Social Media for Social Change

A Case Study of Online News Consumption among the Zimbabwean Diaspora in Botswana

Elle Brooks
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTIFICATION FOR TOPIC SELECTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND TO THE TOPIC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterising the Zimbabwean Diaspora</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterising the Zimbabwean Diasporic Media</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HISTORY &amp; CURRENT STATUS OF RESEARCH AREA</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC TO THE FIELD OF STUDY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW: POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW OF SPECIFIC AREA</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRAMEWORKS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC SPHERE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CITIZEN JOURNALISM</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH METHODS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling and Selection of Interviewees</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF-REFLECTION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINDINGS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIONING MY FINDINGS WITHIN THE EXISTING LITERATURE</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW THE DIASPORA USE NEW MEDIA</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Media Use</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Channels and Platforms Used</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Interviewees Communicate Using New Media</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Content</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News and photos</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate across political lines</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Humour</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Commentary</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Around 1 in 4 Zimbabweans lives outside their home country, with the majority of these having emigrated between 2000-2010 due to economic instability and political repression. The emergence of new technologies and social media means that the 4-5 million members of the diaspora scattered around the world are now connected to the families and friends they left behind, as well as to each other, via an extensive web of online communications networks, which remain engaged in politics by discussing political issues relating to their homeland.

This paper sets out to answer the question “How do members of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Botswana use digital media to engage in political commentary and debate about their homeland?” and argues that there exists a vibrant and multifaceted network of everyday social activists communicating about political issues through various platforms. The paper places examples of online communications, political humour, lively debate and analysis critical of the Zimbabwean government within a wider picture of subversive and counter-government communications under repressive regimes to investigate how this informs our understanding of counter-government debate. It also considers the extent to which this communication process be described as democratising, and how this contributes to a wider discussion of the democratising and social change potential of ICTs.

Overall the paper argues that new media and ICTs offer new solutions for community members to gather and express their opinions to one another. This is viewed as an improvement on previous ways of communicating about politics, and may yield personal benefits to individual members of the community. However, they are not without their shortcomings; as yet no tangible social change in Zimbabwe has been linked to the proliferation of ICTs, and ultimately it is even arguable that social media may limit the potential for real change to occur. The paper assesses these arguments and uses the opinions of the interviewees to ultimately conclude that there are great challenges involved in creating social change through these networks and that there is some way to go before this is achieved.
Introduction

Justification for Topic Selection

As part of the Media, Globalisation and Development module of this Masters course I wrote an essay under the theme ‘the public sphere’. I chose to write specifically about how the Zimbabwean diaspora use new media to create a virtual public sphere. I work at an organisation in Botswana with a large number of Zimbabwean expatriates: around a quarter of the staff are originally from Zimbabwe. While I was researching and writing that essay, I informally asked my colleagues for their thoughts and experiences on the topic, and found they had some intriguing insights. I discovered that all Zimbabweans from my organisation are part of a WhatsApp group where they share news about home, take part in informal political debates and arguably ‘perform patriotism’ to borrow Tendai Chari’s phrasing (Chari, Tendai, 2015). Overall I found the topic to be rich and relevant to many themes within Communication for Development. I ended my essay with this postscript:

“As a closing point, it is perhaps worth highlighting the opportunity for further research into the ZDPS [Zimbabwean Diasporic Public Sphere]. Most existing studies rely on analysis of websites run by exiled trained journalists, and the debate that takes place in their comment sections... However, Alinejad & Mutsvairo note that “only a handful of studies have documented the democratic potential of content that is wholly produced and shared among untrained media professionals in diasporic communities affiliated with sub-Saharan Africa” [my emphasis] (Alinejad & Mutsvairo, 2015, p. 172).

In fact, in the informal discussions I had with members of the Zimbabwean diaspora while writing this essay, everybody mentioned WhatsApp as their primary channel to consume and share information relating to Zimbabwe and to debate on issues, yet there is currently no academic research into this phenomenon. This suggests there is also an opportunity to update the research on how new media might be used by the Zimbabwean diaspora (and those who remain) as a tool for social change.”

I was also interested in this topic because while still being relevant to the field of communication for development, it tends towards the ethnographic. Askanius and
Østergaard, who have noted that “Most CDSC literature tends to treat communication in terms of strategic communication interventions by Western NGOs, largely neglecting the plethora of other academic disciplines that direct attention to the relationship between media, participation in public life, and processes of social change more broadly.” (Askanius & Østergaard, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, Mutsvairo notes that many people have linked the internet with social change, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring, but that this remains unproven on a wide scale and especially in a country like Zimbabwe. He therefore feels it is necessary to conduct research into this link to establish whether or not it is accurate, before an unproven narrative takes hold (Mutsvairo, 2013). I agree with this sentiment.

Background to the Topic

Characterising the Zimbabwean Diaspora

The majority of Zimbabwe’s emigrants left between 2000-2010 in response to an authoritarian government and sharp economic decline (Mpofu, Shepherd, 2015). In terms of characterising the Zimbabwean diaspora, as a group they range from highly educated, affluent professionals to illiterate, undocumented manual labourers, and everything in between (Zimbabwe: The Africa Report, n.d.). They live all over the world, with significant populations in South Africa, Botswana, the UK, USA, Canada and Australia (Ibid.). Speaking broadly they tend to hold pro-opposition sentiment (L. Moyo, 2009) and, like most diaspora, they regularly and actively consume news from their homeland “as a symbolic assertion of transnational loyalty” (Chari, 2014, p. 92). The sheer volume and range of content flowing through this network, in all directions, cannot be overstated. Internet penetration within Zimbabwe itself grew from 50,000 users to 6.7 million between 2000 and 2017 (Internet Penetration by Country: Zimbabwe, 2018). Despite punitive communication laws the internet is a difficult space to police; Tomaselli writes that “global infrastructural ownership and investment often keeps open certain sectors of the public sphere that national governments want to close down” (Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli, 2009, p. 126), and in this case despite the government’s best efforts many Zimbabwean residents are now closely connected to the rest of the world including their friends and family members.
in the diaspora. This suggests there is a transnational, “virtual nation of Zimbabweans engaging in digital public debates in time and space because of the internet” (L. Moyo, 2009, p. 60)

**Characterising the Zimbabwean Diasporic Media**

One important tool of repression used by Robert Mugabe’s government during the years 2000-2010, when most migrants left Zimbabwe, was strict control over the media. Independent publishers were closed down and total government control was established over radio and television broadcasts (Crack, 2008). Laws were passed instructing internet service providers to report ‘anti-national activities’ by users (Ibid.) and, later, allowing the government to intercept all information on Zimbabwe’s internet (D. Moyo, 2007). Journalists were harassed and tortured, the Harare offices of independent radio station ‘VOB’ were destroyed in a bomb attack, and the perpetrators were never caught (Ndlela, Nkosi Martin, 2011). These actions were arguably attempts by the government to control the flow of public information and thereby repress counter-government views.

Many anti-ruling party journalists were among those who found themselves unemployed and pushed out of their homeland. Several of these exiled journalists set up websites from outside the country, including newzimbabwe.com, The Zimbabwe Situation and The Zimbabwean to name a few. More recently, Facebook pages and groups such as *Zvinhu Zvirikufaya*, and YouTube channels such as *Eleven Dogs* provide highly interactive spaces for the Zimbabwean diaspora to communicate. These platforms are thriving, innumerable and inherently political: Ndlela notes that “almost all the news sites describe and perceive themselves as alternative spaces of communication and information for Zimbabweans. Their intention is thus to expand the shrinking communicative space” (Ndlela, Nkosi Martin, 2011, p. 93).
Literature Review

History & Current Status of Research Area

There is arguably not a cohesive body of work focusing specifically on diasporic new media and social change; much of the literature is interdisciplinary. Diaspora studies itself is an interdisciplinary field of study that first emerged in the late 1980s (Andersson, 2019). Benedict Anderson’s coining of the phrase ‘Imagined Community’ in 1983 has been particularly influential in diaspora studies; he articulated that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by people that perceive themselves as part of that group. He also argued that the media is instrumental in creating and perpetuating these ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). Towards the end of the 1980s, Stuart Hall was also engaging with issues of diasporic media use, focusing mostly on the role of the media in creating and maintaining national and hybridised identities through representation (Andersson, 2019).

As new technologies became available, the first studies of migration and ICTs were published. From the late 1990s onwards the field expanded from earlier issues of representation to include such varied topics as the digital divide, community cohesion, cosmopolitanism, the impact of ICTs on migration and long-distance nationalism among others (Ibid.). It was around this time that the term ‘digital diaspora’ began to be used, defined by Laguerre as “an immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant population that uses IT connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad” (Alonso & Oairzabal, 2010, p. 50). From the mid 2000s onwards, internet users started to also became creators of user-generated content in a virtual community (Andersson, 2019). Rogers first applied this concept to the diaspora by identifying what he terms a “second wave of transnationalism” (2005), which he defined by its advanced high-speed communication systems and the impacts of simultaneity and co-presence (Chari, 2014).
In 2014, Siapera astutely wrote that “The field... is very dynamic with new developments leading to new directions; one of the problems is that practices and technological applications change very often, while at the same time human mobility takes many forms” (Siapera, 2014, p. 178). This speed at which technology shifts certainly seems to be a stumbling block in academic and theoretical discussions. Many of the field’s seminal texts have become outdated; for example, Stephen Vertovec described cheap phonecalls as the ‘social glue’ of migrant transnationalism (2009), Anna Everett listed e-bulletin boards, chat rooms and home pages as being key to African diasporic consciousness (2009) and Alonso & Oairzabal suggested that MySpace would be the future for diasporic communications (2010). With the benefit of hindsight, we can see these assertions made only 10 years ago are no longer relevant. This suggests that the field in general is evolving quickly, and supports Siapera’s argument that broader theoretical frameworks are required to frame the individual case studies (Siapera, 2014); perhaps this will be the next stage of the field’s study.

Relevance of the Topic to the Field of Study

The topic of digital diasporas and their potential to create social change in their homelands using new media is arguably increasingly relevant. The world is experiencing increasing levels of migration (Eriksen, 2014) and new technologies have led to the creation of an infosphere constituting a “postnational or global media that transcends national boundaries, creating a deterritorialized space” (Alonso & Oairzabal, 2010, p. 8). This disrupts the notion of a national media for each national culture (Ibid.). The advancement of ICTs has led to the development of phrases such as the ‘annihilation of space’ and ‘death of distance’ used by migration researchers to refer to the bridging function ICTs can play between places of departure and destination (Frouws et al., 2016). This function is seen as especially relevant for migrants, with evidence that diasporic groups tend to be early adopters and heavy users of digital technologies (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014, quoted in Andersson, 2019).
It is clear, then, that new media is changing the way we communicate across borders. These new virtual communicative spaces are especially significant for migrants from repressive regimes because they are beyond the reach of national governments (Bernal, 2010). Indeed, in some cases “exit may be necessary for the exercise of voice” (Brinkerhoff, 2009, p. 9). Uniquely among their compatriots, diasporans “can exercise their freedom of expression through criticising a sitting government as they are outside the territory of the authoritarian rule they are criticising” (Tutlam et al., 2019, p. 37). In many repressive regimes, state-owned communications are being undermined by the sprawling, uncontrollable global force of new media, and governments are losing their grip on the information their citizens are receiving. In countries where the public media have long been viewed as biased government mouthpieces, some argue new media are resurrecting the role of the media as the fourth estate (Mpofu, 2015). As Tettey writes, “discourses that challenge the hegemonic viewpoint of the state are possible and thriving in the transnational bridgespace provided by the internet” (Tettey, 2009, p. 148).

