



The Internet as Public Sphere: A Zimbabwean Case Study (1999-2008)

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Abstract

The appearance of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on Zimbabwe's political landscape in 1999 and the publication of independent newspapers provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres to the government controlled media. Through these counter-publics Zimbabweans articulated their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. However, legislations like the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) have since 2002 enabled the government to exert a stranglehold over the free flow of information. This has subsequently forced Zimbabweans to resort to the Internet to articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the state. This paper addresses the key features, problems, and prospects of this cyber public sphere.

Résumé

L'émergence du Mouvement pour le changement démocratique (MDC) sur l'arène politique du Zimbabwe en 1999 et des journaux indépendants ont fourni aux Zimbabweens des espaces publics comme une alternative aux médias contrôlés par l'Etat. Grâce à ce nouveau phénomène, les populations ont un moyen d'articuler leurs protestations contre la détérioration de la situation économique et politique du pays. Cependant, depuis 2002, les lois sur l'Accès à l'information, la Loi sur la Protection de l'information privée (AIPPA) et la Loi sur l'Ordre public et la sécurité (POSA) ont permis au gouvernement d'exercer son emprise sur la libre circulation des informations. Ceci a contraint les Zimbabweens à recourir à Internet pour véhiculer leurs opinions politiques sans crainte de représailles de la part de l'Etat. Cet article met en lumière les traits principaux, les problèmes, et les perspectives de cet espace public du cyber.

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Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has undergone significant transformation since its popularisation by the writings of Jurgen Habermas. The form and *modus operandi* of the public sphere are arguably informed by the prevailing media of communication in a given society. The modern public sphere is therefore based on radio, television, newspapers, books, magazines and the Internet as well as the informal or alternative media. In view of the above, this paper examines the usefulness of the Internet as an alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe. It argues that the appearance of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on Zimbabwe's political landscape in 1999 and the publication of the *Daily News* and *Daily News on Sunday* provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres and counter-publics to articulate their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. However, legislations like Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) have enabled the government to exert a stranglehold over the media, media houses, and the free flow of information since 2002. In addition, faced with increasing political opposition at home, international isolation abroad, and an unprecedented economic crisis since 1999, the government has been trying to articulate and sustain a 'grand' and 'dominant' narrative resulting in the shrinking of the democratic space. This has subsequently forced Zimbabweans to resort to the Internet to articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the authoritarian state.

This paper argues that contemporary Internet capabilities like electronic mailing lists, wikis, forums, and blogs are potential counter-publics for citizens in countries where there is limited press freedom, freedom of expression and association. Consequently, the Internet offers the possibility for the development of a virtual counter-public sphere. The Internet has great potential for the development of civil society and democracy in situations like those in Zimbabwe. However, the limitations of the Internet as public sphere must also be recognised. The capacity for technology to revolutionise political participation and civil life is not a given. Discussion on the political impact of the Internet has also focused on issues like access, ownership, reliability, authenticity, technological determinism, encryption, commodification, intellectual property, identity and vandalism. In addition, cyber democracy tends to be elitist and an alternative voice for the educated urban citizens who have access to telecommunication infrastructure and electricity.

Zimbabwean Politics and the Media (1980-2008)

A free and open media enhances a democratic political culture and dissemination of political information. In Zimbabwe, the media has historically not been playing its role in promoting democratic participation by the citizens. The media has witnessed varying degrees of control by successive governments, especially between 1965 and 2008. At independence from Britain in 1980, the country inherited a dualistic and contradictory legacy of democracy for the white minority, and authoritarianism for the black majority. During the regime of the minority government led by Ian Smith (1965-1979), the country's 'mediascape' was characterised by state censorship and the banning of media publications and literary works deemed subversive to the racist colonial regime. Restrictive laws included the Official Secrets Act, the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) and the Emergency Powers Act. However, within white Rhodesian society, the media served as a public sphere and exercised a degree of freedom as long as it avoided issues of national security (Alexander 2006:47).

