

Emerging patterns and trends in citizen journalism in Africa: The case of Zimbabwe



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ABSTRACT: While it has generally been accepted that non-professional media actors empowered by novel digitally networked technologies are changing the media landscape in the West, this is less obvious in the case of sub-Saharan Africa. Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a diverse range of citizen media in Africa, enabled by technologies such as mobile phones, blogs, micro blogs, video-sharing platforms and mapping. Through in-depth and focus-group interviews with selected experts and citizen journalism practitioners, as well as a review of the existing body of research, this study aims to identify emerging patterns and trends in African citizen journalism, paying particular attention to the Zimbabwean case. The research hopes to establish the notion that digital technology-enabled citizen journalism, although still restricted to a subset of African countries, provides a powerful counter-narrative to professional media that are often constrained, or even controlled, by national governments.

KEYWORDS: Zimbabwe, alternative journalism, citizen journalism, interviews



INTRODUCTION

Citizen journalism is a relatively novel phenomenon even in developed countries, where the term has come into use since the mid-2000's (Allan, 2009, p. 18), and even more so in Africa. The boundaries of citizen journalism are not yet clearly drawn, but the term is frequently used to denote non-professional, amateur publication of news items (ibid.). Often, the reporters are "incidental journalists" witnessing and capturing exceptional events (p. 21). As Allan argues, citizen journalism thus plays a particular role in crisis reporting (ibid.). Benkler (2006) argues that citizen journalism is a phenomenon of the emergence of a "networked public sphere" based on digitally networked technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones. In the networked public sphere, "commons-based peer production", of

which citizen journalism is a form, is enabled by two shifts in communication technology, writes Benkler (p. 212): “The first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment. The second is the practical elimination of communications costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries.” That is, digitally networked technologies allow people to become their own broadcasters and to reach unprecedented audiences at low cost.

Of all the continents, citizen journalism in Africa has so far attracted the least attention from researchers. A growing body of relevant research, however, has emerged throughout the last three years. Most of these studies are descriptive case studies, which serves to show that a generally accepted theory of citizen journalism has not yet been developed, and even less so for Africa. However, some authors such as Banda (2010) and Goldstein and Rotich (2008) provide useful normative frameworks for the analysis of citizen journalism specifically in an African context. Most case studies chronicle single incidents of citizen journalism around exceptional events, such as the 2007-08 post-election crisis in Kenya (Mäkinen & Kuira, 2008; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Zuckerman, 2009); whereas there are only a few studies concerned with everyday citizen journalism, and no long-term studies. At the current state of research, three emerging foci can be discerned: studies which are concerned with the relationship between citizen journalism and democracy (Banda, 2010; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Mäkinen & Kuira, 2008; Moyo, 2009; Zuckerman, 2009); research into the interaction of conventional and citizen journalism (Banda, 2010; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Oteku et al., 2010); and studies on the representation of Africa in the global media sphere (Wall, 2009).

Media regulation and access to ICTs shape the environment for citizen journalism. In Zimbabwe, freedom of expression is highly restricted. Until recently, there were no independent newspapers or broadcasters, and journalists often faced repression; foreign broadcasters were frequently jammed (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). However, the telecommunications market has been liberalized, allowing several private ISPs to operate in the country. As a consequence, Zimbabwe has one of the highest Internet penetration rates on the continent, at 11.5 per cent of the population (ITU, 2011a). However, in 2009, there were only 100,000 fixed Internet subscriptions, less than one per 100 inhabitants (ITU, 2011b). About a quarter of these subscriptions provided broadband access (ITU, 2011c). At 60 percent in 2010, the rate of mobile phone subscriptions is comparable to other countries in the region (2011d). Mobile broadband is now offered by all operators, and its use is growing rapidly, according to a 2010 Opera study (von Tetzchner, 2010). Irrespective of the model, Internet connections are still extremely slow, with broadband being capped at 256kbps. While offline media are heavily censored, the OpenNet Initiative (2009) has found no evidence of Internet filtering in Zimbabwe.

