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Zimbabwean Case Study  
Mushayabasa, Reward**

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**UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER**

School of Media and Communications

Communication and Media Research Institute

(CAMRI)

**THESIS TITLE**

Digital media activism and democratic transition in Africa: A Zimbabwean case study

**REWARD MUSHAYABASA**

This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Westminister for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**Supervisor: Dr Winston Mano**

May 2022

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to discuss how digital media activism influences democratization and social change in African countries that are in democratic transition, such as Zimbabwe. The dissertation was also aimed to examine the relationship between democratic transition and digital media activism in Zimbabwe, before critically evaluating the significance and the extent to which digital media activism impacts on the political public sphere in Zimbabwe in particular, and Africa, in general.

The study is underpinned by a strand of multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These include the Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of radical democracy is an antidote to Habermas's (1989) theorization of the public sphere. While for Habermas (1989), democracy is based on consensus, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) radical democracy is deeply rooted in dissensus and conflict. This study argues that the digital media provide communicative spaces for both consensus and dissensus.

The dissertation also deployed the social constructivist approach so as to have a better grasp of how subalterns in African countries in democratic transition, such as Zimbabwe, have appropriated digital technologies to create communicative ecologies for counter-hegemonic narratives.

There was a consensus among the respondents regarding the the potential of digital media activism in Zimbabwe as a communicative site of struggle for democratisation and social change. Most respondents noted the significant gains that had been made in recent years by hashtag movements, like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and social media influencers, like the late UK-based lawyer and academic, Dr Alex Magaisa and veteran journalist and award-winning film-maker, Hopewell Chin'ono. However, the study found that although digital media activism in Zimbabwe has made some significant headway in recent

years, the gains were not great enough. This drawback was attributed to several inhibiting factors. Most respondents agreed that the general political environment in the country was not conducive to democratic change. In addition, there was a yawning gap between Zimbabweans in the diaspora, and those inside the country, in terms of access to digital media. Most respondents agreed that the majority of the digital media activists were based outside the country, where they enjoyed unabridged basic freedoms and cheaper internet tariffs in their host countries. On the other hand, digital media remained a preserve of a few urban and peri-urban citizens in Zimbabwe. Most Zimbabweans in the rural areas did not have access to digital technologies due to poverty. Generally, the findings showed that while digital media activism might have been more effective for Zimbabweans based in the diaspora, its impact, in some cases, was seriously constrained due to the absence of embodied activism.

This study makes a significant contribution to the theory of political participation. It attempts to shed more insights on how citizens under authoritarian rule exercise their agency by deploying digital technologies as a site of struggle for democratisation and social change.

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, Reward Mushayabasa, hereby declare that this thesis is my original piece of scholarship and has never been published or used elsewhere. I undertook this study from September 2018 to March 2022 and I have, to the best of my knowledge, cited all the sources used in the research.

*R Mushayabasa*

## ACRONYMS

AIPPA	Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act
AFP	Agence France Presse
AP	Associated Press
AU	African Union
ANC	African National Congress
BAZ	Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BSR	Big Saturday Read
CBD	Central Business District
CIO	Central Intelligence Organisation
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CNG	Community Newspapers Group
CCZ	Crisis Coalition Zimbabwe
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
EU	European Union
G40	Generation 40
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IANA	Inter-Africa News Agency
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
ICF	Informed Consent Form
ICC	Interception of Communications Centre
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
ISPs	Internet Service Providers
JOC	Joint Operations Command

MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MI	Military Intelligence
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MDC Alliance	Movement for Democratic Change (Alliance)
MDC-T	Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai
MMS	Multimedia Messaging Service
NUST	Namibia University of Science and Technology
NCA	National Constitutional Assembly
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
POTRAZ	Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe
POSA	Public Order and Security Act
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis
RBZ	Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe
SMS	Short Message Service
SNS	Social Networking Site
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
SOE	State-Owned Enterprises
SWRA	Short Wave Radio Africa
TA	Thematic Analysis
Telco	Telecommunication Company
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commission for Human Rights
UZ	University of Zimbabwe
VPN	Virtual Private Network
VOA	Voice of America
VMCZ	Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe
PVOs	Private Voluntary Organisations

