President Mugabe's voice was represented in this research. I had read plenty of books, news articles etc, in which the bias against Mugabe was quite clear. Mugabe was demonised and rarely got an international platform to share his views. In this dissertation, Mugabe and those who share his views were given adequate space to share their own views through a critical analysis of news articles and interviews. While developing questions for my interviewees, I made sure not to frame them with a political slant. What I wanted was to get not only a true, but also a broader, picture on the influence of technology in Zimbabwean politics. Then when I selected the interviewees I also picked potential Mugabe supporters just like I selected those sharing a political ideology with Tsvangirai. I also selected students, who had benefited from Mugabe-sponsored scholarships and professionals, whose views had in the past been supportive of Mugabe. Also when I selected websites for content analysis, I was careful not to choose content that was brusquely pro-Tsvangirai. The aim of the content analysis was to investigate the way these news sites covered the Zimbabwean story, with the hope that any Zimbabwean who frequented these sites would read and then transfer their "knowledge" to relatives and friends back home. Content relating to the Zimbabwean Guardian, for example, was not directly offered to profile it and represent it as a sternly anti-Tsvangirai online news site.

The social desirability of this research is one element that needs to be explored.

Considering the fact that I was using structured interviews for the better part of the research, I already anticipated to get responses that I believed would be accurate since all respondents responded to a similar set of questions. While as a researcher you can almost never tell if someone is telling you the truth or not, my assumption was that all the respondents more or less gave accurate answers to my questions. This is because obviously I had gained their trust. They knew that I was not a spy for the Zimbabwean government. The topic is also very emotive, such that while fear is one element that remains a major stumbling block to progress, those who are fearless consider sharing their views with the outside world as a way of showing how desperate they are. These are the people who are keen to tell the truth.

8.3 Content analysis results

The results of the content analysis showed unquestionable evidence of favouritism towards Tsvangirai's MDC party. The content analysis revealed how the use of words that depicted ZANU PF in negative tones may have benefited Tsvangirai's MDC. For example, words associated with propagandistic techniques featured prominently in the articles published within the prescribed timeline. Glittering generalities such as the use of the word "hope" featured prominently in articles published on the four news sites. The same can be said with the use of "God". In deeply conservative Zimbabwe, "God" plays a very important role. More than 50 articles made reference to God especially when pleading for peaceful, free and fair elections in the country. Tsvangirai also may have benefited from being portrayed as a common man. A former labour leader, he never had the higher education that Mugabe received. Table 8.1 shows the frequency of words in the four digital articles in the period leading to the elections.

Table 8.1: Content Analysis Indicators

Key Word	Frequency
Intimidation	48
Corruption	38
Hope	53
Economy	63
Bias	35
God	59

Headlines showed the extent to which the four newspapers favoured Tsvangirai. From the four, only Newzimbabwe.com, which normally reproduced articles from press agencies such as Reuters, published articles that also gave a voice to Mugabe’s Zanu PF. For instance, the site ran a story headlined “Mugabe says Makoni worse than a prostitute” on February 1, 2008. The item referred to Mugabe’s virulent attack on former Finance Minister Simba Makoni who had formed his own Mavambo party, which was due to contest the elections. Newzimbabwe.com attempted to publish “fair” articles representing Mugabe and his party prior to the elections. Among its headlines: “Mugabe’s spokesman reads riot act on foreign correspondents”, “Mugabe will not concede defeat” “Bomb explodes at ZANU candidate’s home”. The other three newspaper gave no room whatsoever to positive coverage of Mugabe. Coverage of Mugabe in Zimdaily, The Zimbabwean and SW Africa was scathing; Tsvangirai’s image was consistently positive. SW Africa claimed to expose potential election fraud with articles such as “Mugabe changes law to allow Policemen in Polling booth” on March 19. In March alone, SW Africa, as shown through its archive pages, published 201 articles.⁵⁰³ None of them came close to giving Mugabe a voice. Examples of the articles the radio station ran are: “Zanu PF heavyweights lose in landmark elections”, “MDC wins in ZANU PF strongholds”, “Riot Police intimidate voters in Bikita”, “Opposition polling agents flee Bikita”, “Tension in Bulawayo as army trucks and water cannons on streets”, “Mugabe threatens business with price cuts”, and “Mugabe says MDC will never rule Zimbabwe”.