**Literature Review: Potential for Change**

With academics agreeing that virtual communication spaces are increasingly available to diasporas, and that these spaces they offer increased opportunity for communicating outside state control, an important question then becomes what potential this phenomenon offers for social change. Many have hailed the emergence of a ‘networked public sphere’, due to a combination of new technologies available at trivial cost and the rise of citizen journalism as having changed long-held patterns of news production and consumption (Mutsvairo, 2016). Writers who take a positive view suggest that this phenomenon has the potential to create and support social change in the home countries (see Brinkerhoff 2009 and 2010, and Mpofu 2013 and 2015). However the extent to which this potential can be realised is highly contentious, with others suggesting various limitations of this social change process (see Mutsvairo 2014 and 2016, and Tettey 2004 and 2009).
I would argue the majority of researchers are optimistic in their perspective, and tend to hold that diasporic new media does have the potential to create social change. One of the stronger proponents of this perspective is Jennifer Brinkerhoff. In her book *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*, the first full-length scholarly study of digital diasporas, (Brinkerhoff, 2009), she asserts this point throughout, with a key argument being that “the internet fosters community, solidarity and liberal values” (p. 11). Similar arguments can be found in other literature, with some writers noting the value in community activists linking up with, and learning from, other activists worldwide (see Laguerre, 2010, and Moyo, 2014). Others emphasise new media’s potential to link dispersed people together to mobilise resistance (see Alinejad and Mutsvairo, 2015, and Ndlela, 2011), or approach centres of power to challenge the status quo (see Mhlanga and Mpofu, 2017 and Mpofu, 2015). Perhaps the most convincing, and yet contentious, perspective is that having a voice is empowering in itself, and that the very act of having a mouthpiece when compatriots do not is constitutive of positive social change (see Alonso & Oairzabal, 2010, Tutlam et al, 2019 and Tettey, 2009). When this perspective is applied, it is easy to see why diasporic new media has been viewed as having such potential. Explaining this viewpoint, Chantal Mouffe writes that since dissent and conflict co-exist in true democracies, simply the ability to debate and dissent is inherently democratic (in Rodríguez & Miralles, 2014). As Mpofu writes, “new media give citizens the opportunity to speak to power. Whether power listens or not may be another matter...” (Mpofu 2015 p. 50).

Several writers are circumspect in their conclusions, with many balancing the potential for change with associated risks. For example, it is certainly true that governments may use ICTs for surveillance and control (Wilding & Gifford, 2013), and there are also issues of access and the digital divide (Mutsvairo, 2013). More broadly, Tomaselli and Teer-Tomaselli describe the internet as a site of struggle for power, noting that both hegemonic powers and the oppressed use the internet to advance their agendas (2009), providing another useful lens through which we can view the power of the internet.
This paper situates its research in the Zimbabwean context. To my knowledge there have been a total of nine papers publishing original research into this area (broadly, the Zimbabwean new media’s potential for democratic change, or the Zimbabwean diasporic new media public sphere). All nine authors are Zimbabwean men, with most writing from a critical theory perspective. The findings and conclusions from these studies align more than they conflict. Overall there is a sense that while new media offers an increasing number of Zimbabweans both inside and outside the country the opportunity to speak and debate, this in itself is not enough to suggest the potential for social change. Most authors conclude that it is unlikely that new media can bring about change in Zimbabwe in the near future (see Mutsvairo, 2013, Moyo, 2007 and Moyo, 2009). Possibly the most cautiously optimistic is Shepherd Mpofu, who argues that the shift of user and producer power relations has been the driving factor in altering political deliberation in Zimbabwe, and sees potential for this to create real change (2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017).

It is worth noting that these previous studies were all undertaken before November 2017, when Robert Mugabe was ousted in a ‘soft coup’ after 37 years in power. Several of the studies published before this date concluded that diasporic journalism does not aid democracy in this case, based on the fact that Mugabe was still in power at the time (see Alinejad & Mutsvairo, 2015, and Moyo, 2009). This suggests an updated analysis could be helpful; this degree project is able to assess whether communication patterns have changed under the new leadership and if so, what this means for the research area.

Therefore this paper aims to situate itself within existing literature while updating understanding in some areas. Firstly, it seeks to reconsider the democratic potential of diasporic new media in the era after Mugabe’s ousting, taking into account new configurations of power that have transpired in the last 2 years. Secondly, it aims to consider up-to-date modes of communication and new channels. Much of the existing research focuses on online newspapers, website comment sections and chat rooms (see Chari, 2014, Peel, 2009, Mpofu, 2015 and 2016, Mare, 2016). However, with the
increasing ubiquity of mobile phones, it is arguable that most diasporic new media is consumed not through laptops but through cellphones, and that the forms these communications take may be more complex than in previous contexts, for example featuring a layering of platforms and new integrations of open/closed groups on platforms such as WhatsApp. Though this will undoubtedly itself become out of date in the near future, it is at least worth assessing new communication structures as they relate to the potential for democratic change at this point in time.

Frameworks

Before collecting my own data for this degree project, it was important to select a framework or frameworks in order to narrow down the area of investigation and to anchor analysis in existing areas of study. For the purposes of the project I selected two frameworks or practices, the first being ‘public sphere theory’ and the second being ‘citizen journalism’. Though I considered several other frameworks, ultimately these two seemed the most relevant to the field of study, and also had the benefit of being flexible enough and open to interpretation that they could be applied to everyday practices without too much rigidity.

Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas coined the term ‘public sphere’ in 1962, to mean a very specific type of virtual space in which citizens debate and form public opinion, but since then his definition has been “developed, modified, critiqued, discarded and re-embraced” 2/23/20 8:33:00 PM. Certainly many of the specifics of the Habermasian model are not applicable to this case study, however many have preferred to consider the useful aspects of the original public sphere theory while dismissing those that are overly anachronistic or inappropriate. This is what I intend to do in this study.

In traditional liberal arguments about the democratic role of the press, the primary function of the media is to act as a watchdog, holding government accountable for their actions (Scott, 2014). However “in authoritarian societies there is an inclination
by the powerful sectors toward controlling the communicative spaces” (Ndlela, Nkosi Martin, 2011, p. 98), and from the previously mentioned cases of state media control, clearly this is the case in Zimbabwe. Because the traditional media is not free, it is unable to perform its role in the public sphere of being the voice of ordinary citizens and watchdog that safeguards good governance (Mpofu, 2015). However, the internet offers radically different patterns of communication: unlike traditional media it is decentralized, immediate, many-to-many, and transcends physical and international boundaries. Indeed, it has been argued that the very lack of an existing public sphere in Zimbabwe combined with these new technologies has been the driving force behind creating this “alternative realm of political debate” (Ndlela, Nkosi Martin, 2011, p. 94).

Importantly, Tettey advocates for “an understanding of the public that is not constrained by the Habermasian model [and which] incorporates the sophisticated landscape of political engagement that we see in Africa and elsewhere” (Tettey, 2009, p. 151), and this is the model I have chosen to use. Conceptualising the public sphere more broadly as “an extensive physical and symbolic space for the formation of public opinion [which is] composed of a society’s communication structure” (Keane, 1995, in Ndlela, Nkosi Martin, 2011, p. 87) gives us a helpful lens through which to analyse this particular case study.
In this paper’s investigations and analysis then, I will consider all facets of public sphere theory as mentioned above, to assess the extent to which Zimbabwean diasporic online communications perform the role of a public sphere.

Citizen Journalism
While not necessarily a framework but more a practice, I have also chosen to use ‘citizen journalism’ as a point of reference for this project as it seems to play an increasing role in new media, and links to public sphere theory in an era of changing user-producer roles. Citizen journalism is defined broadly by Bowman and Willis as citizens “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information” (in Mutsvairo, 2013, p. 43). It has been noted that the boundaries of citizen journalism are not clearly drawn, and this is evident
from the fact that often other terms are used interchangeably, for example participatory journalism, open-source journalism and public journalism. I choose to use the term ‘citizen journalism’ in this paper as it is arguably the most accurate given my study is of ‘citizens’ of Zimbabwe, whether they are in or outside of the country.

Citizen journalism is a form of news dissemination carried out by untrained journalists. These are often people who, by coincidence, are able to capture events ‘on the ground’ via their camera phones, and share this content via social media, an increasingly common feature of crisis reporting (Allan in Scott, 2014). At the other end of the spectrum, they may be people simply airing their political opinions using social media; indeed punditry has been noted as a regular feature of citizen journalism (Mutsvairo, 2013). Though not everyone would agree this is citizen journalism, I prefer to take a broad view and would go as far as to suggest that anyone with a cellphone is now able to produce the equivalent of an opinion piece in a newspaper. The development of the globalised, digitally networked society has allowed subaltern media content providers to subvert this structure as they invite content to flow from the ‘man on the street’, across to his peers, and potentially upwards towards power itself (Thussu in Boli & Lechner, 2015). Ultimately citizen journalism can “provide a powerful counter-narrative to professional media that are often constrained, or even controlled, by national governments” (Mutsvairo, 2013, p. 92).

In the Zimbabwean case, citizen journalism proves perhaps even more of a rupture from standard traditional reporting. Broadcasting in Africa has arguably traditionally been part of the civil service, and a “top-down manifestation of [government] communications” (Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli, 2009, p. 190). This suggests that citizen journalism in Zimbabwe could be a particularly interesting case study. Mutsvairo also argues that while there are many case studies on citizen journalism during exceptional events and crises, there is a lack of studies on everyday citizen journalism in an African context (Mutsvairo, 2013). This is what I am particularly interested in, and what will be discussed in this paper. Though it requires accepting a very broad definition of news and journalism, it is arguable that when considering these broad definitions we may find the most useful insights.
Methodology

This section will begin by explaining the reasoning for the selected methodology; namely interviews and content analysis. It will then discuss the limitations of these methods. Finally, I will reflect on my position as researcher and author of this DP, considering ways in which that position may have influenced and affected the findings.