Between 1980 and 2008, the Zimbabwean media developed in three transitional phases. The period 1980-1990 witnessed an unprecedented expansion of media coverage throughout the country. Government opened up the public sphere by training and employing black journalists in mainstream media, introducing more local language programmes on radio and television, and introducing community and rural newspapers under the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT). However, by 1990, 'the state had already started usurping editorial autonomy at ZMMT, threatened a critical private press, and the under-developed rural market had failed to sustain a vibrant community press' (Alexander 2006:47). Between 1990 and 1998, contradictory developments were evident within the media. The implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) opened up the economy to market forces leading to the mushrooming and expansion of mainstream and urban-based independent media. The period saw the launch of the *Daily Gazette*, *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Gazette*, *Horizon Magazine* and *High Density Mirror*. However, by 1995 most of these publications had collapsed and new ones had emerged, notably *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Standard* and the *Zimbabwe Mirror* (Saunders 1997). In addition, most of the newspapers were urban-based with limited circulation.

The period between 1999 and the formation of the 'all-inclusive government' in 2009, under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed between the MDC and ZANU PF in September 2008, witnessed increasing challenge to state hegemony by socio-political and economic interests in and out of the country. The period also witnessed the implosion of

Zimbabwe's economy, which was engendered by a complex synergy of factors including the country's military involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) conflict from the late 1990s, corruption, the effects of ESAP and the farm occupations, and the implementation of the controversial Fast Tract Land Reform Programme (2000-2003) which disrupted agriculture. The period also witnessed the enactment of repressive media laws like AIPPA (which replaced Ian Smith's LOMA), POSA, and the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) of 2001. It should, however, be noted that Constitutional Amendment No. 18 and 19 have seen substantial revisions of AIPPA, BSA, POSA and other restrictive legislations following inter-party dialogue, the Global Political Agreement, and the subsequent formation of the inclusive government in 2009.

Nonetheless, the importance of the Internet as public sphere in Zimbabwe can be better appreciated if situated within the country's increasingly hostile and dangerous public sphere and a restrictive 'mediascape' since the formation of the MDC in 1999. The emergence of the MDC was a milestone in the development of opposition politics in the country. Between 1980 and the signing of the Unity Accord of 1987 by the Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) to form ZANU PF, opposition politics was dominated by PF-ZAPU. Between 1987 and 1999 the political opposition was fragmented, though the Edgar Tekere-led Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) 'made a powerful showing for a while' (Masunungure 2004:153). According to Waldahl (2004), ZUM and the Democratic Party (DP) remained political unknowns largely due to lack of media publicity, which remained dominated by the ruling ZANU PF party.

The post-1999 opposition was dominated by the MDC, which like PF-ZAPU showed potential to challenge ZANU PF's dominance over Zimbabwean politics. In fact, Labuschagne (2003:15) notes that the emergence of Tsvangirai as leader of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) 'supplied the peasants, working class and the petty bourgeoisie with a vehicle to articulate their protest on the weakening economic situation and their alienation from a real political voice'. The registration of the MDC as a political party and its respectable performance in the 2000 election demonstrated the level of opposition against the policies of the Mugabe government (*Daily News* 14 March 2000). After successfully campaigning for the 'no' vote in the February 2000 referendum, the MDC also performed fairly well during the 2000 parliamentary election despite the methodical and systematic repression, violence and intimidation supposedly orchestrated by ZANU PF against MDC supporters and leaders. More so,

despite the violence and the fact that the MDC had been in existence for only nine months, the MDC won 57 seats (46 per cent of the vote) as opposed to ZANU PF's 62 seats (48 per cent of the total vote), with a third party, ZANU Ndonga, getting one seat (ZESN 2000; Raftopoulos 2004:13). The MDC election result was a substantial achievement for opposition politics in Zimbabwe. In fact, Sachikonye, (2000b:5) describes the 2000 elections as a turning point in Zimbabwe's political landscape as the MDC emerged a significant opposition party in parliament. However, repression, intimidation and alleged vote rigging marred the 2002 presidential poll pitting the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai against Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF. According to the Preliminary Report of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Election Observer Mission (2002), there was lack of access to the political media by political parties other than the ruling ZANU PF party. In addition to this were attacks on independent media houses and journalists.