Citizen journalism often happens when amateur or untrained journalists engage in journalistic practice, a mission that often involves sourcing, interviewing, wit-

nessing, writing and reporting news. The assumption and viewpoint that trained journalists often fail to tell people's real stories certainly has contributed to the rise of participatory journalism, whose presence has also been sustained by the consequent emergence of new media technologies. Citizen journalism, concludes Bowman and Willis, seeks to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information. That's not always the case. Media scholars have questioned the transparency and objectivity of citizen generated contents with activists in turn arguing mainstream media outlets, which over the years have been dominated by reporting scandals and fraud, have failed to meet that target too, creating a furore on what exactly is real journalism and with everyone having the ability to disseminate who then should be trusted as the dependable flag-bearer of competent and reliable news. The ensuing debate has not eluded Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is intended to identify trends and developments in African citizen journalism. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to incorporate the state of research on citizen journalism in sub-Saharan Africa. From the case studies provided, dominant trends and developments in African citizen journalism are identified. Furthermore, to establish a general understanding of the current state of citizen journalism in Zimbabwe, snapshot in-depth and focus group interviews were conducted with up to 50 Facebook account-holders, bloggers and online activists living in the country. Those interviewed included University students and graduates, University lecturers, vendors, informal traders, bus drivers and politicians.

Focus-group and in-depth interviews are considered among the most commonly used and efficient methods of gathering data qualitatively. Marshall and Rossman (2006) are convinced that when thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptive worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspective worlds that can only be captured through face-to-face interactions. Interviews are predominantly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences (McNamara, 1999). Based on this view, the research is principally based on interviews as a research methodology. While there are many ways of collecting data, interviews make it possible to gather an in-depth analysis and a trusted reflection of citizens' experiences in using new media technologies in Zimbabwe. Kvale (1996) notes that qualitative research interviews endeavour to establish the meaning of people's experiences on a particular subject (p. 15). Thus, the main task in interviewing is to get the best out of an interview and make an attempt to make sense of what the interviewees say. This view is also shared by McNamara (1999), who says that interviews are principally useful for understanding and putting the participant's experiences into context. Interviews, argues McNamara, allow the interviewer to comprehensively pursue information around a given topic. We felt in-depth interviews make a valuable methodology, especially considering the fact that we were seeking

people's experiences and views on the use of citizen journalism. Working directly with the respondent makes an in-depth interview personal and open, potentially boosting the quantity of information an interviewer can get as respondents share their opinions without restraint. However, quantity does not always reflect the quality of the material that an interview may bring to a researcher. It is however not for the researcher to judge the quality of the interview prior to the interview being conducted.

In a focus group interview, a small number of people sit together to discuss the topic of interest. For the purpose of this research, the group size was deliberately small to avoid any possibilities of participant members feeling intimidated. The idea was to get them to speak and express their opinions freely. Like in-depth interviews, the discussion was tape-recorded, then transcribed and analysed. Krueger and Casey (2000) say the researcher is supposed to listen not just to the content of focus group discussions, but also for emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that focus groups apply to a situation whereby the interviewer asks group participants very specific questions about a topic having already done considerable research about it. In our case, in-depth interviews were the primary source gathering data before we engaged in focus-group interviews.