⁵⁰³ ‘Previous news stories March 2008’ [web page]
http://www.swradioafrica.com/pages/previous_mar2008.htm, accessed 15 December 2011

Table 8.2: Number of endorsements for four online newspapers

Online newspaper	Mugabe	Tsvangirai
New Zimbabwe.com	9	16
The Zimbabwean	0	42
SW Africa	0	39
Zim Daily	0	47

The four online newspapers that I reviewed in the content analysis displayed pro-Tsvangirai voting. Only four of the articles that appeared on New Zimbabwe.com were slanted towards endorsing Mugabe. Even in those cases, the stories were not editorials from the newspaper itself but were written by its pool of commentators. The other three online newspapers chose to neglect pro-Mugabe endorsements altogether. News material endorsing Tsvangirai or the policies of his party were given priority in these newspapers, clearly showing an anti-Mugabe bias. This shows to some extent how these newspapers had played a critical role in campaigning for Tsvangirai even though, as is argued in this research, there is no evidence that these newspapers boosted outright the participation of citizens in the political playground. The content analysis showed that journalism is on the decaying end in the age of the Internet. The honesty in the news that De Jong propounds as a good value of Journalism and objectivity are no longer the top priorities of news organisations.⁵⁰⁴ Online newspapers take stances with the aim of buttressing their political candidates' support bases.

For its part, *The Zimbabwean* repeatedly trashed Mugabe and his followers. The article "Torture widespread" published on 27 February was based on an "exclusive interview" with Professor Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. Interestingly, there was only one direct quote from Nowak and the story, less than 400 words, is too short to be an exclusive. It is not clear what exactly Nowak said. No views from the Zimbabwean government were sought for this article, which is blatantly biased against Mugabe. On the same day, *The Zimbabwean* ran a story headlined "Soldiers, diplomats vote in secrecy". In the story, an official from the pro-Tsvangirai Zimbabwe Election Support Network

⁵⁰⁴ Jaap de Jong Professorial Inauguration Leiden University [web page] (4 November 2011) <http://www.news.leiden.edu/news-2011/two-sides-to-the-reliability-of-news.html>, accessed 27 March 2012.

(ZESN) is quoted as telling the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) to ensure voting by security forces and diplomats was transparent. That is as far as it goes. Neither the official nor the newspaper give any thread of evidence showing diplomats and soldiers were voting in secrecy as part of what the newspaper called election fraud. This is more evidence of an open bias toward Tsvangirai.

New media thus empowered Zimbabweans with information, but political participation requires more than just access to information. They may be exposed to information but the biggest threat to full and enhanced participation lay in their ability to overcome the fear of the unknown that is the fear of the government's secret service. As far as I am concerned, they are fighting and perhaps winning, a cyber-war against Mugabe, but that does not change the status quo in Zimbabwe. Mugabe remains in power and it looks like he alone, and not even the West, will decide when and how he can go. Notably, even though there are conspicuously thousands of brave people, who by all means choose to fight Mugabe's alleged totalitarianism, one quotation from an interviewee summarizes what appears to me like the general view about active participation in Zimbabwean politics: "To live happily in Zimbabwe, stay out of politics". In other words, the masses are afraid. The fear factor plays a crucial role in keeping the Mugabe regime intact. If you read newspapers, you will of course find articles about citizens being abducted or tortured by the secret service. Empirical evidence showing people are indeed abducted is lacking.