The appearance of the MDC on Zimbabwe's political landscape, and the publication of the pro-MDC *Daily News* and *Daily News on Sunday* by the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres to articulate their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. The private media challenged the official version of the Zimbabwe crisis, which essentially reduced it to a bilateral dispute between Harare and London over the land question and its internationalisation which sucked in Washington, the European Union (EU), white countries of the Commonwealth, and other supposedly African and local adjuncts of the 'regime change agenda'. The local independent media gave expression to a counter-hegemonic narrative which challenged this government line. It also kept the country's citizens and the international community aware of the alleged rampant state – sponsored human rights violations especially during the 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections. However, the above role by the independent media ignited reprisals from the government through legal and extra-legal responses. These included the enactment of repressive media laws like AIPPA (2002) and POSA (2002), the bombing of the *Daily News* printing press in 2001, a few days after government had declared that the paper posed a threat to national security. Other measures include the arrest of journalists, and the banning of the *Daily News* and other critical independent newspapers.

The enactment of the AIPPA and POSA restricted the holding of political meetings and rallies by the political opposition, crippled press freedom and gagged the independent media. Alexander (2006:10) observes that the resulting closure of space for alternative information:

Has dramatically hindered democratic advancement, particularly in rural areas. The existence of POSA means that to hold simple discussions under a tree, for example, is an illegal act... The closure of the *Daily News*, the only independent daily source of events and opinions, has been a major blow to urban populations.

POSA and its amendments criminalised the distribution of political posters, pamphlets or other such material in public places and private homes without permission from the police. A breach of the law attracted a jail sentence of up to five years. Consequently, POSA stifled public political engagement, debate and dialogue both in the urban and rural areas necessitating the need for counter-publics. The AIPPA provided for the regulation of the mass media and the establishment of a Media and Information Commission (MIC) (AIPPA 2002). A ZANU PF apologist and lecturer at the Harare Polytechnic, Tafataona Mahoso was appointed chairman of the MIC. According to Masunungure (2004:184), government's objective in enacting such restrictive media laws was to completely cut out the MDC from its constituency and the public. However, despite the uneven political playing field, Tsvangirai got 42 per cent of the votes as opposed to Mugabe's 56 per cent in the 2002 presidential poll, an election that was declared not free and fair by the EU and the Commonwealth but endorsed by many African countries and the developing world.

In the run-up to the March 2008 harmonised elections, state run (pro-government) newspapers included the *Herald*, the *Chronicle*, the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday Times*. The Government and ZANU-PF had monopoly over radio broadcasts and the country's only television station, ZTV. In addition, since 2003, government had monopoly on daily newspapers. In fact, Alexander (2006:46) observes that 'in Zimbabwe, the authoritarian state is the principal player in media policy and regulation. Because of its undemocratic nature, the state has in the past... curtailed the watchdog function of the press through legal and extra-legal means'. Public media became important tools for maintaining and extending government authority.

The MDC was denied space in state controlled media and it resorted to independent (pro-MDC) newspapers, online publications, foreign radio stations and regional and Western media to articulate and disseminate political messages. Along the same vein, Mugari (2008:3) observes that, 'in Zimbabwe, there is a long tradition of resistance media dating back to the liberation struggle that provided alternative public spaces with a counter hegemonic script'. Local independent newspapers included *The Standard*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Gazette*, all of which are published in Harare. The first two are owned by Trevor Ncube, a Zimbabwean business

tycoon based in South Africa, while the *Financial Gazette* is owned by local businesspeople linked to the ZANU-PF government. Media density remains in favour of urban and peri-urban areas. In addition, before the March 2008 elections, Zimbabweans were also increasingly resorting to ‘pirate radio stations’ for alternative political views. These radio stations operating outside the country included Short Wave Radio Africa (UK) and Studio 7 (America). Others also made use of satellite television, the Internet, mobile telephony and other alternative media to subvert state censorship and articulate and share political ideas.

However, both the state-controlled and ‘independent’ media have failed to transcend the bifurcated terrain of the discourse about the Zimbabwean crisis. In general, media reports since 1999 have assumed a polemical outlook endorsing or legitimising the ZANU-PF government on the one hand, or the oppositional stance of the MDC on the other. *The Herald* and ZTV uncritically accept and reproduce every aspect of ZANU-PF’s policies while the pro-MDC papers and online publications attack government positions without giving reasoned alternatives (Waldahl 2004). This ‘attack journalism’ limited the media’s capacity to provide insightful and educative political information to the electorate. Raftopoulos (2005) observes that the Zimbabwean crisis has been constructed through a dichotomy: on the one hand, a radical nationalist redistributive project carried out as historical redress in the face of neo-liberal orthodoxy, or on the other, a breakdown of the norms of liberal governance through the machinations of an authoritarian political figure. The state managed to reduce the public media to cheerleaders of the ZANU-PF government. In addition, public media failed to claim its editorial autonomy as established through the ZMMT, which was dissolved and replaced by New Ziana in 2001. The state-controlled media, like the independent press and online publications, became increasingly partisan (Alexander 2006:48; *The Herald* 09/05/2000).