Of particular interest to this research are semi-structured interviews, which collect qualitative data by setting up a two-way communication-based interview with the respondents, giving them enough time and scope to reveal their opinions. According to Christa Wessel, Fredric Weymann and Cord Spreckelsen, semi-structured interviews signify two corresponding aspects: (a) the interviewer is aware of the topics and (b) the interviewee has the opportunity to talk freely on a certain point. The use of semi-structured interviews was preferred largely because of their ability to get the respondent's opinion through the use of open-ended questions. In-depth interviews are used in situations where one is keen on learning about the perspectives of individuals, as opposed to, for example, group norms of a community, for which focus groups are more appropriate (Natasha Mack 2008). While in both instances, a researcher is keen on deeply exploring the respondent's point of view, feelings and perspectives, in-depth interviews, the two are separated by definition. In in-depth interviews, one person and sometimes two gets interviewed at a time while focus groups focus on group dynamics. The type of interview one uses provides another important distinction between the two. Whereas conducting a telephone interview could be possible in in-depth interviews, it may be difficult to apply in focus groups.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Banda's (2010) eponymous book on citizen journalism and democracy in Africa provides a first exploration of citizen journalism as a phenomenon that can be

found across the continent. The author focuses mostly on institutionalized citizen journalism, i.e. platforms provided by media companies or non-governmental organizations. Drawing on case studies from South Africa, Eastern (Kenya and Uganda) and Western Africa (Nigeria and Ghana), as well as the Maghreb (Algeria), Banda examines the five questions related to citizen journalism in Africa: its context, technological basis, uptake by conventional media, financial viability, and democratic value.

He places citizen journalism in a context defined by the globalization of democratization and an increasingly deregulated, over-commercialized media landscape, as well as the “rapid emergence and adoption” of novel ICTs (pp. 7–9).

As Banda writes, “citizen journalism thrives in a context of democratic pluralism,” where freedom of expression and access to information are guaranteed; value that can be encoded in both legislative and technological architecture. This contextualization reflects the author’s view that citizen journalism is both shaping and shaped by technology (pp. 35–41), in that it incorporates social and technological impacts on the emergence of citizen journalism. Nevertheless, he asserts that citizen journalism is a “product” of novel technologies, which have, in part, also shaped its form; e.g. social media have facilitated “dialogical communication” (p. 73). Some conventional media have begun to take up such formerly alien practices from citizen journalism, e.g. in the South African Mail & Guardian’s “Thought Leader” blog which is open for citizen contributors. Banda finds that these institutional forms of citizen journalism where platforms are provided, and sometimes edited, by a commercial media company or non-governmental organization are most prevalent in Africa, more so than non-institutional citizen journalism. Although a business model for such platforms is not yet in sight, Banda asserts that some are founded with commercial considerations in mind; others, however, are meant to promote public debate. In the absence of financial viability, Banda argues that their sustainability should be understood in terms of “democratic sustainability;” i.e. a media supported by the willingness of citizens to take up communicative spaces afforded by ICT. Citizen journalism promotes democratic citizenship through citizen participation in media production and broader public affairs, and it increases media plurality (p. 75). In this view taken by Banda, citizen journalism and democracy are interrelated and facilitate each other.

Kenya’s 2007-08 post-election crisis, which was marked by widespread riots and a media shut-down, has been the subject of several case studies. Banda (2010) as well as Mäkinen and Kuira (2008) both provide short, descriptive accounts, as does Zuckerman (2009). A concurring, but theoretically more sophisticated case study is provided by Goldstein and Rotich (2008). They draw on the concept of the networked public sphere put forward by Benkler (2006), which describes two shifts in mass communication enabled by digitally networked communication technologies; namely towards many-to-many communication at costs of near zero, or, in the terms of Goldstein and Rotich (2008), the emergence of tools that “allow us to be-

come our own broadcasters and reach large numbers of people in unprecedented ways at trivial cost” (p. 3). It is worth noting that the application of Benkler’s theories to the African context has been criticized as being oblivious to the lack of Internet access still prevalent on the continent (Walton, 2011). Within this theoretical framework, Goldstein and Rotich (2008) analyze a threefold use of digitally networked technologies during the crisis: of SMS to spread violence, of blogs to provide a counter-narrative to conventional media, and of maps to document and draw awareness to human rights violations (ibid.). In all of these media, however, the authors find tensions between “civic” and “predatory” impulses (cf. Diamonds, 2001). SMS calling for ethnic violence were spread after the announcement of election results on January 1, 2008, drawing on the capacities of bulk SMS tools and simple forwarding mechanisms. Goldstein and Rotich (2008) find SMS to be “remarkably useful for organizing this type of explicit, systematic, and publicly organized campaign of mob violence” (p. 4). As Zuckerman (2009) reports, the Kenyan government reacted by disabling bulk SMS tools and asking mobile network providers to send out messages calling for peaceful behavior (p. 194).