8.4 Citizen journalism: Reflections by Zimbabwean journalists

To best assess the future of citizen journalism in Zimbabwe we need to first look not only at who is sponsoring efforts in participatory journalism in Zimbabwe but also profile the "types" of citizen journalists we have. Citizen journalists in Zimbabwe – as five of the 20 interviews conducted with journalists and members of the NGO community in Zimbabwe – do not always meet the widely accepted definition of having no formal training in Journalism education. The decade-long political and economic crisis, which ended in 2009 when ZANU PF and MDC joined forces to form a new government, affected almost every professional in the country. Many journalists left the country. These are the journalists now leading the online networks that were analysed in this research. Some

journalists chose to stay in Zimbabwe and some of them chose to become citizen journalists. As one of them revealed in an interview, for the “purposes of survival” they were happy to do anything that paid them: “I was working for the Zimbabwe Independent but at the same time I was writing for *The Zimbabwean* and Voice of America’s studio 7. I also blogged for an international website earning 100 USD a month. That’s how I survived”.

Notably, this journalist has not stopped sending citizen-based stories to *The Zimbabwean* newspaper. Trained at the Christian College of Southern Africa in Harare, he is a professional journalist, who has since stopped working professionally but earns a living by contributing “blogging material to sites run by NGOs”. Another journalist, who also considers himself a citizen journalist, insisted that very few people “I know are trained journalists. You don’t train journalists. They just become [a] journalist themselves”. He has a degree in Sociology from the University of Zimbabwe and has written stories for local dailies, also supplying new material to international newspapers. But most of his money, he says, comes from blogging. He is one of the journalists that frequent a place in central Harare where American press freedom giant Freedom House has an open space where journalists can freely use computers and send in their stories. He believes the world deserves to know what is happening in Zimbabwe but the reality is “I also need to live and survive”.

My only concerns talking to these journalists was two-fold. First I struggled categorising them as citizen journalists. They both thought they were, but their idea of citizen journalism was centred on the idea that they were citizens who happened to have journalistic skills which they were using to tell the world the Zimbabwean story. The other problem was the ethical side of their work. Dedicated and determined as they seemed, it looked to me like they were equally ready to write stories tarnishing Mugabe and his party in a bad light as long as they would get paid. One of them did not mince his words: “No one out there wants to hear anything legitimate about Mugabe. He hasn’t got anything legitimate anyway.” This statement goes on to show why stories about Mugabe have not always been accurately presented in Zimbabwe and abroad and it seems like no

one cares, because for the sake of getting paid some journalists have turned to citizen journalism, which has little or no ethical requirements than the more demanding traditional school of journalism.

I also interviewed a foreign blogger working for a leading NGO in Zimbabwe, as well as a Zimbabwean working in the communication department of the Western Embassy. The two similarities they had was that they both maintained a blog in which they wrote about their experiences in Zimbabwe. They considered themselves citizen journalists too. They both had worked as journalists previously. They were free to write what they wanted, they said. Their bosses did not interfere with what they wrote even though their stories were published on the official websites of their employers. The embassy official said her views did not reflect the official policy of her mother country towards Zimbabwe. Both said they had no hidden agenda concerning Zimbabwe. “I find it hard to write about positive things because there is very little positive to note. They have a new government but squabbles are all over the place”, the embassy official noted. Asked whether he also tried to post positive material about Zimbabwe on his blog, the NGO worker differed with the embassy official even though they both knew each other: “I am looking for positive stories here. The accusation we get from the Zimbabwean government is that we only want to tarnish the image of the country. I write about the positive reflections and resilience of the people here.”