Developments in Zimbabwe between 1999 and 2008 seem to support Tomaselli’s assertion that ‘in Africa, typically, yesterday’s resistance fighters become tomorrow’s repressive elites. These groupings then tend to betray the democratic principles for which they claimed to have fought, by curtailing or controlling the nature of the public sphere, as did their autocratic predecessors whom they deposed’ (Tomaselli 2009:15). In addition to the *Daily News* and the *Daily News on Sunday*, other banned newspapers included the *Tribune* and the *Weekly Times*. The ANZ newspapers were accused of failing to register with the state-run MIC as required by AIPPA. They refused to register on the basis that they regard AIPPA as unconstitutional. The ANZ has been fighting legal battles with the state but its papers remain banned.

The president of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), Matthew Takaona, in August 2008 observed that 'it is clear that the *Daily News* case is political and has very little to do with the laws governing the country's media. The tragedy is that Zimbabwe has been turned into a media desert' (*The Financial Gazette* 15-20 August 2008:3). Takaona echoed sentiments that had been raised by Brian Raftopoulos who posited that:

Continuing its onslaught against civil society, the state sought to close off the spaces for the privately owned media to operate. Through restrictive legislation, threats, newspaper burning, the bombing of the alternative press, and the deportation of critical foreign correspondents, the Zimbabwean state followed, dishonourably, in the footsteps of its Rhodesian predecessor, and removed any doubts that it was still concerned about the legitimacy of its citizenry (Raftopoulos 2001:1).

The *Daily News* offered an alternative and competing narrative to Zimbabweans but was regarded by government as a subversive adjunct of the MDC and part of the 'regime change' agenda. In addition, the *Weekly Times*' operating license was cancelled by the MIC allegedly on the grounds that the paper had misled the regulator when seeking to register the paper. According to MIC chair Tafataona Mahoso the newspaper's owners, Mthwakazi Publishing House, had said that the *Weekly Times* aimed to inform, educate, spearhead development in the country, and uphold the rules of fair impartial reporting and journalistic integrity. The MIC claimed that the paper had not made any attempt at fulfilling this professional promise in its political commentary. One of the *Weekly Times*' leading stories was an interview with Mugabe's arch-critic and former Archbishop, Pius Ncube who accused Mugabe of remaining unrepentant following the army's (5th Brigade) massacre of mostly civilians in Matebeleland and Midlands provinces during the early 1980s dissident insurgency. The massacres are commonly referred to as *Gukurahundi*. It is not clear if the Mthwakazi Publishing House was linked to the 'Mthwakazi Project' starting from the early 2000s, when civic activists in Matebeleland and cyber activists in the Diaspora started calling for the establishment of the secessionist Mthwakazi Republic in Matebeleland and the Midlands provinces. The Mthwakazi Project is an example of secessionist ambitions propagated by a cyber community, complete with a map, flag and anthem of the so-called Mthwakazi Republic. However, the 'republic' or Mthwakazi community has no physical reality as it exists only on the Internet (www.mthwakazionline.org). Nonetheless, its existence on cyber space indicates the frustration of some people of Matebeleland and Midlands provinces' with the ZANU-PF government and their search for an alternative political space.

The efforts of the ZANU-PF government at controlling the critical press were part of a broader strategy of spreading its own version of the causes of the Zimbabwean crisis. Between 1999 and 2008, the government tried to articulate and sustain a ‘grand’ and ‘dominant’ narrative through the teaching of a ‘nationalist’ National Strategic Studies in colleges and the introduction of the National Youth Service programme. Other state-funded projects aimed at advancing government’s ‘grand narrative’ included the Oral History Project: ‘Capturing a Fading National Memory’ that was launched in Tsholotsho by the then Information Minister Jonathan Moyo on 15 May 2004, and television programmes like ‘*Nhaka Yedu*’ (Our Heritage), ‘National Ethos’ and ‘Melting Pot’.