WUA	Women's University in Africa
ZANU (PF)	Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front)
ZADHR	Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights
ZBC	Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation
ZCC	Zimbabwe Council of Chiefs
ZCTU	Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions
ZIDERA	Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act
ZESN	Zimbabwe Election Support Network
ZEC	Zimbabwe Electoral Commission
ZIANA	Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency
ZHRNF	Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum
ZILIWACO	Zimbabwe Liberation War Collaborators
ZMMT	Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust
ZNLWVA	Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association
ZIPDRA	Zimbabwe Political Detainees and Restricttees Association
ZZEE	Zimbabwe Zhongxin Electricity Energy

## CHAPTER 1

### 1.0 Introduction

The affordances of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have helped to redefine participatory democracy in most of the African countries that are in democratic transition. This new development has helped to create communicative spaces for subaltern groups to challenge the dominant power groups. This study critically evaluates the relationship between democratic transition and digital media activism in Africa. The study noted that there is a symbiotic relationship between democratisation and digital media activism in Africa, and will also argue that many Africans are taking advantage of the affordances of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to promote democratisation. However, while many citizens are now taking advantage of this window of opportunity to reclaim their civil and political rights, some African countries, especially those under authoritarian rule, are seeking new tactics and strategies through which to subvert the communicative spaces created by ICT's affordances. Some of these strategies and tactics include internet shutdowns and raising data tariffs and internet tax in, e.g. the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Zimbabwe. These government measures clearly demonstrate that digital media activism, especially in countries in democratic transition, is not 'harmless politics' (Fuchs, 2018) as some scholars suggest. In these countries, the digital media provide social activists with tools for mobilization and discursive practices. However, before discussing and analysing the nexus between digital media activism and democratisation in Africa, this chapter has critically evaluated the political situation in most African states during the third wave of democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## 1.1 Background

From the 1980s to the 1990s there were noticeable 'winds of change' on the African political landscape, almost three decades after the introduction of the Third Wave of Democratisation. In *Democratization in Africa: African Views, African Voices*, Kpundeh (1992) captures the movement towards democracy on the continent as a result of both the internet and external forces. Economic and political challenges caused new African thinking, protests and increased demands for change. There was a marked shift from decolonization to new struggles of economic recovery and good governance. More importantly:

Although pressures for change had been building in a number of countries, it was widely agreed that the ending of the Cold War served as a catalyst for action. During the Cold War, some countries capitalized on superpower competition, seeking military and development assistance from either the Soviet Union and its allies or from the West in exchange for strategic considerations (Kpundeh, 1992, p6).

The end of the Cold War and other external events combined with internal events within some African countries resulted in heightened pressure for change. Kpundeh (1992) also observes how:

Multiparty democracy has become the rallying cry for much-pursued political reforms, but, in a larger sense, the agitation in Africa in the last three years stemmed from a modest question of accountability. How to hold leaders responsible for their conduct in office and how to make governments more responsive to the wishes of the people (p11)

These calls for greater political changes have had varying effects across Africa in both the Middle East and North African (MENA) and sub-Saharan African regions, bringing multiparty democracy and a climate of new expectations. In recent years, "the combination of political liberalization and diffusion of satellite TV and internet technology in MENA have led to a relatively open, transnational, and electronic communicative space which some scholars, like Hafez (2001), call a 'new Arab public sphere'" (cited in Gheytauchi and Moghadam, 2014, p6). The new generation of activists in MENA use satellite TV channels such as al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyya, CNN International and BBC to counter-hegemonic narratives. These communicative spaces

in MENA have created what Tadros (2005) calls a “parallel community of activists” (p24). The new phenomenon has been “strengthened by the fact that individuals who normally would not be involved in activism are now ‘speaking out’ and expressing themselves on the internet” (Ibid.). The activism in MENA is mostly a result of growing levels of inequalities, corruption and unemployment that are triggered by the neoliberal economic policies that are pursued by the incumbent governments in the region (Gheyntanhi and Moghadam, 2014). This backdrop helps to contextualise the protests that have engulfed North African countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia in recent times.

The nuances between digital media activism in MENA and sub-Saharan African countries are also worth noting. These stark differences might be attributable to a wide range of cultural, political and economic factors (Skjerdal, 2016). For instance, MENA countries liberalised media systems as part of neoliberalism, while the notion of media reforms in the sub-Saharan African region is still a contentious issue and has received lukewarm support from some governments. According to Mpofu and Matsilele (2020) episodes of digital activism in sub-Saharan African countries such as Zimbabwe “are ephemeral and fleeting, failing to unseat hegemonic actors” when compared with activists in MENA (p. 222). Ndlela and Mano (2020) contend that the media play a pivotal role in the mediation of politics in Africa. This realisation may explain why most African countries nationalised the mass media after attaining independence. However, there have been some significant changes in mass media ownership in most African countries in the last two decades. The changes were spawned by the political and economic liberalisation programmes that were introduced by the Bretton Woods institutions in those countries as part of the neoliberal agenda driven by the developed nations and this has had a profound effect on the media ecology in Africa.