One non-affiliated blogger said she wrote about “everything but politics”. Her views were that journalists only focussed on politics “as if there is nothing to talk about it Zimbabwe”. She said she was not a journalist but a social activist. She enjoyed writing about people living in rural Zimbabwe and documenting their interesting “beautiful stories”. She did not have a personal blog but she contributed her stories to several blogs for free. She did not consider blogging “a profession but more of a hobby.” Data from the five respondents show the confusing dynamics of citizen journalism in Zimbabwe. It is no easy task defining who is a citizen journalist and who is not because those who post pictures that reveal information that politicians may want to conceal (on Facebook) also call themselves citizens journalists. Citizen journalism in Zimbabwe is thus seen from the

window of political activism. Only one respondent felt politics did not define what she wanted to write; the majority of the respondents admitted it was difficult to separate politics from the Zimbabwean way of life. Political activists, who also considered themselves citizen journalists, clearly confirmed that their presence of Facebook was politically-inclined. “I wouldn’t have a Facebook account had I not been a political activist for the MDC”, one of them said.

The problem with citizen journalism in Zimbabwe is that it is not people-driven. The educated elite living in bigger cities and towns are in most cases the driving force behind this revolution. When I put it to a politician that the rural dwellers were mostly left out in this citizen participation since not all of them had the technological knowhow to report and send stories to other people, the politician retorted: “You are wrong there. You should not underestimate our people. My mother is 71. She has a cell phone. When she has no credit in her phone, she sends me a message, asking me to call her back. So you think if some political rivals attack her, she won’t be able to send me a sms telling me what’s going on.” The politician revealed that her mother’s cell phone could take pictures and she knew “how to take pictures.” That made the politician’s mother a potential political participant, but I could not verify how many 71 year olds in Zimbabwe were in possession of a cell phone.

Zimbabwe also has its own emerging public sphere. The blogs are dominating the political space. NGO involvement is key to this expansion. Several NGOs, including the Netherlands’ HIVOS, which has its regional African office in Harare, are actively involved in pursuing citizen goals to actively participate in political digitally by financing courses for Zimbabweans seeking to learn more about the digital environment. I have spoken to young Zimbabweans who have participated in these courses. I have also been asked to teach one of these courses in Harare. Young people learn a lot about writing short stories and blogging and sharing content with fellow bloggers. Mugabe and his ZANU PF party have been reluctant to crack down on the blogosphere despite numerous threats from several politicians within his party to do so. Perhaps they just realise the Internet has got the capacity to bring them down. Some of them still think only the urban

dwellers have got access to the Internet, but as we have shown here those living in rural areas, the traditional political hotspots for ZANU PF dominance, now have mobile phones and also have Facebook accounts.

8.4.1 Theoretical contribution

Given the scope of an overpowering and commonly acceptable view that new media technologies are at the centre of bringing democratic revolution globally, this study's contribution appears twofold. Firstly, and perhaps more significantly, there has never been a better time to pursue research in this area, as such an undertaking will only serve to avoid empirically unproven notions such as the those seeking to link the Internet with humanising the democratic institutions of a country. This study has without doubt shown how powerful the Internet and new technologies have been in empowering people with information in Zimbabwe through an analysis of data that revealed an overwhelming presence and participation of Zimbabwe on the web. However, it has also highlighted some of the complexities surrounding the possible success of the digitalised culture, exploring issues such as access, availability, legal frameworks and state skepticism. Therefore, there should be no reason to think that since the Internet has been instrumental in democratising Egypt, the same can be done in Zimbabwe, simply because of the geopolitical and cultural differences between those countries. It is dangerous to assume that the same tactics used in the Egyptian revolution can be reproduced with corresponding success in another country, as no evidence has been given to support such a position.

Secondly, through this study, we have learned that the biggest obstacle to the success of digital technologies in improving the citizens' democratic participation in Zimbabwe is fear. Participation can be subjective. It certainly does not necessarily mean voting against Mugabe. Zimbabweans need to overcome fear in order to realise the full potential of the digitalised world. Through the Internet, citizens can have access to empowering information. But more important is what they do with that information. True, knowledge is power, but without understanding how to utilise knowledge, power remains out of reach. In the March 2008 elections, citizens had information about what was going on in

the country through access to the Internet or via messages from relatives and friends abroad. That information empowered them to make their choice of candidate, yet some still voted for President Mugabe because they feared the consequences of voting for the opposition.