A New Alternative Public Sphere

Overall, the above developments resulted in the shrinking of the democratic space forcing citizens to resort to other counter-publics where they can have access to multiple and competing narratives and discourses. The Internet has emerged as an alternative public sphere for Zimbabweans within and outside the country. Zimbabwe has many websites, in and outside the country, ranging from news and media, money and shipping services and digital telephony services (Ndlovu 2009). Zimbabweans have resorted to cyberspace in order to share and articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the state. In fact, electronic mailing lists, peer-to-peer networks, wikis, Internet forums, blogs and emails are increasingly becoming important sites for political intercourse and these are almost impossible for the Zimbabwe government control. A large corpus of online publications focusing on the Zimbabwe situation has sprouted since 1999. These include the *Zimbabwe Situation*, *Zimonline*, *talkzimbabwe*, *zimdaily*, *newzimbabwe*, *ZW News* and *zvakwana.org*. *ZW News* and *Zimonline* are produced in South Africa while *Zimbabwe Situation* is run by Zimbabweans in Australia who compile news items from different online sources. *New Zimbabwe.com*, which is published in Wales, features tabloid-style news items and commentary. In addition to these online publications and blogs are Internet radio stations like *Afro Sounds FM*, *SW Africa* and *Zimnetradio* (Alexander 2006:51; Witchell 2005).

Despite the Zimbabwean economic crisis, there has been a notable growth of Internet usage in the country. Internet use increased from 50 000 users or 0.3 per cent of the population in 2000, to 820 000 or 6.7 per cent of the population in 2005 and to 1 351 000 users or 10.9 per cent of the population in March 2008 (*internetworldstats* 2004). Similarly, the number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) grew from less than 6 in 2003 to 27 in 2008. However, while only 10 percent of Zimbabwe’s estimated population of

12.4 million in 2008 had access to the Internet, the figure represented one of the highest Internet usage rates in Africa. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, in 2002 Zimbabwe was among the top 11 countries with relatively high Internet usage in Africa with more than 35 000 dial-up Internet subscribers who had accounts with the country's leading ISPs at the time, namely Africaonline, Ecoweb, Telconet, Zimbabwe Online, Zimweb and ComOne. In addition, of the 4 million Internet subscribers in Africa in 2002, over 60 per cent were reported to be from South Africa and Zimbabwe (*internetworldstats* 2004). It is apparent that Zimbabwe's telecommunications industry, especially the mobile telephony and Internet sectors have witnessed relative growth since 2000. To illustrate this point, in 1990 there were only 10 computer companies in the country but in 2004 the number had increased to 200. Internet use in business, education, media, politics, activism and other social activities have also grown in leaps and bounds. This led to the sprouting of Internet cafes especially in cities like Harare and Bulawayo (Zimbabwe ISPs Association, 25 October 2004). In fact, in 2004, Harare had over 30 Internet cafes up from less than 20 in 2002. These included Quick n' Easy, InTouch, DCAfrica, Telco, Digi Café, ChuWeb and the state operated ComOne.

Another interesting development over the past few years has been the government's computerisation programme. Mugabe has been donating computers to urban and rural schools ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections. However, most rural schools have limited access to telecommunication infrastructure and electricity. As a result, most of the computers are just lying idle, while others are reported to have been stolen. It remains to be seen how ZANU PF intends to use these computers for political gain apart from the apparent attempt to buy votes. Most Zimbabweans access the Internet at cyber cafes, colleges, schools and the workplace. A few access the Internet at their homes, on mobile phones, at their farms or other places. In addition, apart from email and Facebook, the Internet is still largely under-utilised in Zimbabwe. In addition to universities and colleges, most Internet users are corporate organisations, government agencies, commercial institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties. Internet use for e-Commerce has been limited, but foreign currency dealers in Harare, mostly the youth, have also been using the Internet to illegally 'burn money'. This refers to the abuse of e-banking by illegal forex dealers (*The Herald* 20 September 2008).

The Internet has also offered the possibility for the development of an electronic commons, a virtual public sphere. Internet websites allow individuals to subvert POSA and AIPPA and voice their political views.