There was liberalisation in the mass media, and this paved the way for private ownership of the media. These changes ushered in a new era of media pluralism, diversity and media freedom (Ndlela and Mano, 2020). This study argues that these changes on the political landscape in Africa gave impetus to the democratisation process in the continent. In addition, the recent advances in information and

communication technologies (ICTs) have also helped to create more democratic space for counter hegemonic narratives.

These recent developments in digital technologies in Africa have witnessed a significant increase in the number of internet users on the continent. Over the past few years there has been “a 20 per cent year-on-year growth in the number of internet users” in Africa (Ndlela and Mano, 2020, p3). However, in terms of global rankings in internet penetration, some of the countries with the lowest rates of penetration are found in the continent and these are: Eritrea (1 %), Niger (4 %), Burundi (6 %), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (6 %) and Chad (5 %) (cited in Ndlela and Mano, 2020: 3). The penetration rates in the different African regions are as follows: Southern Africa (51 %); Northern Africa (49 %); Western Africa (39 %); Eastern Africa (27 %) and Middle Africa (12 %) (Ndlela and Mano, 2020). From these statistics, it can be noted that there is a positive correlation between economic growth and the rate of internet penetration. Manji et al; (2012) argue that countries with a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have higher rates of internet penetration. As a result, Manji et al; (2012, p5) agree with the notion that “technology amplifies social differentiation” and this is clearly illustrated “in the way in which the internet is distributed in Africa”.

Among the countries with the highest rates of internet penetration in Africa are Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa – “between them represent some 73.5 % of internet usage African-wide” (Manji et al; 2012, p5; Internet World Stats, 2010). In addition, over the past few years outstanding progress has been made in the establishment of tech hubs in some African countries like South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt and Morocco. Schelenz and Schopp (2018) also note that a lot of progress has been made in Africa in the provision of digital technologies and these innovative changes include cloud computing communication tools and electronic data storage and retrieval systems.

While some scholars suggest that Africa’s rate of internet penetration remains very low by global standards, others argue that “the digital face of Africa is mobile” and has

been transformed in recent years. Almost 82 percent of the continent's population have access to mobile connection (Majama, 2018). This is supported by official statistics published by Internet World Stats (2018; 2021; 2022). The figures show that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of subscribers for Facebook in Africa in recent years. For instance, there were 204 million Facebook subscribers from the continent for the period ending December 2017 (Internet World Stats, 2018). As of 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022, the number of Facebook subscribers in Africa stood at 289, 759, 800 (Ibid, 2021). The statistics also showed a significant high rate of penetration among resource-rich countries like Egypt, Angola, Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa and Morocco and "less penetration in countries like Togo, Swaziland, Malawi, Guinea-Bissau and Lesotho" (Ndlela and Mano, 2020: 3). It was also interesting to note that countries from the African continent, including Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Morocco (2 hours 24 minutes) fared much better than some developed nations in relation to the amount of time spent on social media on average (Ndlela and Mano, 2020).

From this discussion, it is clear that digital technology has made significant gains in Africa in a short time and has transformed the way people communicate. These gains have been noted especially in the use of mobile phones and social media. This point is underscored by De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman (2009) who refer to "the mobile phones as the new talking drums of everyday Africa" (p13). Among the most popular social media platforms in Africa are Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube.

These 'new talking drums' are also often referred to as "disruptive innovations" because they have transformed the way "citizens interact with political messages" and loosened the political elites' stranglehold over the mass media in Africa (Ndlela and Mano, 2020: 3). These recent developments mark a departure from the period when State-owned media enjoyed a monopoly in many African countries, and they have enabled social movements to find their voices. Hence, we have recently witnessed the weaponization of digital media in the struggle for democratisation in Africa, and this has occurred in North African countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. For instance, Twitter messages were used in the revolution that

led to the demise of Sudan's strongman Omar al-Bashir and the resignation of the Algerian President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in 2019.