Kenyan bloggers covered the election process as citizen journalists, initially without anticipating the following violence (pp. 189–191). As Goldstein and Rotich (2008) point out, the country has one of the most active blogospheres in Africa (p. 8). When the government ordered a ban on live broadcasts, these bloggers intensified their efforts, actively researching incidents of violence. Zuckerman (2009) reports that some bloggers published articles written by guest authors, some of whom were entirely new to the medium (p. 191). Bloggers published information on incidents that were not covered by conventional media, e.g. about the involvement of foreign troops, thus filling the gap in coverage left by newspapers and radio stations either censored or self-censoring under pressure from the government (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008, p. 8). During the time of the crisis, web traffic from Kenya vastly increased; and bloggers reached further audiences when radio stations began to relay their articles (ibid.). Besides their importance as sources of news and commentary, blogs through their comment sections also became “spaces for discussion” (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 195). Among the incidents reported by bloggers were human rights violations and their consequences, such as refugee movements.

During the crisis, Ushahidi was developed as a tool to map such incidents. The software links Google Maps with various means of reporting incidents to be displayed on the map, including via SMS, e-mail, and Twitter. Zuckerman (2009) argues that Ushahidi is best understood as “a form of collaborative citizen journalism”, in which reports from vastly dispersed and independent witnesses are pulled together on a central platform (p. 192). Goldstein and Rotich (2008) understand the platform in Benkler’s (2006) terms of “commons-based peer production”, allowing a new form of cooperation as it has “significantly lowered the cost of participating in a global civic campaign from anywhere on the planet with only a mobile phone signal” (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008, pp. 6–7). Goldstein and Rotich conclude that

the emergence of a networked public sphere in Africa is, other than in Western democracies, not necessarily linked to “civic” impulses; much rather, digitally networked technologies can be utilized to promote violence as well as to provide counter-narratives to the stories of oft-censored conventional media and to more easily collect reports from witnesses of human rights violations (p. 9).

Moyo (2009) provides an analysis of citizen journalism during another election aftermath, the delayed announcement of election results following Zimbabwe’s general elections in 2008. The election had been preceded by “intimidation, torture and violence” from long-term dictator Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF. Moyo posits that as the government and electoral commission failed to provide information about the outcomes of the hotly contested election, citizen journalism gave rise to a “parallel market of information” (p. 552). This “information gap provided fertile ground for various alternative forms of communication to take centre stage,” feeding on and from “an increasingly hungry rumour mill.” As Moyo argues, the parallel market of information “became the dominant source of a mix of information and disinformation.” However, while being “often replete with supposition, speculation and fiction” (Chuma, cited in Moyo, 2009, p. 553), this market nevertheless filled the information gap and enabled citizens to discuss the situation and to “engage in different scenario building and conjecture” (Moyo, 2009, p. 553).

Moyo defines citizen journalism broadly, to include blogs, emails, and SMS, arguing that “these are communications meant for dissemination to many (often unknown) recipients” (p. 555). The inclusion of SMS also reflects the relative prevalence of mobile telephony over Internet usage in Zimbabwe (*ibid.*), a factor which is similarly true for all of sub-Saharan Africa. That notwithstanding, Moyo explicitly points out that definitions of citizen journalism grounded in “the idea of equal access to these new technologies of freedom [i.e. digitally networked communications technologies] [...] become[s] particularly problematic in the African context, where diffusion of these technologies has been characteristically slow and unequal” (pp. 554–555). However, while noting Zimbabwe’s relatively low Internet penetration as an obstacle to blogs gaining relevance, Moyo also points out high growth rates in Internet usage across the African continent (p. 559).