Research Methods

Interviews

The chosen data gathering method for this paper was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The emphasis on ‘semi-structured’ aims to suggest that the interviewees were free to talk about what they would like, within a broad theme. This method provides the researcher with in-depth information on the topic of interest without predetermining the results (Cook in Given, 2008). This was important in this case because as an outsider (non-Zimbabwean), there was a risk that pre-determined questions could result in important areas not being addressed since I would not know exactly what to ask. I found this to be the case during the interviews; many interesting issues were raised that were not originally in the question list, and I was able to probe these with unplanned follow-up questions leading to better insights. The list of original interview questions and additional probing questions are attached as an appendix.

Content Analysis

The data produced and transcribed from the interviews formed the text, and I then used content analysis as the method to analyse that text. This method was chosen because of its ability to reveal both conscious and unconscious thought through an exploration of recurring themes or discourses (Julien in Given, 2008). In order to achieve this, researchers conducting content analysis need to closely analyse texts to reveal recurring patterns, themes and trends. In terms of the exact process, Julien writes that “Identifying themes or categories is usually an iterative process, so the researcher spends time revisiting categories identified previously and combining or
dividing them, resolving contradictions, as the text is analyzed over and over.” (Ibid., p. 20). This certainly was the case; after conducting the interviews, I transcribed the roughly 4 and a half hours of recordings, separated them into separate points and then grouped all these points by theme, several times over. Arguments emerging strongly from each themed group formed the basis of my analysis and arguments.

Sampling and Selection of Interviewees

In my initial research methodology paper, I proposed interviewing colleagues and acquaintances, since I felt the data would benefit from my previous relationship and rapport with the interviewees. However, my tutors dissuaded me from only interviewing people I know, suggesting I use snowball sampling and try to find people that would provide a range of perspectives.

I therefore tried to use snowball sampling and to secure interviews with people I did not know, whom I felt it would be interesting to interview and who would help create a more rounded dataset. However of the 6 people I made contact with, 4 did not want to be interviewed. They cited different reasons but these generally referred to them being unable to give their personal opinions as they have some form of professional link to the Zimbabwean government. Of the other 2 who did agree to interviews, one cut off contact before I was able to interview him, and one was interviewed but contacted me afterwards to request that I remove him from the study and delete the audio recording of the interview, which I did. He did not give a reason.

Because of these difficulties, ultimately all the interviews I analysed in this DP were with people I already knew. Mutsvairo has noted that “naturally Zimbabweans tend not to openly enjoy discussion about their political affiliations in public.” (2013, p. 35), which suggests a reason why it was difficult for me to persuade people I don’t know to open up to me during interviews. Although in the end I was limited to a pool of people I already knew, I feel I managed to make the best of this. Importantly, I was able to speak to a representative range of people, interviewing 11 people from across the socioeconomic spectrum, from domestic worker to managing director with a range in between. 5 interviews were with women, and 6 were with men. Interviewees had
been living in Botswana between 4 and 22 years, and left Zimbabwe for a variety of reasons.

Apart from ease of access and their willingness to speak to me, there was another benefit in interviewing the people that I did. I work in a communications company and interviewed several of my colleagues there; because they are familiar with the topics I wanted to discuss, some of these interviews were truly insightful. In particular, certain interviews helped introduce interesting concepts and points of view into the project because the interviewees are extremely well-read in the topic area. They used terms such as ‘citizen journalism’ and ‘public sphere’ without any prompting, and were able to speak with authority and knowledge about the topic in a way that other interviewees were not. I found that these interviews in particular introduced me to interesting new ideas and concepts, which I would not have encountered if I had not interviewed any experts in this area. For this reason I feel this method of interviewing was successful.

Limitations of the Method

When interviewing people in a language that is not their mother tongue, researchers must “be attentive to the cultural and linguistic identities of these groups and allow their voices, attitudes and responses to be fully articulated and honestly represented in the final report” (Birch, 1996, p.15). In this case, this meant that depending on the level of English spoken by each interviewee, I asked questions using more or less complex language. On some occasions I rephrased questions several times until their meaning was better comprehended. It was relatively easy to do this with concrete words but notably more difficult to do this when asking about abstract concepts such as ‘democracy’ ‘positive social change’ etc. This meant that interviewees with lower levels of ability in English were less able to contribute meaningfully, which is a disadvantage of this method. A researcher who spoke the interviewees’ native languages would be better able to express the questions and collect and analyse data from everyone, not just those with a higher ability in English.
Similarly, an alternative research method I considered for this DP was participant observation. I considered obtaining access to diaspora online groups first-hand, i.e. being added to the groups on Facebook, WhatsApp etc, and viewing all communications taking place inside. In this way, valuable data could be collected and analysed from a variety of angles. However, after spending some time browsing Facebook groups, I discovered the vast majority (probably 90% or more) of all communications are not in English and therefore the level of work required to translate all communications would be beyond the scope of this project. It would, however, be a good method for a Shona speaker to use, studying a similar topic. I did ask my interviewees to share examples of political content shared with them through digital channels and as such I have included some examples in this DP, but these are obviously not naturalistic in the sense that they were pre-selected by both the interviewees and by me for inclusion in this paper.

**Self-Reflection**

It is important for researchers to reflect on their own role in the research process. This is particularly relevant to the interview process because interviews are productive research tools that create new data, rather than simply tools for analysing pre-existing data (Given, 2008) meaning that my position influences the production of the dataset as well as my analysis of it.

I am a white, British woman and as such, I could reasonably expect that I would have to work to create a rapport with Zimbabwean interviewees. However I think it is possible that those I did interview felt they could be more open with me as a non-Zimbabwean because I don’t have a political affiliation. I believe the fact that I am on friendly terms with all the interviewees helped them to open up to me. I also believe the fact that I am a member of the diaspora living in Botswana too (though the British diaspora rather than Zimbabwean) meant they felt there were some commonalities that created an open atmosphere. As such the interview took place on ‘neutral territory’, as we are both non-natives of Botswana, and we face some of the same issues in terms of being far from home.
There could also be power dynamics at play during interviews such as these, especially given that I interviewed people I work with who are more and less senior than me, but considering the positive relationship I already have with all interviewees, I think this potential issue was mitigated to a great extent. There definitely were limitations arising from my position, however; in terms of the analysis and my interpretation of the interview data, I would naturally also be influenced by the position I write from. To mitigate this, I tried as much as possible to avoid reading into people’s answers too much, but rather taking them at face value. On a few occasions during the analysis stage I noticed myself thinking I was reading between the lines of what an interviewee was saying, revealing something different. Given that I don’t come from the same background as the interviewees it is unlikely that I would be ‘reading’ correctly, and as such I tried to avoid this as much as possible. In certain cases that meant I did not collect particularly interesting data about a particular question, but it is better to have uninteresting, or non-cohesive, data than to misinterpret it and make a point that is not well substantiated.
Findings

Positioning my Findings Within the Existing Literature

Nine out of the eleven respondents seem to follow Zimbabwean news and politics (using new media) as an almost ritual practice. This is a demonstration of Tendai Chari’s conceptualising of consuming news as ‘performing patriotic citizenship’ (Chari, 2014). Certainly the overall sense from the interviews was that the participants felt strong emotions towards Zimbabwe and its situation, and that although they were outside its national borders, they remain part of a nation of Zimbabweans whose communications are facilitated by the internet. This mirrors findings from Brinkerhoff (2009 and 2010), Tettey (2009) and Laguerre (2005 and 2010), who have all noted that notions of place and belonging have undergone transformation due to new media.

Another general finding in line with previous studies is that while everyone maintained close contact with their homeland, the way they do this is diverse (see Danilewicz, 2017), and certainly the degree of contact ranged quite broadly. The modes of contact also ranged broadly, with many news sources being multimodal in nature; this is in line with a general trend observed towards multimodality in digital communications (see Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019).

Another key finding was that a main channel for communication is WhatsApp. It has been noted that WhatsApp is a dominant media channel particularly in the Global South due to the limitations of internet service provision (WhatsApp’s Political Use in the Global South, n.d.) and I certainly found this to be the case in the interviews I carried out; all respondents listed WhatsApp as their primary communication channel, with Facebook a close second. This suggests that citizens of the global south are heavily reliant on one USA-based company for their everyday interactions and even for advocating for social change.
How the Diaspora Use New Media

The first issue the interviews addressed was how exactly new media is used by this community. Participants were asked about which channels they use to consume news and communicate with other Zimbabweans, how often they do this, types of content and the flow of information. These responses give us insight into how new media has developed and is still developing.

Level of Media Use

Overall, 9 of the 11 participants said they do follow the news in Zimbabwe. Of the 2 who said they didn’t, however, one exhibits practices which under normal circumstances would likely be considered ‘following the news’. He noted that he checks news about Zimbabwe every day, always has the newzimbabwe.com tab open on his computer, and regularly searches for specific videos on YouTube. Perhaps the reason he defines this as ‘not following the news’ is that compared to his peers, he does not consider it to be heavy usage. Certainly it has been noted that emigrants actively seek out more media about their homeland on average compared to people who remain in the country (Chari, 2014) and my findings echoed this. Other interviewees tended to note a heavier engagement with news, for example “I check the news about Zimbabwe every moment I get a chance. Always in the evening, and once or twice in the day too.” (Misheck). One explained this by saying “I like to know what’s going on where I came from” (Viola) and generally others felt the same. Only one participant noted a particularly negative attitude towards consuming Zimbabwean news, saying “My problem is all news from Zimbabwe is generally depressing so I try to disassociate myself from it” (Michelle).

Interestingly, one person said he follows the news less now compared to when he first arrived in Botswana; “the realisation that it’s a lost cause is the reason. The fire has died” (Derick). Others, however, noted that they follow the news more now, with one participant saying “I feel like I’m a lot closer to the news on the ground now, with the onset of Facebook” (Cathy), and this echoed the feelings of the majority interviewed,
that they do feel close to the source, despite being a country away, as a consequence of their increased access to new media.

**Media Channels and Platforms Used**

In terms of the channels used, there was a reasonably wide variety. Two participants mentioned regularly visiting formal news websites, but the general consensus was that most news is consumed through social media, using a mix of channels, with the most popular being WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, in roughly that order.