Internet users can also receive regular email attachments (including documents, photographs and images) from human rights organisations, political activists and political parties. A number of individuals, bloggers and cyber-activists in Zimbabwe have been using the Internet as public sphere. A notable example is cyber activist Bev Clark who runs the *Kubatana.net* website. She has been using the website to post political messages, condemn human rights abuses by government and other political players and to inform viewers of forthcoming meetings by political parties and civic groups. These updates are often sent to emails of subscribers (see *Los Angeles Times* 16 September 2008). Together with her partner Brenda Burrell, Clark often organises protests and sends out newsletters and text messages to subscribers in their mailing list. In addition, Clark has used *Kubatana.net* to protest against the numerous arrests of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) leaders Magodonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams.

Bloggers and cyber activists also include former Rhodesians, former white commercial farmers whose land was taken by government under the fast tract land reform programme, journalists, politicians, academics, students and security forces. They use the Internet to express paranoia, humour, rumour, frustration, stoicism, rage, anger and hope in view of the Zimbabwean crisis. A former white commercial farmer and victim of the farm seizures, Cathy Buckle, posts her angry protests on *Cathybuckle.com*. On his blog (*comradefatso.vox.com*) and website, (*www.comradefatso.com*), Comrade Fatso, a Zimbabwean poet and ZANU-PF critic whose real name is Samm Farai Monro, called Harare ‘our comedy-of-errors town, a city full of lines snaking out of banks or supermarkets depending on the season’. After the 30th March 2008 presidential poll, Comrade Fatso wrote on his blog; ‘we await the rigging. We await the victory. With a hesitant joy. And a bounce in our step’. The results of the election were released only after a month had elapsed, with allegedly no winner with over 50 per cent of the total vote as demanded by the constitution.

Some of the loudest of the cyber activists are in the Zimbabwean Diaspora (see *zireport.com*). The Internet has kept the Zimbabwean Diaspora informed about events at home. It has also facilitated their networking with each other. In fact, Internet-based political activism is largely associated with the Zimbabwean Diaspora community. The Internet has been a new front for the circulation of electronic petitions condemning the Zimbabwe government. Some of these are sent to the United Nations (UN), the Africa Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). However, it is difficult to quantify the actual impact of cyber activism. What is clear though is that it has enabled ideas to be discussed and linkages to be forged between

individuals and political movements at home and abroad (Alexander 2006:52). However, the Zimbabwean Diaspora has been criticised for its excessive reliance on the Internet at the expense of other forms of political activism. Consequently, its activism has been disparagingly described as ‘desktop or keyboard activism’ (Kwinjeh 2005). It has also been noted that:

the overwhelming use of the Internet to spread information and advance debate, which is a major characteristic of the struggle in the Diaspora, has proved to be the greatest weakness of Diaspora activism. While opening up space for debate, cyber democracy has offered democracy to a minority and restricted the major political debates to those with access to computers and Internet (Alexander 2006:52).

The Internet is largely a preserve of the educated and professional Zimbabwean Diaspora community. In addition, an analysis of the content and nature of the political debate on the Internet indicates that it has been used to fan hate speech, regionalism and ethnicity.

At this juncture, it should be noted that the Zimbabwe government has been making efforts to censor cyberspace and online publications deemed hostile to it. This culminated in the enactment of the Interception of Communications Act (ICA) in August 2007. The Act seeks to legalise the interception and monitoring of communications in the course of their transmission in Zimbabwe. The Act also provides for the establishment of a monitoring centre and the granting of an interception warrant to the security establishment or the Commissioner General of Police or the Commissioner General of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority by the Minister of Transport and Communications. In addition, the Act requires ISPs to install systems which are technically capable of interception at all times. The legislation violates the privacy of the citizens. However, government does not appear to have the technical or manpower capacities to fully implement the Act. The ICA was preceded by incessant and sustained, but fruitless, government threats to bug cyberspace. For example, in July 2004, media reports indicated that the government was planning to acquire ‘high-tech’ equipment from China, a country also known for repressive media laws and authoritarianism. The Chinese technology was supposed to enable the state to interfere with the flow of information and to monitor the operations of ‘hostile’ online publications. However, given the country’s unprecedented economic crisis, coupled with a chronic foreign currency shortage, the government does not have the financial capacity to sustain this ‘cyber war’ against online publications and Internet users.