Mobile phones served to fulfill several information needs during the election aftermath. They enabled people within the country to share information about the situation on the ground with the Diaspora, which in turn relayed news from international media not accessible in Zimbabwe (p. 556). Mainstream media also utilized SMS and emails to receive information from citizens, in particular in regions inaccessible to journalists for economic or security reasons (pp. 556–557). However, Moyo asserts that “most of the shared text messages [...] were in the form of jokes,” which served as “discreetly packaged news” where outspoken criticism of the government could be dangerous and provided political commentary (p. 557). In addition, SMS were used to inform fellow citizens about ongoing events, including vote counts, often in connection with the request to forward the information, ac-

According to Moyo “an emerging critical feature of citizen journalism” as it “enables a viral spread of information” (p. 559).

According to Moyo, Zimbabwe’s blogosphere has a multifold bridging function. While bloggers on the ground provide eye-witness accounts, those in the diaspora “both amplify and comment” these reports. In addition, blogs also link traditional and citizen journalists (p. 559); in many cases, bloggers break stories that go unreported by mainstream media (p. 560). Moyo makes a distinction between the roles played by personal and institutional blogs during the election aftermath (ibid.). Personal blogs relayed “personal experiences, opinions and emotions,” but their authors also acted as “monitorial citizens” (ibid.; Schudson, 1998). Moyo notes that when relaying information, this was presented as unverified, i.e. in a style suggesting “that the readers should do their own cross-checking and verification” (p. 561). In line with this observation, institutional blogs written by professional journalists provided them “with the opportunity to temporarily escape from the institutional formalities and constraints placed by mainstream media and become a citizen journalist” (p. 562). However, Moyo notes that exactly because citizen journalism is not bound to any particular ethics or set of rules, it “could worsen things by spreading untruths and half truths which could lead to panic and disorder” (ibid.).

A study focusing on the roles taken by conventional and citizen journalism comes from Oteku et al. (2010). The authors analyzed media reports on Kenya’s 2010 constitutional referendum, which in contrast to the 2007 election remained peaceful; the study is thus interesting because it is less prone to hindsight bias as retrospective analyses of incidents of outstanding citizen journalism. Oteku et al. find that in the presence of extensive news coverage from conventional media, citizen journalists played a merely complementary and less prominent role than in 2007–08 (p. 11). Nevertheless, blogs and microblogs were used to report the voting process, e.g. using Twitter hashtags such as Kenya Decides (p. 9). An Ushahidi-based platform, Ushaguzi, was employed by a civil society organization to compile and map reports from social media users (ibid.). The study notes in particular that “mobile services seem to have become an established part of Kenya’s new media system” (p. 11). The authors group these uses into three categories, namely personal expression, provision of background information, and aggregation of news published by other media (ibid.). The latter two uses, in particular, involved “cross-linking to other media” (ibid.), thus supporting the thesis that citizen journalism has become “an integrated part of the media system” (p. 8).

Wall (2009) has studied the representation of Kenya and Ghana on the video-sharing platform Youtube. Her findings dispute claims of diminished boundaries in the digitally networked public sphere (p. 393). The study examines videos uploaded on YouTube and tagged as dealing with Kenya or Ghana in 2007 and finds only several hundred such videos (pp. 395-396); these numbers can be expected to be much higher today. Wall finds that most of the videos were posted by Westerners, and that videos posted by Westerners on average were viewed more often than those

posted by people in Africa or Africans in the diaspora (pp. 398-399). Entertainment, in particular music, and tourist experiences were the most common contents, each making up for about one third of the videos; further categories included aid work, religious contents, news, and commercials (p. 400). With regard to citizen journalism, the news category, which includes videos of generally informational content, is of particular interest. This category constituted a minor share of the videos, 4 percent in Kenya and 10 percent in Ghana (p. 404). Most of these videos were produced by non-African television channels, only one each was from Kenyan and Ghanaian television, and no videos made by citizen journalists are mentioned (*ibid.*).