Overall, WhatsApp appeared to be the most popular channel of communication by a large margin, with all participants saying they are in at least 1 WhatsApp group with other Zimbabweans, and some people being in so many groups they could not count. It has been noted that “many in the Global South use it [WhatsApp] to create a communicate with much larger social groups, organised around support of a particular football team... as well as along politician lines” (Ibid.). Family groups, friend groups, mixed groups and sports groups were all mentioned. In particular, many people mentioned school groups, for example ‘[school name] Class of ’86’. I have selected some quotes from the interviews that demonstrate the range of uses for WhatsApp:

---

“I’m in a WhatsApp group with the old boys club school. It was a whole year group so I don’t know them all well. There are guys in the group who live in Dubai, Canada, the UK, Australia, the US...” – Derick

“I’m in a WhatsApp group called ‘Zimbabwean Men’ and another group called ‘Real Zimbos’. There are hundreds of people in there. I don’t know them all, no way.” – Leslie

“The main group I’m in, there are 28 of us in it. People share news. If there’s going to be a strike [in Zimbabwe], I find out there and then let my relatives know. One of the people in the group is connected to the [Zimbabwe] secret service. So they have insider information and they say head’s up, if you have family in x, y, z area... so then we tell our families ‘stay away from this area’.” – Rudo

“There is one WhatsApp group for family, and there is one for guys in the family. I’m sure there is one for the girls in the family too. In the African context, guys are the ones who take decisions, and on the
family platform there are certain things you can’t discuss, so we take it to the men’s platform. When we want to contribute money or to talk about stuff to do with our dead, we take that to the men’s platform” – Joe

“When my uncle was sick and his kidneys were failing, we had a WhatsApp group with literally 100 people in, all relatives, and people would say ‘oh he needs another round of dialysis’ and we would say ‘OK cool’ and we would all send the money through Western Union” – Leigh-Anne

These examples suggest that different WhatsApp groups are used in different ways. Some perform the function of simulating an ordinary life back home, for example being structured around the family and organising family affairs. Others are used to relay important information across borders; Rudo’s interesting example demonstrates classified government news being relayed outside the country and then back in, in an attempt to keep people safe. Many other groups are formed based solely as a form of ‘belonging to a group’, whether that is an school alumni community or an almost random group of people, brought together only by the fact they are Zimbabweans living outside the country.

In terms of specific channels on Facebook and Twitter, most people said they just scroll through their feeds and see news from a variety of sources including formal news houses, but also individual journalists (many of them freelance), highly informal media outlets that don’t follow many traditional rules of journalism, and ordinary people communicating content that becomes popular and is shared many times. This is in interesting form of obtaining news; rather than seeking out a particular source, people are setting their preferences and then allowing an algorithm to feed them news that should theoretically be of interest to them. Another notable trend was the variety in sources; when asked about specific media houses a total of over 30 with little overlap between those named by people.

How Interviewees Communicate Using New Media

When asked if they are active or just consumers of news, everyone said they just consume, and observe. One person, Derick, did admit that “I’m not very active but I’m
prone to outbursts. If something rubs me the wrong way, I will vent and then let it go” but other than that, everybody maintained they simply consume news. However, as Alinejad and Mutsvairo note, “the increasingly blurred boundary between the producers and consumers of internet content means that active usage must be recognised.” (Alinejad & Mutsvairo, 2015 p. 173). It is arguable that many of the people I interviewed are ‘active users’ in this sense, but do not necessarily consider themselves as such. The picture becomes more interesting, however, when asked about WhatsApp, where all but one said they participate in sharing and discussion of news. Where they seemed to feel that commenting on Facebook and Twitter was inappropriate, they felt airing their views on WhatsApp was normal.

It is worth briefly considering how media circulates around these groups and other platforms. One notable common feature was the sharing of images through WhatsApp which were, themselves, screenshots taken from Twitter. Participants agreed that though they never took original screenshots, they assumed someone ‘far up the line’ took them and then they are shared and forwarded from group to group. One study in Kenya concluded that citizen journalism often included aggregation of news published by other media and cross-linking to other media, creating a very integrated media system (in Mutsvairo, 2013). This certainly seems to be the case here, with one participant noting she used to be in a WhatsApp group with over 100 other Zimbabweans living in Botswana; none of whom she knew in real life. There was one person in that WhatsApp group who, twice a day, would post an audio news summary from Studio 7, a US-based radio station set up by Zimbabwean exiles. She would listen to those clips every day, despite not ever listening on a real radio, or even knowing who the person was who was sending the clips. She also says “Studio 7 has stories from all over Zimbabwe, they are based in the US but somehow they will know things even before the people in Harare” (Viola).

Types of Content
In terms of the content posted in WhatsApp, everyone agreed there is a lot of political talk happening in all types of groups. However, most people noted they do not personally engage in political talk outside of the more ‘closed’ groups, i.e. close family
and friends. In the groups containing hundreds of people, they tend to simply observe the political content.

“My mum’s brothers are opposition party supporters. One is in Australia, one is in the UK, one in South Africa. They’re in their own networks in those countries obviously, and then they pull content from those networks and share in this big family group. They want us to know exactly what’s going on with the opposition party.” - Leigh-Anne

Another common feature is breaking news; when something important happens, the news stories seem to travel like wildfire throughout WhatsApp, with the same story appearing in several groups at once. One other notable feature is that people often seem to voice their political views ‘by proxy’; rather than outwardly declare a party affiliation or even name a political party or figure, people may forward images or jokes that can be interpreted as a particular standpoint without having to say it. This is likely due to a reluctance to voice a strong political opinion, common among Zimbabweans.

There is often a dichotomous relationship between feelings of national pride, nostalgia and longing on the one hand, and feeling disappointed and disenfranchised on the other. This is a notable feature of diasporic communications (Heyd & Honkanen, 2015). Some interviewees noted that humour is a device that helps resolve this tension, with participants saying they generally receive at least 10 memes a day, rising to perhaps hundreds when something particularly newsworthy has happened. There was a general agreement that “Zimbabweans use humour to cope with the madness of things” (Michelle), “We find humour in our lives so that we can cope with our lives” (Rudo) and “Sometimes if you don’t laugh you cry” (Leigh-Anne). This is certainly reflected in some examples shown to me of content. It is arguable, therefore, that political deliberation and assertion one’s viewpoint can take place through the
creation and dissemination of memes. Several interviewees shared examples of content with me. I include some of them below, as an indication of the range of content that is shared on social media, mainly through WhatsApp though many originated on other platforms. The four categories I have listed are by no means the only categories, but these felt particularly interesting and relevant to highlight.

**News and photos**

![Figure 1](image1)

**THE Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe will this week release up to $1 billion in new bank notes to ease cash shortages. RBZ governor John Mangudya said banks over the weekend traded their RTGS balances for new $5 and $2 bank notes. The central bank is concurrently releasing new $2 bond coins. The RBZ wants to end bank queues for cash. The new notes will be withdrawable from cash machines – a sight not seen in Zimbabwe in years. Mangudya said they hope to announce new withdrawal limits this week. – ZimLive**

![Figure 2](image2)

This category is often associated with breaking news. It comprises pieces of news published by reputable outlets and un-edited photos and videos. Figure 1 is a simple case of a government press release or announcement being reported by an online media source, screenshotted and shared over WhatsApp. It performs the role of informing the public about an important change, but does not have an obvious agenda or political slant. Interestingly, this is domestic information which would not be expected to affect those living in the diaspora, yet all interviewees tended to consume information like this, perhaps in solidarity with their family and friends back home.

Figure 2 is a photo taken by a Reuters agent on 20th November 2019, of police brutality at a rally held by the opposition leader Nelson Chamisa in Harare. My interviews took place in the days following this incident, and nearly every interviewee mentioned this
event and made reference to the photo, unprompted, showing the importance of visuals in the swift sharing of news.

*Debate across political lines*

Another category of content seems to be the online debate that is screenshotted and shared across other media. In particular, the examples I saw tended to be people making a statement either supporting government or at least being non-critical about the government, followed by someone responding by criticising government. I would suggest that people share these images as a proxy statement of support for the person responding.
Another common category is that of critical humour, which tends to include memes and often uses other cultural references to make its point. These tend to be less pointed than the previous category, as they do not engage in specific debate but rather they make fun of situations in a way that criticises the status quo without outwardly criticising individuals or their actions. This category formed the majority of the communications I saw from interviewees, perhaps because they are seen as particularly entertaining and lower risk to share with a wider group of people. Many
are self-mocking, making fun out of Zimbabweans as a nation rather than a particular group.

In figure 5, a photo taken on the day Mugabe was ousted is labelled ‘Dzungu day’, meaning ‘pumpkin/idiot day’. The meaning here is that the people celebrating in the streets after Mugabe now feel stupid because the freedom and prosperity they expected at the end of Mugabe’s reign has not come. In figure 6, a spoof football match advert has been created, pitching Zimbabwe and its neighbour Zambia against each other in a ‘load shedding derby’ (‘load shedding’ meaning regular power outages). In figure 7, a common and popular meme globally has been localised to comment of a piece of news. This specific incident refers to an annual financial report from the Zimbabwean government which registered receiving $3.6 million from China in bilateral aid that year. The Chinese government picked up on this statistic and made a forceful statement noting the actual amount was $136 million, leaving many Zimbabweans speculating about where the missing money had gone. In figure 8, a photo of President Mnangagwa is contrasted with other items in unexpected places, suggesting he does not belong in the position of President. This is one of several examples of indirect criticisms of the President; the message is implied, and softened by being a question rather than a statement. Arguably people are more willing to share content such as this, which avoids being outwardly antagonistic towards government.
Several interviewees mentioned trained journalists who tend to be freelancers or who run smaller media houses, often available online only. In one interesting example, an interviewee showed me contrasting interpretations of the same news story. On the left, a Zimbabwean state-run newspaper proclaims ‘Zim has enough fuel’. On the right, Zororo Makamba reports on the reasons behind the current fuel shortage to 23,000+ viewers on his YouTube channel Eleven Dogs. The video on the right uses footage captured by members of the public to show the long queues for fuel during a shortage. When presented with these opposing presentations of the same story, the advantage of citizen journalism and commentary is obvious. It is also worth noting that though Zororo Makamba uploads his videos to YouTube, the majority of the interviewees are sent them through WhatsApp.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the participants in this study did not consider themselves to be heavy consumers of media, and do not consider themselves active users or producers, but it is arguable that this is due to a normalisation over time; in fact all participants do seem to use a wide variety of media to identify, consume, share and discuss news with fellow Zimbabweans using new media. It was also interesting to note that while nearly everyone said they do not actively comment, the sharing of political content could be interpreted as lending to public debate in its own way, which is particularly relevant to the internet age.
A Functioning Public Sphere?

The Effect of Living in the Diaspora

This paper will now consider the ways in which new media use by the Zimbabwean diaspora fulfils the function of a public sphere. Again, I am using a broad definition of a public sphere rather than the original Habermasian version.

“In my WhatsApp group that has the old school guys in, a lot of them are really passionate so they write lengthy shit about their opinions on politics and it goes up for debate” - Patrick

All participants noted that they observe a lot of political debate taking place on these new media platforms, so arguably in the broadest definition of the public sphere, the diasporic new media sphere certainly fulfils the function of being a ‘space’ for ordinary people to take part in political debate. In fact, the transnational nature of this sphere arguably adds to its effectiveness; many participants noted that people feel much more free to express their opinions outside Zimbabwe’s borders. This is supported by Chivanga who notes that legal limitations such as laws about insulting the President, do not extend beyond state borders whereas communication structures do (Chivanga, 2015). Tonderai noted he has seen diasporans post things which technically, if they were inside Zimbabwean jurisdiction, would be deemed illegal. Similarly, Lesley said that he feels as a diasporan that he can post whatever he wants about the Zimbabwean government because he can’t be tracked down, living in Botswana. Furthermore, interestingly several participants felt that people have more freedom of expression the further they are from Zimbabwe and the more liberal their host country. One commented that she sees very vocal comments from people in the UK and Australia, and that she associates this with a ‘who’s going to catch me here?’ attitude (Cathy).