Nonetheless, the ZANU-PF government’s mistrust of independent news and dissenting opinion is arguably well documented. The party’s highest

decision making body, the Politburo, in 2007, reportedly blacklisted 41 online publications that were deemed to be part of the 'regime change' agenda. These included *Zimbabwe Situation*, *zimonline*, *zimdaily*, *newzimbabwe* and *zvakwana.org*. The Politburo meeting had been presented with sample downloads from some of these online publications. One of the downloads extracted from *Zimupdate Forums*, gave seven reasons why Mugabe did not want to step down including that: 'he is afraid of being hanged like Saddam Hussein of Iraq; fear of being extradited like Charles Taylor of Liberia; he is afraid that his party would disintegrate; he is intoxicated with power; and he does not trust anyone in ZANU-PF who can succeed him'. In addition, the ZANU-PF Secretary for Science and Technology, Olivia Muchena, also underlined government's mistrust of online publications and Internet users. While presenting a report on the role and importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs), on 26 July 2007, Muchena claimed that ZANU-PF had no choice but embrace ICTs for it to remain politically relevant adding that:

Comrades, we are all aware that ZANU-PF is at war from within and outside our borders. Contrary to the gun battles we are accustomed to, we now have cyber-warfare fought from one's comfort zone, be it bedroom, office, swimming pool, etc but with deadly effects.

Muchena further posited that ZANU-PF should identify the brains behind the hostile websites, their target market, their influence and impact on Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF's image. She added that the Internet and cell phones had become weapons used to fight ZANU-PF and that ICTs were now platforms that peddle 'virulent propaganda to de-legitimise our just struggle against Anglo-Saxons'.

It should however be noted that ZANU-PF's mistrust of online publications and the Internet is not totally unfounded. Journalists on some online publications have been accused of using hate speech which fuels political polarisation in the country. Like the government controlled public media, online publications have failed to deepen debate about the Zimbabwe crisis and have adopted uncritical endorsements of opposition politics and a confrontational negativism towards the ZANU-PF government (Alexander 2006). The private media and the Internet need to be more balanced and probing and should problematise the nature of the post-colonial state in Zimbabwe. Alexander (2006) thus urges the media to critique the political economy of globalisation and global trade with relation to Zimbabwe. Internet use has seen the erosion of the quality and depth of debate on the Zimbabwean crisis as anyone with Internet access can post any material online, regardless

of the quality (cf. Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese 2004:3). Other pertinent issues include authenticity, reliability, accountability and responsibility as well as misinformation and deliberate lies (see *The Sunday Mail* 22-28 March 2009:8). Along the same vein Habermas (1989:170) observes that the news is made to resemble a narrative from its format down to stylistic detail. The rigorous distinction between fact and fiction is ever more frequently abandoned. The Internet is a powerful political tool which can also be used to undermine national security and to propagate hate speech and the ethnicisation of politics. In fact, one of the dominant and most frequent topics on *Mthwakazi* website is the issue of *Gukurahundi*, an emotive and highly charged topic in Zimbabwean politics with the potential to fuel ethnic conflicts.

Conclusion: Electronic Discourse in a Period of Cholera

In view of the discussion above, a number of conclusions can be drawn. The concept of the public sphere has undergone a number of transformations since the 1960s when it was popularised by the writings of Jurgen Habermas. Despite the wide criticism that the concept has attracted, especially from feminist scholars and postmodernists, the theory remains pertinent to discussions of democratic participation, democratisation, governance and civil society in Africa. In addition, the basic level of interactive space has shifted from the coffee house to include mass media, newspapers, television and computer-based information systems. The Internet has subsequently emerged as an important counter-public for citizens under authoritarian governments where there is no freedom of association and expression. The Internet and cyber democracy are, however, associated with a plethora of challenges including technological determinism, access, gender, ethnicity, encryption, commodification, and intellectual property rights, among others. In most African countries, the Internet remains elitist and a luxury for grassroots communities facing chronic poverty, war and disease; an unaffordable luxury for rural and peri-urban communities ravaged by chronic poverty, starvation and diseases, including HIV/AIDS and cholera. Nonetheless, despite its apparent limitations, the Internet has been an important counter-public for Zimbabweans in the context of repressive media laws like AIPPA and POSA. It has also been a forum for political discussion and engagement between Zimbabweans at home and in the Diaspora without fear of reprisals from the state. Despite the threats, the government currently has no capacity to censor cyber space. Consequently, the Internet remains an important counter-public for an increasing section of Zimbabwean society.

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