Wall's analysis builds on post-colonial studies which understand Africa's representation as constructed by Western observers who "employ their gaze to create an Other," which "has enabled them to exercise dominion over Africa for centuries" (p. 394). She notes a discussion on the possible opportunity provided by new media for Africans to create and distribute representations of the continent themselves, although marred by unequal access to information and communications technology (p. 395). However, Wall concludes that her findings seem "to suggest that these new technologies and new global information channels will continue to support western dominance," although African news producers might gain access to Western audiences in the future (p. 404). She writes that "YouTube enables the average westerner in particular to become a chronicler of other peoples in faraway lands just as travellers and missionaries 'discovered' Africa in previous centuries", thus not disrupting the representation of Africa in the media. Rather, "age-old inequities still exist and still allow westerners to dominate," and YouTube might even allow more of them to do so (p. 405).

PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM IN AFRICA: ISSUES AT STAKE

Within any given context, citizen journalism aims to strengthen people's use of home-grown media ideas to increase quality information dissemination capacity using readily available multiple digital platforms. Access to the Internet is not always a guarantee to every sub-Saharan African citizen. Worse still, whenever it's available the Internet is normally accessed by those living in urban areas, a development that isolates rural dwellers from active and potential participation. For Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) independent media enables ordinary citizens to become politically empowered. However, activists' hope and ability to use new media technologies to independently empower citizens through publication, lobbying, networking and knowledge sharing within their particular constituencies is often impinged by the fact that the participants, while very much willing to engage the technological revolution either have no access to the much-needed Internet or lack the necessary skills that allow them to participate. With NGOs playing a leading role in providing training, anti-West African regimes often monitor the activities of

citizens, further deterring others from participating. These regimes are also keen to monitor and control the media. Moreover, participants also have to work in an environment where there is lack of equipment, adequate infrastructure and resources.

Besides, traditionalists are worried citizen journalists are not journalists. Professionalism is arguably central to the success of any media outlet, which is why journalism training, not just in Africa, is often encouraged. Citizen journalists normally have no ethics to worry about. The problems do not end there. The use of colonial languages also means that vernacular languages are largely ignored. Over eighty percent of South Africans for example consider English their second language, hence the participation of citizens is likely curtailed by language barriers as many participants may be eager to work in or with their own local language. This reality is often ignored by Western funding bodies on citizen journalism initiatives. Citizen journalists have also been criticized in traditional media circles as being activists, hence abandoning the much debated issue of objectivity. Some have also accused bloggers and other participant journalists of lacking quality. Despite the criticism, it goes without saying that new media players have completely changed the rules of the game. In fact several traditional media outlets including CNN, BBC or the New York Times have occasionally used citizen journalists as sources for their stories further underlining their importance.

Although the body of research on citizen journalism remains small, it reveals several trends in both technology use and social practices. Participation in citizen journalism remains dependent on access to information and communications technology, in particular for Africans (Walton, 2011). Consequently, citizen journalists can be thought of as being predominantly better-off, higher educated, and living in urban areas (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008), although there is need for a dedicated demographic study to support this assumption. However, mobile phones have been noted as a key technology for citizen journalists in Africa (Banda, 2010; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Oteku et al., 2010), and with growing mobile phone adoption, more and more Africans become technologically enabled to become reporters. That notwithstanding, at the moment citizen journalists are often long-term ICT users who have extensive experience with social media (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008).