In contrast, Zimbabweans living in Botswana may be more muted in their online communications; the two countries share a border and all participants in my study return at least home once a year to visit. As Miriyoga found, many in the diaspora do believe the Zimbabwean government deploys operatives in other countries to spy on
opposition activities (Miriyoga, 2017). There were mixed opinions from participants on the question of whether the Zimbabwean state’s power, via the secret police, extends to Zimbabweans living in Botswana or not.

“As long as we are in Africa, we are passive because we think even though I’m in Botswana maybe the secret service is still watching me. But for the Zimbabweans in the UK or first world countries, it’s different, that feeling is not there and they tend to demonstrate at the embassies and things like that, that’s what I see them doing online.” - Michelle

This insight suggests that there are mixed feelings on the issue, but that for some people, being outside of the country does not necessarily mean they feel free to express themselves fully online. Since Botswana and Zimbabwe share a border, arguably there is a feeling among Zimbabweans that they are not truly outside their home country’s jurisdiction and that they should therefore be more cautious about being critical of their government.

**Reaching a Consensus**

Beyond allowing for voice and expression, another important element of a public sphere has historically been to move debate towards a consensus. Most participants felt this element was lacking from the diasporic new media sphere. Several mentioned that more broadly the biggest political issue in Zimbabwe is a lack of unity and support for one person or party that has the potential to really challenge the ruling party, and this was mirrored in many comments about the lack of cohesion and consensus in online arguments. Some people felt that new media intrinsically lends itself to argument rather than rational debate; this is supported by a case study of The Forum, a Zimbabwean online platform, where Mhlanga and Mpofu noted one user’s feeling that “there is nothing to participate in since this has turned into a mudslinging arena” (Mhlanga & Mpofu, 2017, p. 78).

Overall, most participants in this study felt online political arguments are not productive at shifting opinion. One participant noted that in a WhatsApp group he is a
member of, “people are really emotionally invested in the positions they take on things, to the point of threatening one another with violence” (Tonderai). Arguably while the idea of an anarchic but productive public sphere is appealing, threats of violence are likely to deepen divisions rather than produce meaningful consensus.

Linked to this is the idea that what is being said may not actually be productive. One participant, Michelle, was the most disenchanted with Zimbabwean politics and follows it the least because of this. She noted that the current President of Zimbabwe has a Twitter account and that people reply to his tweets with criticism, but that most of it is not productive. She gave an example of a tweet posted by President Mnangagwa announcing the planned expansion of Harare Airport, to which many people replied saying variants of ‘we don’t care, we know you will steal the money anyway’, which she felt was unconstructive and indicative of a general predisposition for ‘ad hominem’ arguments seen online. Finally and most notably, all participants say they see political debate happening online but the majority said they do not participate in it themselves. I detected a general feeling of ironic ‘eye-rolling’ from most, who seem to view actually participating in these debates as a waste of time and as potentially marking you out as bull-headed and antagonistic. The quote below is representative of the general attitude towards taking part in debate online:

“I’m deliberately a silent observer. I’d rather stay anonymous. I consume the information because it’s public but I’m very careful when it comes to communicating with other Zimbabweans. We’ve got this ingrown fear. I think it’s from the years that we had under Mugabe, there was so much fear. We tend to be very guarded when it comes to public discussions. So yes, I’ll feel free to talk to you, or a family member, but you’ll never hear me say these things in public. And I think it’s a weakness.” - Cathy

Finally, it should be noted that for a public sphere to function, crucially there should be some form of dialogue with, or at least link to, government. Most participants noted that this is lacking in this case, with the Zimbabwean government not only repressing freedom of expression but also simply ignoring communication it doesn’t want to engage with. This is an important point; concepts such as ‘public opinion’ and ‘public pressure’ can only manifest in places where ‘the public’ has some form of group
power; where government is seen as a public service rather than viewed as a top-down form of power. Several participants noted that the ability to ‘speak to power’, for example responding to President Mnangagwa’s tweets, is pointless because the deep-rooted cronyism and systemic inequalities mean the President just doesn’t need to listen. Listening to the people will not benefit him. Several mentioned that something ‘beyond’ debate is needed. The below quotes are some interesting takes on this idea, which ultimately lead me to the conclusion that this does not constitute a functioning public sphere.

“Theoretically, the government has the ability to ‘speak to power’, for example responding to President Mnangagwa’s tweets, is pointless because the deep-rooted cronyism and systemic inequalities mean the President just doesn’t need to listen. Listening to the people will not benefit him. Several mentioned that something ‘beyond’ debate is needed. The below quotes are some interesting takes on this idea, which ultimately lead me to the conclusion that this does not constitute a functioning public sphere.”

The Role of Fear & Intimidation

Finally, it is important to discuss issues of safety, violence and intimidation. This was not part of my original degree project plan, however so many interviewees highlighted these issues spontaneously that I feel it is important to acknowledge and to consider its links to the topic, since the issues seem to be so important to them.

In terms of types of intimidation and threats of violence mentioned by the interviewees, there is a general feeling that within Zimbabwe itself, this is a key feature of everyday life. Firstly, there is the fear that the police can tap your phones. While most felt that WhatsApp is safe from tapping, and some noted it would be impossible to monitor ever citizen’s interactions closely, the fear of phone-tapping is still very real. In a more concrete sense, several people noted that the police will also stop people and demand to see the content of their phones. If they contain content
that can be perceived as anti-government, including joke memes, the people may be beaten. Two interviewees mentioned that when they return home to visit family, they wipe their phones before crossing the border in case this happens. There is also a more explicit fear of being involved in anything vaguely political. One interviewee noted that “If I want to have a protest, maybe my family and my kids will get killed. The previous and current government had instilled that fear in us, so you wonder, is it worth the risk?” (Misheck). This idea was echoed by many interviewees, that the government’s tactics are to create an environment of fear, quashing protests before they can even transpire. Another interviewee told me that his father was killed because of political reasons; others mentioned well-known outspoken people who disappeared, some of whom later reappeared with serious injuries, some of whom never reappeared. Hearing about this very real threat of violence surprised me during the interviewees, and I began to see how this fear permeates digital communications and can still have a great effect on behaviour even when the people are outside national borders. One particularly interesting example of the government influencing mass communication within the borders is below. I have protected the interviewees’ name in this case.

“When I lived in Zim, at one point I read the news for the state broadcaster, the morning news on TV. It was fun! Until election time, because literally someone with a uniform and a gun would come in to watch, to make sure you read what they wanted you to read, and it just got ridiculous. So I had to make up an excuse and quit that job.”

This is an interesting insight into how government intimidation influences mass communication in very direct ways as well as in insidious, everyday ways.

However, in an interesting contrast to these examples is the fact that “Nowadays people are putting stuff on Twitter, they are outspoken” (Rudo), “You can go on Facebook and Twitter and people even reply to Mnangagwa, they are not afraid” (Viola), and “It’s crazy, people literally go on Twitter and say the most intense things, they cuss out these high level people, and nothing happens, life goes on” (Leigh-Anne), and “A lot of people are saying things that they couldn’t say under Mugabe, and
nothing is happening to them so there is more and more freedom” (Joe). Even before Mugabe’s ousting this idea was supported by Mutsvairo, who noted in 2013 that by that date there had only been two arrests made in connection with comments made on social media (Mutsvairo, 2013). If we consider these seemingly opposing facts, it is arguable that the government knows it cannot respond to all criticism because of practicalities and limitations of their control in the digital arena, but that as long as these criticisms are just ‘talk’ and don’t point towards action taking place, the government is unconcerned. This could in fact be a bad thing for democracy; the fact that people have a relatively high level of freedom of speech online compared to their level of freedom of association and assembly in the physical world, could mean that they are able to vent without being able to take action, leading to more stability and a maintenance of the status quo. Rather than a total suppression of rights, people talk in the digital public sphere but this cannot lead to any concrete action because of the level of fear.

Overall, this also suggests that there is no functional public sphere in place here, as it is limited both by a lack of meaningful mechanisms to create change, as well as the inherent fear among people who otherwise might lend their voices and actions to the cause.

The Role of Citizen Journalism

Though not all interviewees spontaneously used the term ‘citizen journalism’, they all certainly consume it regularly. One participant noted the below:

“No one really follows the newspapers. They are either just government, or opposition. If you are out of the country and you want news, you listen to people and they will tell you what it’s like on the ground.” - Rudo

Many others also agreed that the partisan nature of Zimbabwean traditional media is what leads them to seek out stories ‘from the people’ instead. This eroding of trust in the traditional media has been noted as a key driver of citizen, or participatory
journalism, by writers such as Mutsvairo. That is not to say that there is an established and trusted citizen media base though; in particular there seems to be a trend of semi-professional media companies that spring up online and disappear again. In Patrick’s words “it’s not really like proper journalism, more like people have created it just to vent”.

Proliferation of Citizen Journalism

One interviewee, Leigh-Anne, had an interesting perspective on citizen journalism and active consumption of media. She noted that when she lives in Zimbabwe she tended to consume news through more formal channels, for example TV, newspapers etc. But “Now I get news much more informally and I feel like I have to piece all sorts of things together, some of it utter rubbish, and try to form a clear view”. This suggests a much more active role compared to traditional news consumption, and mirrors the feelings of other interviewees, all of whom commented on the sheer scale of information coming through this network. Leigh-Anne further noted that:

“Within your [Facebook] network there are people that are very reliable, so you can be reasonably sure that if they are sharing something, it’s true. They are basically curating content for others and I feel like they are almost activists in that way.” – Leigh-Anne

This suggests that there is an increasingly blurred line between formal journalism and active news consumption. The people Leigh-Anne mentions are performing the role of a traditional journalist, outside the boundaries of journalistic rigour and ethics but building up public trust through experience and evidence. Another interviewee, Cathy, relayed an interesting story about a woman who was not a journalist but was known for sharing reliable information on Facebook, who accidentally shared some incorrect breaking news and was chastised by her followers for it. This demonstrates the level of trust that members of the public have in certain citizen journalists. Similarly, several interviewees mentioned Hopewell Chin’ono, a journalist whom they follow on Twitter and trust to report reliably. Though Chin’ono is a trained journalist, he is freelance and as such, his prolific tweeting can be said to be ‘non-institutional’. These examples
given by the interviewees serve to suggest that citizen journalism likely exists on a spectrum between totally untrained, active users who simply share news, to trained journalists who perhaps are able to vet stories with journalistic integrity and share those they find credible, but do not necessarily get paid for this role.