A chapter analysis of the inductive parts of this research also shows the important contribution of this research to the field of media and African politics. Through a critical reflection of the conflicting historical and contemporary positions of Zimbabwean politics, it is apparent that Zimbabwe has seen itself facing the challenges it has been encountering since 2000. These problems did not just begin with the land reform. They go back to the colonial involvement of the British in Zimbabwe. Land is a highly emotive and contested issue, which despite all its agrarian potential has literally contributed to the downfall of the country. The same chapter also revealed how much of the colonial laws – ironically issued by the previous White governments – are now being used by Mugabe to oppress his own people. Rhodesian media laws, which gave dominance to the state-run broadcaster, are still very much alive. At the same time, the chapter shows the origins of media discontent. Zimbabwean journalists had good cause to embrace the Internet revolution. The Internet offered a voice to those who could not criticise Mugabe from within the country, and the same digital technologies could be manipulated to tarnish the image of ZANU PF.

Chapter four also shows the relationships between new and old media in the Zimbabwean context. *The Herald* newspaper's position in the Zimbabwean political market is scrutinised to understand its power and to show how difficult it may have been for Mugabe to achieve his political aspirations without the assistance of this brazenly loyal newspaper. But the advent of the Internet has forced *The Herald* to adopt and embrace the new media. Citizens' participation through citizen journalism, I also conclude, is not a distinctively new phenomenon, as citizens have historically been participating in issues surrounding their own interests. This conclusion also reveals a rather pessimistic view on the overall contribution of the Internet in improving the way citizens participate in the Zimbabwean political space. This is a significant contribution because I have yet to see

other studies that question the notion that new media technologies have significantly improved the way Zimbabweans participate politically.

8.4.2 Conclusion

I have come to a congenial conclusion that new media technologies, far from eloquently improving the way Zimbabweans participate politically, are yet to fully demonstrate their full potential. This is not because of their inability but rather the citizens' unwillingness and powerlessness to actively participate in politics due to their fear of the unknown. You may have the Internet, you may have unrestricted access to it but what is important is your willingness and determination to use it for political purposes. That is still lacking in the case of Zimbabwe. Obviously, this is a generalised view that came out my research. There are plenty of fearless people who have confronted Mugabe. Indeed, there are plenty of people who have taken Mugabe to task by using the Internet and new media platforms to denounce his alleged misrule. However, there is still a long way to go before the platforms can have a direct influence on the Zimbabwean political climate. There are several reasons prohibiting the influence of the Internet in Zimbabwe including:

- a) **Mugabe's grip on power:** While access to Internet has, as has been shown in this research, significantly improved in Zimbabwe, there is no evidence to suggest that Mugabe is about to relinquish power. He remains the world's oldest president and he is set to run for reelection in 2013 when he will be 89 years old. People may have Internet, but Mugabe has the power. The Internet could empower them but still they still need to deal with Mugabe's tight grip on power.
- b) **Fear:** Protests are not tolerated in Zimbabwe. They have never been tolerated in the country. Opponents of President Mugabe have in the past been arrested and put in jail for simply expressing views that were opposed to Mugabe or his party cadres.
- c) **Accessibility:** While the mobile phone revolution has reduced concerns over accessibility, literature reviewed in this research also showed that those living in the rural areas were still struggling to gain access to it. Also, those who have access to it, may use it for reasons other than political.

- d) **Lack of triggering events:** Zimbabweans are not the only ones living in a dictatorship. There has not been a country in sub-Saharan Africa where Internet-influenced protests have led to a genuine regime change. The Arab Spring may have shown others in Africa how they could revolt against dictatorships. However, there are several political, economic and ideological differences between the Arab and African states. If anything, the Arab Spring, I believe, was an eye opener for dictators across Africa, helping them further maintain their grip on power. They saw that while “people power” was inevitable in countries such as Egypt, they needed to be equally prepared to deal with potential revolts.
- e) **Diaspora intervention:** While those living in the Diaspora could essentially play an important role, in the case of Zimbabwe it is a different story because Mugabe does not trust Zimbabweans living abroad. For that reason, as shown in this dissertation, they are not allowed to vote and some, including established journalists, have been blacklisted and cannot return home as long as Mugabe is still in power.