However, the role of digital media in Africa should not be romanticised. The digital media operate as a double-edged sword, which can be used to promote democratisation by social movements, while, in the hands of authoritarian regimes, it can be used by social movements to suppress and keep citizens under surveillance. This inherent potency of digital technologies may help to explain why some African countries view social media with great suspicion and some have recently shut down internet access in order to quell political activism. It is also interesting to note that shutdowns have happened not only in countries with higher rates of internet penetration, like South Africa, but also in countries with the lowest rates of penetration like Chad. Other African countries which have experienced internet shutdowns so as to deny digital media space to political activists are Gambia, Uganda, Burundi, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.

However, as noted earlier, great caution must be exercised in avoiding exaggerations of techno-optimistic determinism when discussing the role of the digital media in the democratisation process in Africa. Fuchs (2015) argues that there is a need to critically evaluate the political economy of digital media. He acknowledges the potency of digital media as agents for change, but he cautions that these technologies are a double-edged sword that can also be used by the ruling political elites for surveillance purposes. In addition, the use of digital media is not evenly spread. There is a digital divide in most African countries, and it is characterised by what Van Dijk and Hacker (2003) termed a yawning gap between the 'information-haves' and the 'information-have-nots' on the continent (p315). Techno-pessimists (Gladwell, 2010) caution against over-reliance on new technologies for participatory democracy, arguing that the digital media reproduce the structures of domination and inequalities in society.

Africa is still characterised by fragile democracies, weak economies, poverty and unequal distribution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) resources. It is hence important not to strip the African countries of their particularities. Some media penetration in some countries is very low, and in some, it is mainly an urban

phenomenon. We have to understand Africa as a plural entity by avoiding any forms of digital universalism (Ndlela and Mano, 2020, p14).

In a nutshell, digital technologies in Africa are mostly the preserve of urban-based citizens, while the majority of the population in rural areas is still marginalised. Hence, this study argues that digital media has its limitations; on its own it cannot help to achieve democracy. It can only be effective when weaponised as a tool to create a nexus between online and offline political engagement in a context-specific situation. In this regard, Gambia can be cited as a good exemplar, in which political activists both outside and inside the African country, have effectively used new media to unseat the former President, Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled the country for over two decades. The activists used “online forums to exchange ideas, mobilise funds, and people in such unprecedented ways that made it impossible for the suppressive regime of Yahya Jammeh to control” (Ndlela and Mano, 2020, p4).

Against this backdrop, this study undertakes to critically examine the nexus between using digital media political activism and democratisation in Africa. In recent years the phenomenon has generated a lot of interest among research scholars (Makinen and Kuira, 2008; Mare, 2018; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2013; Nyabola, 2018). More recent struggles for democratization have led to the departure of entrenched dictatorships in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan regions in Africa, and these include Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Egypt, Kenya, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Algeria and Sudan. The same changes also happened in South Africa where the former President, Jacob Zuma, resigned after being recalled by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party for committing acts of misdemeanour whilst in office. He was replaced by his deputy Cyril Ramaphosa. Against this backdrop, we have also seen some citizens increasingly turning to digital media activism to create free spaces for political and social commentaries on developments in their countries. This point is supported by (Castells, 2012; Diamond, 2010; Shirky, 2008) who view digital media as a ‘magic wand’ that can be used by political activists to push their agenda. Diamond reinforces the argument by adding that new technologies “enable citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest and monitor elections” (Diamond, 2010, p70).

In addition, Manji et al; (2012) argue that the advent of new technologies “creates potential for new, effective spheres of protest, mobilisation and resistance” (p8), adding that:

The diffusion and evolution of new media technology in Africa have enabled activists and civil society groups to organise, campaign and engage in political struggles in new ways: whether through SMS campaigns, mobile phone-based crowdsourcing, blogging, video clips or internet radio, these tools offer opportunities for keeping local groups informed, compiling location data during times of crisis and facilitating linkages of significant geographic scope between civil society actors (p9)

Chiumbu (2015) also acknowledges the contribution of digital media to political activism. She argues that digital media are not only used as part of the activists’ repertoire of contention (Ibid.). They are used for fulfilling mostly other key tasks, like administration and networking (Ibid.).

This study focuses on the case of Zimbabwe in order to critically evaluate the use of digital media activism in Africa, with particular reference to the last years of the Mugabe era, from 2016 to the current Mnangagwa administration, which is also known as the Second Republic or New Dispensation period. Zimbabwe is among the few African countries with a well-developed infrastructure for internet connectivity (Bosch et al; 2020).