**Breaking News & Dynamic Journalism**

Another important element of citizen journalism is the extent to which breaking news can be covered. All formal journalism is slightly delayed by necessary factors such as fact checking, editor approval, and in some cases production and distribution. In contrast, citizen journalism using new media has the unique benefit that content can be captured and transported live or nearly live instantly to people all over the world.

All interviewees agreed that despite living outside the country, they can access breaking news much easier now because of the spread of the internet. In particular, several interviewees spoke about the day the ‘soft coup’ against Mugabe started, as an example of breaking news through citizen journalism. The quotes below help to show the atmosphere of the day and the way citizen journalism played a key role.

—I still remember the initial video. It was a guy - not a journalist, just a normal guy - he stopped his car and filmed tanks, the military, in a procession in Harare. It was unheard of, we couldn’t believe it. But he captured it, shared it and said ‘guys, I think something is going down’. That’s the clip that even CNN was using.” —Joe

“We got the news about what was happening from our phones and our groups, a long time before seeing it in the real news” —Viola

“My network of the people I know was actually way ahead of the formal media. No one was saying anything yet because the state broadcaster was locked down and foreign journalists hadn’t landed yet. But my best friend was in Harare at the time, and she was sending me photos of the army in the streets. She actually sent me her live location on WhatsApp to say this is where I was last seen, if I go missing.” —Leigh-Anne
These quotes demonstrate the importance of citizen journalism in times of crisis, where events unfold quickly. Traditional journalism is not dynamic enough to match the speed of these types of events, and it is particularly interesting to note Joe’s point that video clips captured by members of the public can become the content used in major formal news outlets. This also supports my earlier suggestion that the line between the formal and informal media is increasingly blurred.

Accountability

Another area that interviewees highlighted as an important aspect of citizen journalism is its unrivalled power to expose injustice. From the interviews there appears to be a trend of content created by ‘informers’ purporting to be connected to powerful people and sharing ‘juicy secrets’. These people may say they are related to high-level politicians, or that they have overheard important conversations. In some cases they actually record conversations secretly; one example given was a widely-shared recording of the current Vice President’s wife blackmailing someone. Another way ‘exposition’ is of value is in the capturing of violence by the police and other human rights abuses on photo or video, and sharing this evidence.

_In America right now when black people get stopped by the police you just whip out your phone and start filming. And that same opportunity exists wherever you are, if you have a phone, whether you’re in Zimbabwe or anywhere. So citizen journalism is a third force that the government can’t easily counter.”_ - Tonderai

One interviewee mentioned “20 years ago we just had word of mouth when these kinds of things happened” (Rudo). Another interviewee says he believes new technology does help democracy because every person with a phone is able to document and share things; “In the past we were always told there was vote rigging, or intimidation, or violence, but now because of people sharing and technology allowing people to share, you can find out what really happened and whose fault it is” (Misheck). I would argue that this is one of the few tangible changes that has resulted from new communication technologies: the capturing and sharing of illegal acts by the government. Whether or not this has yet been linked to real change on a social or
political level is arguable, but exposing injustices in this way is something that is a relatively new phenomenon due to technology and so should provide a potential opportunity for real change.

Limits of Government Control

It is certainly true that the Zimbabwean government is grappling, largely unsuccessfully, with the ubiquity of citizen journalism. One example of the government trying to take control over citizen journalism came in January 2019, when the Zimbabwean government took the unusual step of blocking all internet in the country in order to quell public anger at fuel price rises and threats of protests (‘How Zimbabweans Stayed Online When Government Shut Down the Internet’, 2019). The attempt to block the internet proved futile, because the average citizen was able to bypass the block on their phones, one way or another. This suggests that the limits of government control no longer necessarily align with national boundaries, because technology can allow people to tap into global networks and infrastructures. All the interviewees described this incident in similar ways, with one typical response as below.

“The internet block was intense because from what we were hearing, there was a lot of violence and so we were worried for our families. You wonder, are they safe? But people quickly came up with solutions, they came up with VPNs [Virtual Private Networks] where they could bypass the block and we could get information about what was happening. It just took a few hours or less to find the workaround.” - Misheck

This highlights a wider point; citizen journalism does not just have value because of the stories it can bring to light, but also because in a state where the government has historically controlled the media, suddenly it finds itself unable to exert control over the flow of information. Moyo has noted that an emerging feature of citizen journalism is that is enables a viral spread of information (Moyo, 2009); clearly this is what the government wanted to suppress but it found itself powerless to do this. This demonstrates a shift in communicative power that is radically different from the past;
where once citizens felt their communication structures were ruled with an iron fist, that control has now been exposed as weak in the face of virtual, transnational communication networks. The everyman in the street, in ignoring the wishes of the government and sharing content across borders, becomes an activist.

The Fake News Problem

Finally, it is worth noting a large caveat regarding citizen journalism, which is the proliferation of fake news. Though not all fake news is created by citizen journalists and it should not be assumed that citizen journalism is necessarily unreliable, the fact that ‘news’ content can be created and shared by anyone is an important one. All the interviewees felt that fake news is prevalent, with one interestingly mentioning that this is the type of news that “comes to you unbidden” (Leigh-Anne), in contrast to formal news that is purposely sought out. This is arguably an important distinction as it means the news people receive unsolicited is less credible than the news they make the effort to seek out, giving an unequal advantage to fake news. Types of fake news vary; a common theme is high-level people dying, and other common themes seem to be political scandals involving high-level people, and emerging criminal schemes to be aware of, often attached to requests to ‘share’ the information to keep other safe. Mutsvairo notes that “this parallel market of information can be fraught with falsehoods and uncertainty, and verification will often be left to the reader” (Mutsvairo, 2013, p. 213). The interviewees all tended to agree with this, and the below quote suggests that even as passive receivers of news, a new need has arisen for audience members to actively engage in verifying sources.

“I’ve become better at spotting fake news, but you have this complex calculation and you weight it depending on where it came from and what was said, and what came before it. It’s a continuous stream of information and everything is on a continuum in terms of how true, and how trustworthy it is. You almost have to become a super-sleuth.” – Leigh-Anne

The interviewees for this paper raised some interesting examples that point towards the potential danger of the fake news phenomenon. Firstly, Derick mentioned that
during the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa which targeted Zimbabweans among other nationalities, there were credible videos shared purporting to be incidences of violence against Zimbabweans. However, he later discovered that though the setting was accurate, the timing was not and these were videos from a previous, similar, outbreak of violence. This not only makes it difficult to track the extent of the most recent wave of violence, but also has the potential to increase tensions and create more violence. Derick highlighted “Especially visual things, if it clicks and it looks and feels like it was something that could have happened, you are going to take it as gospel”. As more photos and videos are captured and shared throughout the world but without identifying time stamps, this may happen more often. Another interesting take on fake news came from Joe, who believes the Zimbabwean government creates fake news to protect against potential uprisings. He said “If the MDC [the main opposition party] says tomorrow we are all marching, the government will post [on Twitter] saying soldiers have all been mobilised in those areas, so you think ‘oh, there is no point in going out”’. Although I am unable to verify Joe’s assertion, his belief certainly demonstrates how fake news could be weaponised against social action.

Tonderai also believes that fake news can have serious consequences. He raised some interesting points about the potential for high-level threats from fake news in terms of political machinations, which is an important category in addition to fake news that simply proliferates without a particular political agenda. The below quote refers to the potential for fake news to create wide-reaching anti-democratic consequences.

“There are things that can happen in the dark corners [of new media] where there is no transparency, no debate, no auditing and monitoring of what’s going on, that can swing an election one way or another. In America, as much as journalism is under pressure, people still have objectivity and the tools of journalistic enquiry. In the African context, they throw the trade of journalism and enquiry out the window and just take a side. The problem is that journalism is under threat in terms of viability and advertising and state support. So he who has the deepest pockets and a malicious agenda, does have the ability to manipulate the media towards their point of view, or towards a view that is not really objective.”

- Tonderai
This again highlights the ways in which credible news and fake news exist on a spectrum of truth and objectivity, and demonstrates the ways in which even independent media can be influenced by money, which of course is more available to those working within traditional structures of power. A media that lacks journalistic integrity can be more easily swayed by hegemonic powers to report on issues in a way that promotes maintaining the status quo, compared to a media with a robust system of objectivity checks. Similarly a media in a threatened landscape, which has never been truly independent from the state, is less able to perform its role as the fourth estate. It is arguable whether citizen journalism provides a viable alternative to a non-functioning traditional media, or whether it is equally vulnerable to the same threats. In the case of Zimbabwe, the lines between traditional and citizen journalism, and ethical reporting and fake news are blurring, and it seems to be increasingly left to the consumers to sift, verify and share.

Potential for Change

While it has been useful to consider public sphere theory and the role of citizen journalism in this phenomenon, the intrinsic question remains about whether or not new technologies can be used by Zimbabweans, especially in the diaspora, to instigate tangible social change. Therefore as the final section of analysis, I will consider the potential for change that the diasporic new media has, according to findings from my interviews. Overall, the interviewees gave mixed opinions on whether they feel there is potential for social change offered by the new media channels they consume and use. They mentioned several ways in which the diaspora can create change in Zimbabwe, which do not necessarily involve communications and are not new phenomena, for example philanthropic organisations and remittances. These are critically needed in Zimbabwe but as they are not relevant to the topic of this paper I will not discuss them here.

Only one person mentioned the digital divide as a factor in limiting the potential for change, though it has been written about extensively by others (see Andersson, 2019,
and Mutsvairo, 2013). Derick felt that the people with the most voting power because of their population are those in rural areas without internet access, meaning that regardless of what happens on the internet, their vote remains unchanged. Though I generally agree with him on this point, I do feel that internet penetration is growing rapidly and that even people without internet access on their own phones are still connected to it through their real-life social networks, word of mouth etc. (see Crack, 2008).

More broadly, however, there is still the undeniable fact that members of the Zimbabwean diaspora are disenfranchised, that is to say that there is no way for them to vote in elections unless they return home both to register to vote and to vote in person, making it practically impossible for most. This was the main reason given by interviewees who feel that they have no potential impact on change within Zimbabwe. Some examples have been noted where diasporas successfully contribute to the development of their homeland due to the extension of the vote to those living outside the country, for example in Eritrea (Brinkerhoff, 2009). This suggests that the lack of a vote for Zimbabwean diaspora limits their potential for creating change. More broadly, the relationship between governments and their diaspora has been noted as being crucial to the potential of the diaspora to contribute to social change (Tutlam et al., 2019). However, while none of the people I spoke to had been able to vote since leaving Zimbabwe, some of them did not feel totally disenfranchised. Most said they discuss who their friends and family back home plan to vote for, and that they try to influence this vote if they disagree with it. This supports Mutsvairo’s finding from speaking to people living in Zimbabwe, who admitted they were influenced in their voting choices by relatives from abroad (Mutsvairo, 2013). Joe noted that this is a powerful tool because from his perspective, the people who vote for the status quo tend to be disconnected from new technologies, “our parents and the gogos [grandmothers] in the villages”, whereas young people and the diaspora are more inclined to support the opposition, but are unable to vote. He therefore sees influence from the diaspora on family members back home as crucial in affecting voting patterns.
Several people have written about the unique position of diasporans to access media (see Tettey, 2009, and Alinejad and Mutsvairo, 2015), suggesting that those living outside countries with strict media laws are often able to access news that those in the home country cannot, and can then share that news back into the country via their networks. I was expecting to find this as a feature in the interviews I conducted, however it did not come out strongly at all. Interviewees did not feel that they had more access to news than their family and friends back home, and generally did not recall any times they had news about Zimbabwe first. One interviewee, Viola, did mention that she would sometimes see breaking news stories on diaspora news sites, for example VOA based in America and Studio 7 based in the UK, before seeing them on news sites based in Zimbabwe, though she noted this is because those organisations have “people on the ground all over Zimbabwe”. Other than this, nobody raised that point, so perhaps this feature of diasporic media does not exist to a strong degree in the Zimbabwe situation because of the general ‘freedom’ of online activity referred to earlier in the paper, whereby the government does not make a large effort to constrict online activity so long as they feel it does not directly threaten them.