Citizen media outlets, such as blogs and Twitter, but also mass SMS and emails, have been found to be utilized in multifaceted ways. Citizen journalists are relaying critical information, in particular in the absence of reports from conventional media (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Moyo, 2009). This can involve dedicated research to publicize issues ignored or suppressed by mainstream media (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). However, this “parallel market of information” can be fraught with falsehoods and uncertainty, and verification will often be left to the reader (Moyo, 2009). In line with the perception of citizen journalism as providing a more personal perspective, punditry has been noted as a regular feature of citizen journalism (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Zuckerman, 2008). Several authors have also noted the ex-

pression of emotions as a prevalent use, for instance through political jokes (Moyo, 2009; Oteku et al., 2010). Blogs and fora, in particular, have also been turned into “spaces for discussion” (Zuckerman, 2009), which can connect those in the country with the diaspora (Moyo, 2009).

Citizen journalism takes place counter (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008), parallel to (Moyo, 2009), and interlinked with (Oteku et al., 2010) mainstream journalism. Several authors note a growing convergence between conventional and citizen journalism. Bloggers and microbloggers link to and relay news stories published by online editions of newspapers (Oteku et al., 2010), but conventional media also take up leads from citizens, e.g. relayed by SMS (Moyo, 2009). In Kenya, newspapers have even occasionally been found to have reprinted blog articles without permission (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). Some media publishers have integrated tools and practices from citizen journalism into their portfolios, e.g. having journalists write blogs in a less formal tone, or providing platforms for non-journalists to report stories (Banda, 2010). However, these forms of institutional citizen journalism (ibid.) remain exceptions.

Although citizen journalism is linked to democratization and empowerment (Banda, 2010), research has shied away from technological determinism, rather pointing out different utilizations of the underlying technologies. Goldstein and Rotich’s (2008) terminology (borrowed from Diamond) of “civic” and “predatory” impulses that are amplified by digitally networked technologies is particularly helpful in understanding this issue. As they show, the tools and practices of citizen journalists have been used both to incite violence and to document it. Similarly, Moyo (2009) warns in the absence of any particular ethics, citizen journalism could have adverse effects as it might contribute to the dissemination of untruths fuelling “panic and disorder.”

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS: ZIMBABWE

Zimbabweans buoyed by the omnipresent availability of mobile phones seem to have revolutionized and pioneered a new concept of citizen-led news-gathering and content-sharing responsiveness. Twitter, popular across the globe, has yet to find its ground in Zimbabwe. Facebook, on the other hand, has become increasingly popular and based on our assessment will likely continue to dominate other social network platforms in terms of recognition. With accounts already opened by virtually all sectors of society, from vendors to leading politicians including the President and Prime Minister, it is safe to conclude that Facebook will potentially continue to increase its popularity among citizens. The key question is: why are people on Facebook and what do they use it for. Interestingly 85 percent of the respondents in our study said they used Facebook as a way of knowledge improvement rather than for social purposes. While Zimbabwe’s alleged repressiveness toward free speech is internationally well-documented, citizens said they felt free to share content and

openly criticize the status quo digitally than any other way. As noted, an array of politicians has also embraced the social network platform. While we could not independently verify whether a registered account for the president and prime minister were indeed maintained by these political leaders, we confirmed that ministers including David Coltart and Walter Mzembe were active users of Facebook.

Historically technology has always evaded some less educated and financially poor sectors of society but Zimbabwe, which is home to sub-Saharan Africa's highest literacy rate, has made notable inroads thanks largely to the availability of mobile-phone based Internet. All 50 respondents from the interview said they used their mobile phones as a way of gaining access to the Internet with only seven of them using personal laptops as the second option.