Fear, as already discussed, is one of the reasons why it will probably take a long time before Zimbabweans realise the full potential of the Internet. Another factor affecting the dichotomy of information-sharing between Zimbabweans at home and their fellow citizens abroad pertains to the general mistrust of Zimbabweans who are living in the Diaspora. While many people can easily identify their contribution to the country's economy, not everyone, as shown from the analysis of 20 interviews with Zimbabweans living in the country, is happy with their attitudes toward the country. Some see the Diaspora Zimbabweans as sell-outs, while others consider them cowards who could not stand the heat. Some are not happy that among Zimbabweans in the Diaspora there were people who created versions of alleged brutality from Mugabe with the hope of securing a visa and residence permit in the West. All these factors have contributed to the general mistrust of Zimbabweans in the Diaspora.

While the Internet should be credited for providing information to previously underprivileged citizens, it should not entirely be credited for influencing the way people

participate in their political affairs. Within the context of the 2008 elections, it can be argued that the Internet played an information-providing role as evidenced by the confirmation given by some of the 50 interview respondents. However, not everybody who got the information from the Diaspora unconditionally chose to vote for Tsvangirai, as six of the voters confirmed that they decided to vote for Makoni instead. Five of the voters who got advice to vote against Mugabe still decided to vote for him, against the wishes of their friends and relatives abroad. In this case, the Internet was not entirely central to the voters' choices.

There is only one thing that can strongly validate my hypothesis. If participation means going on the Internet and sending emails to politicians, questioning their positions in order to ensure transparency, then Zimbabweans still have a long way before they can solidly conclude that the advent of the Internet has boosted their online political activism. However, if participation just means accessing and sharing online political information with friends and relatives, then Zimbabweans are already doing that. But not everyone is participating. In fact the majority of the rural dwellers have no idea what Facebook is. My view is that participation should not be half-baked. It should be a process that not only involves making voting choices but taking politicians to task for the decisions they make. Participation should also mean that the distance between the political players and the constituencies they represent is shortened. That is still not the case in Zimbabwe. Politicians remain rather untouchable and it is still a bit early to think that the Internet is helping make them accountable for their decisions and actions. Zimbabweans should first deal with more pressing issues, such as securing access to the Internet. Despite all these problems, one would be a fool to dismiss the democratic potential of the Internet, as has been argued throughout.

8.4.3 Possibilities for further research

The fact that power of the Internet and new media technologies to influence democratic participation have not been wholly proven in Zimbabwe should not be taken to mean the case is the same in each and every country. The Internet, I predict, is going to play a much bigger role in determining the pace of democratic participation in the future. It

takes a significant amount of time for people to realise their potential. Confronting supposedly autocratic regimes is a risky business and many people living in Zimbabwe are well aware of this. But then the question should also be asked if that is what the people want. Is it true that the people of Zimbabwe are sick and tired of Mugabe, or would they rather keep him in power? This research offers plenty of possibilities for future research. The growing mobile phone technology is seen as playing a leading role in democratising the political space in Africa especially by those in the West.

Elsewhere in Africa, for example in Kenya, cell phones have been credited with helping the independent media (mostly radio) provide accurate coverage of elections. Can Zimbabweans also turn to mobile phones to help end President Mugabe's decades-old political reign? Mobile phones have virtually changed the communication landscape across the African continent. Loader is of the view that new media technologies provide citizens with a chance to engineer change in democratic institutions and practices.⁵⁰⁵ But it is important to note that optimism has dominated largely unsubstantiated and seemingly idealistic claims linking participatory journalism and digital technologies with the enhancement of democratic participation in Africa. But once again empirical evidence backing these notions remains lacking. Rigorous research is thus needed.