Transforming Words Into Action

Overall, interviewees had mixed feelings on whether new media could help to effect real change in this situation. Some felt it could, so long as people were civil and rallied around one cause rather than infighting, while others felt the current state of the media creates greater division. Overall, none of the interviewees felt that the diasporic new media has thus far created any real change in Zimbabwe. One example where their new media use did result in some form of action was a physical march of Zimbabweans in Botswana during the days that Robert Mugabe was being ousted. Interviewees all said that the week-long period of the ‘soft coup’ was one of intense sharing of information on their phones, with breaking news arriving minute-by-minute and updates being shared instantly across networks. A voice note was forwarded from group to group on WhatsApp telling Zimbabweans in Botswana about a plan to congregate at a shopping mall in Gaborone, Botswana’s capital, and to march from there to the headquarters of SADC (Southern African Development Community). In the
event, a few hundred people congregated but before they could march, the local Botswana police stopped them because a license to protest was not obtained prior to the event. Though the march eventually did not go ahead, interestingly organisers created WhatsApp groups for all who attended, and these still exist today, sharing news from Zimbabwe among its members. Four of my eleven interviewees attended the march; three of those said the reason they went was because they felt that the SADC can create real change. This was one of the few examples of concrete action as a result of new media that I found, where people truly felt something could change, in part due to their participation in the diasporic public sphere. Unfortunately I was unable to secure an interview with any of the organisers of the march themselves; I would have been interested to know the extent to which this was part of a larger organised movement, or whether it was simply grassroots. Without this information, I can only assume it was a purely grassroots movement unconnected to specific organisations but still created partly because of seeing similar movements on social media happening in London, Cape Town and other major cities at the same time.

Finally, one point that resonated with me was made by Leigh-Anne. As mentioned in the public sphere section, she feels that while a public sphere may exist online in form, it does not in function. The function she feels is lacking is the connection to government. Developing this idea, she feels that as much as social media can capture incidents of human rights abuses, for example, there is a lack of a culture for accountability in Zimbabwe which inhibits the potential for social change through the media. She noted:

“Maybe it’s the fact that we are largely paternal and have patriarchal cultures. So we can say whatever we want as citizens but they [the government] will tell us ‘That’s nice, sit down. I am not a public servant, I do not work for you, little girl.’ It’s like the political leadership are the adults and we are the children. They make decisions for us, they do whatever they want to do and they will not suffer the consequences.”
– Leigh-Anne
This points to a fundamental problem at the heart of this case study: if existing structures of power are inherently resistant to change created by the public, then new media as a messenger of the public is by default incompatible with this system and therefore holds no potential for creating change. It also poses the crucial question, which perhaps does not have an answer: if citizens speak but government closes its ears, do they really have a voice?

**Conclusion**

**Summary of Findings**

Overall, my findings echo much of what has been found in previous, similar studies. However, the interviews conducted lend nuance, richness and texture to the underlying themes, while also updating the understanding of how new media is used, as this changes at a rapid rate. I found that to a great extent the conclusions of my interviewees on the potential for social change corresponded with their general attitudes of optimism or pessimism. At least three interviewees were overtly optimistic throughout discussions. They feel that social media has given them a voice they didn’t have previously, they feel more connected and useful in the diaspora compared to the past, and they are optimistic that new technologies can and will catalyse change in Zimbabwe. In contrast, at least three interviewees felt the opposite; they feel they do not have a voice, that they are impotent as members of the diaspora while ironically being able to witness events in their homeland unfold closer than ever before, and that new technologies are ineffective in the face of fear and brutality. The remaining interviewees were ambivalent but tended towards the pessimistic view. These mixed results are indicative of the difficult approach of trying to assess ‘potential for change’.

Ultimately, only time will tell whether diasporic new media has a role to play in the future of Zimbabwe. However, this conclusion will reflect on some of the major arguments set forth by those who have addressed the topic, and will attempt to weave together the main arguments together with findings from this paper.
In Support of the Potential for Social Change

Firstly, from an optimistic point of view, there is the argument that “The expansion of freedom of expression through media development can be seen as important, both as a means for achieving development outcomes, such as democratisation and economic development, and also as an outcome in itself” (Scott, 2014, p. 128). This argument suggests that even if social change does not occur, the fact that new media offers new opportunities for voice and participation is in and of itself a positive development outcome. More specifically to the Zimbabwe case, Mutsvairo echoes this idea by concluding that “if participants just means accessing and sharing online political information with friends and relatives, then Zimbabweans are already doing that” (Mutsvairo, 2013, p. 176). Findings from my interviews certainly support that this is happening; all interviewees agreed that their communication networks and patterns have shifted and proliferated drastically in recent years, and that as members of the diaspora they have an unprecedented freedom to participate in online discussions. However, not all interviewees felt this was important or relevant when considering social change; perhaps this depends on whether people feel their everyday activities are inherently political or not. Overall, the idea that participation is inherently democratic was not found to be either true or false in this degree project.

Another argument in favour of the potential for social change is the idea that members of the diaspora can use new media to organise and lobby international bodies, such as the governments of their host countries, or regional associations such as the SADC (Southern African Development Community). Chivanga contests that “due to their position in the global area the diaspora are pivotal players in ensuring the government of Zimbabwe adheres to basic human rights principles” (Chivanga, 2015 n.p.). Certainly the more optimistic people interviewed for this paper agreed, with several mentioning that they could apply pressure to the government of Botswana to take action in Zimbabwe, or that they could observe the way the Botswana government works and use this knowledge in Zimbabwe. However, I would argue that while the process theoretically holds potential, so far it has been unsuccessful and so cannot be said to hold potential in a practical way.
The Argument Against the Potential for Social Change

The main opposing argument, that new media does not currently hold potential to create social change in Zimbabwe, can be found in Mutsvairo’s work. In his in-depth study of citizen journalism in Zimbabwe, he arrived at the conclusion that this form of media cannot compete in a fight against oppression and mostly importantly, fear. His argument is that despite the seismic shifts in media production and consumption in Zimbabwe, this has not yet translated into concrete action or any level of social change due to an unwillingness by Zimbabweans to even hold a peaceful protest organised through new media or based on information obtained through new media. He attributes this unwillingness to the brutality of the current regime and the lack of previous success in pursuing change in this way (Mutsvairo, 2013). This argument is startlingly similar to findings from my interviews regarding attitudes and the atmosphere within Zimbabwe. Every interviewee mentioned the word ‘fear’ unprompted, and many used other telling phrases such as ‘brutality and intimidation’, ‘the iron fist of government’, and ‘putting your head above the parapet’. When considering how rife these attitudes are, it is easy to see why Mutsvairo concluded that fear is a stumbling block to translating media into action and I would tend to agree with him.

One major difference between Mutsvairo’s research and mine, however, is that he focused on citizen journalism only rather than the diaspora. I was expecting to perhaps find that the diaspora feels it is in a unique position to influence change, as it is based outside government control and therefore the fear felt by those living under the regime is not present. However I did not find this, rather my interviewees noted that their distance from Zimbabwe exacerbated their inability to help create social change, most importantly due to the removal of their voting rights. Several did note that they try to influence the voting habits of their friends and families back home, and stated that they increasingly do so using new media where they feel comfortable discussing such things. However, even these people did not feel they were making a difference; some saying that elections are rigged anyway so there is no point in trying to affect the outcome, and still others saying that their influence is less effective than the army going to villages with guns and instructing their relatives who to vote for.
Though several authors have noted the unique opportunity for diasporic journalists to speak more boldly (see Brinkerhoff, 2009), interestingly my research suggested that people living within Zimbabwe do not necessarily feel afraid to speak out using new media. Many people mentioned that with the advent of new media and especially since Mugabe’s ousting, Zimbabweans feel free to express negative opinions about the government online, however the real stumbling block is that the government don’t care, and don’t listen. This not only suggests there is little opportunity for change, but also suggests that the diaspora may not necessarily have a large role to play if they do not have a unique position of freedom compared to their compatriots. Overall, this suggests that while some version of a public sphere may exist in the communication arena of this virtual nation of Zimbabweans, it does not fulfil the function of a public sphere because there it has no connection to a government unwilling to engage in dialogue.

**Access to the Sphere**

Another key point highlighting the inadequacies of new media for social change is that of the digital divide. Many authors point to a lack of access to internet as a key factor when assessing potential for social change (see Manyozo, 2012), while others even suggest the divide may widen inequalities (see Manase, 2013). This is one area where I am optimistic; though it is clear that not everybody is connected to the internet and that this benefits those who are connected, I believe it is an important point that information from the internet circulates through other channels too, and arguably more so in the African context. It has been suggested that “statistics on disparities in access to media in the developing world may not adequately reflect the communal sharing of resources: for example, in Africa, 10 people may read the same newspaper or share an Internet account, and a whole village could share a single telephone line or television set” (Crack, 2008, p. 93). This suggests that information and content circulated through new media may reach rural populations in nonstandard ways, whether through sharing of devices or even by word of mouth. When we consider these interpersonal aspects, we begin to see a complex picture of access as not
necessarily ‘in or out’ but as qualified by a number of factors and potentially reaching even digitally disconnected people.

The interviews for this paper presented these media networks as complex, multi-platform, interlinked and highly dependent on real-life relationships. Almost all my interviewees did not go online to discuss with strangers, but instead to share news and gossip with close friends and family all over the world, and several mentioned that rather than forwarding content to their friends, if they are close by they will simply show them their phone. This is not to say that access is equal and available to all, but to propose a more nuanced interpretation of the digital divide. I certainly would argue that in terms of participation, digital connections produce a positive effect even on those who do not have a personal internet connection, and especially in this context.