Citizen journalists have cashed in on these technological developments. Recent citizen-led accomplishments can be traced to *The Zimbabwean*, a newspaper published in Britain by exiled Zimbabwean editors. The paper's editor says most of the paper's content is provided by citizen journalists, the majority of whom are, as expected, not trained as media professionals. The bulk of other online newspapers, independently run by Zimbabwean journalists abroad, use citizens as their main source of news-gathering efforts. The platform offers Zimbabweans a unique opportunity to interact and participate in events that shape their daily lives, thanks largely to new media technologies. To date, there have only been two arrests made in connection with comments made on Facebook. An opposition figure had an arrest warrant issued after he commented on his Facebook wall that President Mugabe had died in Singapore where he had allegedly gone for treatment while another activist was charged with "subverting a constitutional government" after posting a message on Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Facebook account purportedly claiming "what happened in Egypt is sending shockwaves to dictators around the world. Apart from these two isolated incidents, and based on our participant observation in politically-charged Facebook-based debates for five months, it looks like citizens are at least for now free to openly express their political and social misgivings online. On Facebook, stories critical of President Mugabe and his party are shared by activists and general citizens. These are then followed by comments that fiercely criticize political repression. While some of the participants may be living abroad, we were able to talk to citizens who claimed they shared their views without any concerns, also using their real names in that process even though the majority of them said they would not broadcast the same views on TV or Radio. This scenario shows that the adoption of ICTs in Zimbabwe and potentially in Africa is giving rise to new, reform-based, emergent alternative media narratives that encourage, articulate and stimulate public participation.

Given the context of a plethora of rigorous media laws that have dominated the country's print and broadcasting sectors, one powerful facet whose contribution to critical social development and political reports can no longer be ignored is the growing blogosphere in Zimbabwe. Civil society-funded and student-driven con-

tent of daily, weekly and monthly electronic periodicals providing comment and debate on issues affecting the country have been gathering momentum since 2000 at the beginning of the country's political and economic crisis. Since then, activists have put their knowledge of web 2.0 tools to good use, providing content, which is available on several Zimbabwe-centered blogs and weblogs and is widely shared on social networks with locals as well as millions of Zimbabweans living abroad. In the absence of private newspapers, blogs as supported by interviews with urban and rural dwellers have taken the role of providing the alternative voice. Seeking to fight off what it saw as imperialistic maneuvers, President Mugabe's government introduced unprecedented media laws in 2002 which were invoked to expel foreign reporters, who refused to register with a pro-state body while also banning virtually all private newspapers, perceived to be critical of government policies. Popular blogs include Kubatanablogs, which largely provides commentary on politics and life in Zimbabwe, with content drawn from its online community for activists that provide a large cache of electronic archive of documents focused on Zimbabwean issues, as well as Pambazuka News, which is a Kenya-based multilingual Africa-centered initiative of activists using citizen-generated content to create awareness on citizen rights and freedom.

CONCLUSION

This paper identifies trends in citizen journalism in sub-Saharan Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular. Participation in citizen journalism remains dependent on access to information and communications technology, in particular for Africans; but the increasing adoption of mobile phones and, in recent years, mobile Internet services, is lowering this technological barrier. Nevertheless, issues of (media) literacy and economic privilege continue to play a role, which is mirrored in the demographics of citizen journalists, who are mostly middle class, well educated, and living in urban centers. In particular in times of crisis, when reports from conventional media are absent, citizen journalists are relaying critical information; but blogs and microblogs are not merely news platforms, but also a means of expressing emotions and spaces for discussion. Citizen journalism takes place counter, parallel to, and interlinked with conventional journalism, and dependent on the situation it can contradict, replace, or amplify mass media narratives. While citizen journalism is often named in a context of democratization and empowerment, the African reality appears more complex, and the neutral tools of citizen journalism can be used to increase participation in peaceful and violent action.

Several questions remain open at this stage of research. Citizen journalism has to the most part been studied in exceptional instances, when the use of social media in crisis situations rose to the fore. To understand the phenomenon more comprehensively, there is a need for studies on day-to-day citizen journalism in Africa. Furthermore, at the moment, there is no dedicated study on the demographics of

citizen journalism in Africa, an issue that calls for quantitative as well as in-depth ethnographic studies. In general, the current body of research covers only few countries, in which citizen journalism seems particularly salient. Studies on other African countries, and indeed non-user studies, will be necessary to complement the picture.

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