Press rights are also arguably improving in Zimbabwe. The Internet has forced *The Herald* to allow citizens to freely comment on issues as they wish without fear or favouritism. This is pretty unprecedented. Reading *The Herald* these days, you can see readers' comments criticising President Mugabe's foreign trips or anything written about him or his party. Zimbabweans are not accustomed to this. Traditionally, criticising the President has not been openly allowed. In fact legally, as I have shown in this research, some people have been brought to court after criticising the President. However, in the digital age just like you can find satires taking a free ride against the President on YouTube, you can also equally find readers expressing their views in *The Herald*. Without any doubt, this is going to be another interesting area to investigate further.

⁵⁰⁵ Brian Loader, 'The Citizens' Voice in a Wired World: Experiments in e-democracy', paper presented at the ANA Hotel, Tokyo (14 November 2001).

What is causing this sudden policy change? Are editors at the newspaper ignorant enough not to see the Internet's potential? Zimbabwe has also authorised the establishment of a few more independent newspapers since Tsvangirai joined the government in 2009. Even better, in June 2012, the ZBC 's 32-year broadcasting monopoly came to a sticky end after a new local radio station went on the airwaves. While this radio station is run by *The Herald*, I still think this is quite a development considering ZBC has been left to do whatever they wanted for over three decades. At least now they will get some competition. Another radio station run by Supa Mandiwanzira, a former ZBC and *Aljazeera* correspondent in Zimbabwe, is also in the cards. It has already been given a green light to broadcast. These are indeed new developments that are worthy exploring scientifically in the future.

Ethical dilemmas necessitated by the digital environment should be researched further. This has become a problem not just in Africa but elsewhere around the world. Are traditional journalism ethics still relevant in the digital age? This research has also revealed how, for example, seeking quotes from official sources, which for many years has stood firm as the basic requirement for good journalism, is no longer as important as it used to be as a new generation of ambient journalists continue to dominate the digital age. While online regulation is almost impossible, journalists ought to accept that the era of ethics is gradually coming to end. There will be those who will continue to respect the ethics, many of them in fact will perhaps continue to abide by them, but they will face stiff competition from internet publishers, some of whom may not see the relevance for respecting the ethics of journalism. In fact, the majority of bloggers are not journalists. They have not been trained as such and will most likely not seek any journalism training of any sort. However, their influence on the web will continue to determine the flow and acceptability of news. It must also be noted that considerable confusion continues to rage as well-established news organisations such as BBC have also incorporated bloggism into their mainstream reporting strategy. What does all this lead us to? How does the future of journalism look in the wake of all these digital developments?

8.4.4 Limitations of this research

It is not always easy writing about a subject to which you have an emotional attachment. As a Zimbabwean by birth, I have naturally followed almost every news item in which Zimbabwe features. I have read news from traditional news sites as well as new media websites. I have also read a great deal of literature tied to this research. I have obviously formed my own opinions about the subject. To this end, I have also contributed several opinion articles in newspapers in the Netherlands and Zimbabwe. Writing about the Diaspora's contribution towards democratic participation was therefore very difficult since I was also an active member of the Diaspora community. Still, I made sure that my research was not by and large influenced by my own views.

I could have spent more time in Zimbabwe directly observing the impact of the crisis. In the last three years, I have made five trips to Zimbabwe, three of them specifically as part of my data gathering process. In total, I spent 91 days in Zimbabwe working for my research. Even though most of the interviews were conducted in the UK with Zimbabwean expatriates there, I still feel spending more time in Zimbabwe could have boosted the analysis of this research. I have become very skeptical about the Western media's reports on Zimbabwe. I tend to prefer relying on good empirical work rather than media reports, hence the argument that spending more time observing and talking to people on the ground would have complemented the findings of this research. However, at the same time, I am quite pleased with amount of data I was able to get and use for this research.