Technology: A Double-Edged Sword

The other important conclusion found by other writers and also expressed by my interviewees, is the idea that new media for social change is a double-edged sword, which can be powerful but does not inherently support democratic ideals and has the potential to do damage too. This quote, by Julian Assange, summarises the idea well:

“The Internet is not a technology that favours freedom of speech. It is not a technology that favours human rights. It is not a technology that favours civil life. Rather it is a technology that can be used to set up a totalitarian spying regime, the likes of which we have never seen. Or, on the other hand, taken by us, taken by activists, and taken by all those who want a different trajectory for the technological world, it can be something we all hope for.” - Assange, J. in Mhlanga and Mpofu, 2017 p.77

Several of the interviewees for this paper raised this point; they see a lot of fake news that they feel has the potential to deepen hostilities and create negative unrest, and even at the discussion level several people felt that the nature of communicating online lends itself to disagreement and incendiary reactions rather than reasoned, progressive debate. One interviewee, speaking about a citizen journalism page she follows on Facebook, noted that “because they have big followings, the onus is on
them because they could cause confusion and disaster if they wanted to, but they could also contribute a lot” (Cathy). This suggests that there is a general feeling that new media is highly influential, but that it is important to use this power for good. Already fake news has been seen to influence the outcome of elections where WhatsApp was used as a tool to spread fake news in Brazil, leading to the election of far-right President Bolsanaro (WhatsApp’s Political Use in the Global South, n.d.). I would argue that something similar could easily take place within the Zimbabwean or other African context, given the proliferation of cellphone connectivity and lack of monitoring and legislation.

Finally, there are some important facets worth considering that are more global in their nature. Firstly, there is the issue of increasing corporate dominance of new media (see Everett, 2009). It is not without consequence that both Facebook and WhatsApp, the two most cited platforms by interviewees, are owned by the same people, based in the USA. Though none of the interviewees mentioned it, this has been highlighted by others as a potential problem, as “this kind of monopolization of messaging platforms could have major consequences for democratic processes in these [global south] countries” (WhatsApp’s Political Use in the Global South, n.d.). It is interesting that there seems to be an inherent trust of these large international media companies, with some interviewees mentioning that the Zimbabwean government has not been able to infiltrate WhatsApp and so they trust that what they write there is private. It is notable that they would trust this information to a large company in a different country totally disconnected from them. Perhaps it is indicative of wider trends in new media; rather than a traditional media with established media houses and journalistic integrity, we are now seeing a shift toward more personal journalism on impersonal platforms.

Final Conclusion

At the end of this degree project, a few final conclusions stand out. Firstly, this degree project aimed firstly to assess whether the Zimbabwean diaspora is part of an online ‘public sphere’. Ultimately, I did not find evidence to suggest that all the functions of a public sphere were fulfilled. Most importantly, a government has to recognise that a
public sphere exists and listen to it (whether or not it is influenced by it), in order to be recognised as such. In the case of Zimbabwe, the government is so unwilling to engage in a conversation with the public that I could not conclude that any true link between a public sphere and the government exists. It was interesting to note the openness with which people criticise the Zimbabwean government online, from within the country and from outside, however it seems there is a pattern of it ‘falling on deaf ears’, with the government completely ignoring all online criticism and refusing to react. I would argue that the longer this pattern continues, the less likely it is that any action will take place, good or bad, as it adds to an atmosphere of stability and ultimately results in greater government control. Ultimately this is why I feel a functional public sphere does not exist in Zimbabwe or among its diasporans.

Secondly, this degree project sought to assess the role of citizen journalism in the case study. I certainly found many interesting examples of citizen journalism from the interviews, and ultimately concluded it increasingly falls on a spectrum from trained to untrained, and institutional to non-institutional journalism. While some examples of citizen journalism are inherently good for social change, such as documenting government injustices, there are also downsides to the phenomenon, for example the proliferation of fake news and the risk that poses. Overall, I got the sense that citizen journalism is an increasingly normal and important facet of everyday news dissemination, especially in a landscape where traditional media has been treated with mistrust.

Finally, I aimed to assess the potential for social change that this case study holds. I have already discussed the potential for change through a public sphere lens, and thinking about citizen journalism. More broadly then, through interrogating how new media is used today I have become convinced that huge and significant shifts are taking place in terms of how people communicate. I believe a rapidly increasing number of people in Zimbabwe (and the global south in general) will access have internet access on their cellphones, and that this will come to define the way news is produced and consumed. I would argue that a greater proliferation of news sources is
likely to occur, ranging from malicious fake news, through to untrained but ethical citizen journalists, to former traditional media houses trying to adapt to the digital landscape. With a greater burden placed on consumers of news, who now have to verify and fact-check this constant stream of information, I believe there is a real threat that this could have negative consequences if no systems are put in place. The monopolisation of digital platforms also adds to this threat. Many people argue that Facebook has a responsibility to ensure fake news does not spread on its platforms, however in reality we also have to consider that the majority of Zimbabwean news is written in Shona, and that Facebook would therefore need to conduct assessments on the veracity of political news in Shona and other languages spoken in Zimbabwe, something that is highly unlikely to ever happen. This suggests that the overall trends in news consumption in Zimbabwe pose a threat to truthful journalism. Although there are benefits to these new patterns of media use, namely increased access and agency, overall I would argue that without timely intervention, the future of new media holds more potential for damage than for positive social change.
Personal Reflection on Degree Project

Overall I found this degree project very productive; the biggest challenge I had in writing it was keeping to one theme and not including everything I found interesting. In the end I am not sure I successfully managed to do that, and if I was to do the project over again I would perhaps have limited myself to either public sphere, or citizen journalism, or potential for social change, rather than trying to assess all three areas. However overall I was happy with the choice of topic and positioning. Given that ICTs are a fast-moving field it felt good to update literature that was on a similar topic but written before the advent of social media.

In terms of the methodology I feel the interviews were very insightful and productive and were appropriate for a case study such as this. The major challenge I had was wanting to speak to people with different perspectives and more direct knowledge of social change campaigns, however I could not gain access to these people for interviews. I feel the project would have benefited from their insights, though it also would have shifted the focus away from everyday communications towards organised development.

Finally, in terms of the analysis and conclusions I was initially disappointed that my findings did not point towards opportunities for social change. However, it is important to study topics from different angles to recognise barriers to action rather than optimistically suggesting positive action is possible. There are many examples of a digital diaspora supporting development in their home countries (see Everett and Brinkerhoff’s work), but the case study I chose happened to not be one of them, and I would argue that it is equally important to know and understand the reasons behind this.
References


Magaisa, A. T. (2018, June). *In the run up to elections in Zimbabwe, social media is playing a more important role than ever*. CIMA.


**Appendix**

**List of Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15/11/19</td>
<td>20:24</td>
<td>Misheck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/11/19</td>
<td>29:48</td>
<td>Joe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/11/19</td>
<td>18:44</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/11/19</td>
<td>19:23</td>
<td>Viola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/11/19</td>
<td>45:47</td>
<td>Derrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/11/19</td>
<td>21:54</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/11/19</td>
<td>16:11</td>
<td>Patrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/11/19</td>
<td>49:41</td>
<td>Leigh-Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/11/19</td>
<td>14:25</td>
<td>Leslie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/11/19</td>
<td>34:20</td>
<td>Rudo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/11/19</td>
<td>22:53</td>
<td>Tonderai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All participants preferred me to use first names only*

*One or more participants requested using a pseudonym*
Interview questions

All main numbered questions were asked in each interview. If further probing was needed, the sub-questions were also asked. In most interviews, further questions were asked outside of the below, led by the interviewees themselves.

1. Would you say you follow the news in Zimbabwe?
   a. Where do you check the news? What platforms/sources do you receive news from?
   b. Why do you choose to consume news this way? (e.g. breaking news)

2. Can you compare how you consume news from Zim, and communicate with your family and friends back home now compared to when you first arrived in Botswana?
   a. Do you think it is better/more democratic now?
   b. Are there any disadvantages that you can think of?

3. How many WhatsApp groups are you in that contain mostly Zimbabweans, where you discuss issues relating to Zimbabwe?
   a. Tell me about these groups, what defines them, how many people are members, who participates in them and where are those people located?
   b. What are some differences between those groups, e.g. do they differ in terms of their political leanings?
   c. Are you in any WhatsApp groups where you don’t know the other members well or at all, in real life? How do you communicate differently there compared to in groups of family/friends?

4. Do you feel like you have more freedom to say what you want online compared to your friends and family in Zimbabwe? Do they feel the same?

5. If you compare using WhatsApp to using Facebook, Twitter etc, what are some of the important differences?
   a. Do you behave the same on each platform (if several are used?)
   b. To what extent does WhatsApp feel private/secure to you? Does this affect the things you are willing to say on the platform?

6. Can you tell me about a time when something (a piece of information, a meme etc) was shared in many groups at the same time (i.e. it was viral)?
   a. Were people in your groups debating these news stories or simply sharing information and generally agreeing with each other?
   b. There have been certain ‘flashpoints’ where breaking news is shared quickly, for example Mugabe’s ousting in 2017, the 2018 elections and most recently, Mugabe’s death. Can you tell me the type of things you were seeing being shared on WhatsApp during these times, and how much variety there was?
   c. How would you describe the type of engagement at these times – did it feel defiant, hopeful, sad?
7. Do you think fake news is a problem online, in terms of Zim news?
   a. Has there ever been a time when you have personally shared something through WhatsApp but it turned out not to be accurate/ it was fake news? Can you tell me about that?
   b. Have you ever suspected something was fake news and then left the app to verify it elsewhere?

8. Who do you think creates the shareable content (forwarded messages, image memes, videos etc)?
   a. Do you know anyone personally who has created any of this content?
   b. How much of the content you view/share is branded with either an individual’s name, social media page, media house etc, and how much is created anonymously?
   c. Which media names do you see often, and what do you know about them? Are they trained journalists?

9. In the run-up to last year’s elections, were you aware of any formal calls to action in terms of voting, that took place through WhatsApp?
   a. Do you think anyone’s voting was influenced by information shared over WhatsApp?

10. Do you feel like having a diaspora that is able to take part in healthy debate contributes to democracy and real change?
    a. When you discuss political issues on WhatsApp, does it generally feel like an echo chamber (everyone having the same opinion) or does it feel like people are debating with each other?

11. What role do you think the diaspora plays in the development of Zimbabwe, or creating positive social change?

12. What role do you think new media could play in creating positive social change in Zimbabwe? Do you think new media has played a role in any change so far in Zimbabwe, or not yet? (I keep seeing references to the diaspora playing a role in Mugabe’s ousting, but can’t find any firm facts)

13. During the last election, the government blocked WhatsApp. Can you tell me about what that was like?
    a. What were the workarounds?
    b. How did the block change public perception?
    c. What do you think the government was afraid of?

14. As a member of the diaspora, you are not able to vote in Zimbabwe. Some people say that just being part of a ‘public sphere’ and debating political issues is another way of taking part in democracy. Do you feel that you are exercising your democratic rights when you read and discuss news about Zim? Or, do you feel totally disenfranchised?