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The purposes of this study are as follows:

- To discuss how digital media activism influences democratization
- To analyse how digital media activism has shaped social change in Africa, and in Zimbabwe, in particular
- To evaluate how activist groups have deployed digital media in the period before and after the end of Mugabe’s rule in 2017

- To critically evaluate the significance, and the extent to which digital media activism impacts on the political public sphere in Zimbabwe, in particular, and Africa, in general

## 1.3 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- What is the relationship between democratic transition and digital media activism?
- To what extent has digital media activism, e.g. using Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and online news platforms, contributed to social change in Zimbabwe?
- What are the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and other similar African contexts?

## 1.4 Literature Review

### 1.4.1 Overview

This section deals with the theoretical context for this study. It engages with studies relevant to this research, especially concepts and theories related to digital media activism and transitology, democratic transition and the media. The study postulates that digital media play a key role in promoting political engagement among citizens. The new technologies are closely related to the notion that digital media “will leapfrog development in Africa, promote democratic participation, empower citizens and emancipate youth, women and marginalised communities” (Ndelela and Mano, 2020, p6). However, some digital media scholars do not agree with this utopian theoretical perspective. The dystopians argue that digital tools on their own cannot

effect democratic change; meaningful democratic change can only be achieved when the tools are deployed in partnership with human agency.

#### 1.4.2 Digital Media Activism

This study posits that digital media activism is a very recent phenomenon in Africa. It is activists' use of new technologies to create spaces for political engagement and mobilisation and in this study, the terms 'digital media', 'new technologies', 'new media' and 'social media' are used interchangeably.

A fact that is often ignored is that African digital media professionals work under very difficult conditions and with meagre resources, including technology (Kupe, 2004). Nyamnjoh argues that **“it is regrettable that scholarly focus has been rather on what ICTs do for Africans, instead of what Africans can do with ICTs”** (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p9), *emphasis in original*).

In recent years there has been a plethora of scholarship on digital media activism. Now most of it is on global protest movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). In her study, Kavada (2015) analysed how activists have managed to use digital technology as a 'connective tissue' in the creation of well-coordinated global protest campaigns. There is a symbiotic relationship between connective action and collective action. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), connective action helps collective action which gives insights into “the processes of negotiating common interpretations of collective identity linked to the contentious issues at hand” (p750).

To some scholars, the digital media present new opportunities for social change. New media present new opportunities for “the circulation of information, ideas, debates . . . and also the formation of political will” (Dahlgren, 2005, p148). This point is supported by other scholars like Castells (2009) and Benkler (2006) who view digital media platforms, such as social media, as a public sphere in a networked society.

The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the internet democratizes (Benkler, 2006, p272).

According to Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), digital media are among the most effective resources for mobilising collective action and their growth over the years has resulted in the creation of cyberactivism. Scholars of cyberactivism often include short message service (SMS), multimedia messaging service (MMS), social networking sites (SNS) and blogs when discussing social media (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005).

In Africa, the affordances of new technologies have opened new spaces for both individuals and groups of people to make social and political commentaries on the developments in their countries. A noticeable feature of this recent phenomenon has been the use of connective action. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012) connective action involves personalized content sharing across media networks.

Digital media have transformed political communication in Africa in many ways. For instance, social networking sites like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are mostly appropriated to engage with the electorate during general elections (Mare, 2018; Matsilele, 2019; Ndlela, 2015; Willems, 2016). The role of the new media in Africa is mostly in countering repression and propaganda (L. Moyo, 2009; D. Moyo, 2007), and Mudhai et al; (2009) discuss the relationship between the new media and democratisation in Africa. These studies look at the impact of new technologies on political participation and they emphasise the contribution of social movements and activists.

Other scholarly works have also focused on the protest movement in Zimbabwe in the past two decades. Most notable were works from Last Moyo (2009; 2011), Dumisani Moyo (2007; 2009), Chuma (2014), Mano and Willems (2008), Mabweazara (2011), Chari (2014), Mare (2014), Chiumbu and Nyamanhindi (2012), Muneri (2016) and

Mutsvairo (2016). These scholars took up the critical analysis of digital media activism from different theoretical perspectives.

Traditional modes of communication remain in force in some African countries, despite the advent of new technologies (Nyamnjoh, 2005). New technologies complement traditional forms of communication. Nyamnjoh (2004: 54) cites an example of “single-owner-multiple-user” in which mobile phone users act as communication nodes within their communities and share information.

However, there is currently a void in the scholarship on the influence of digital media activism in countries in democratic transition in Africa. That is why this research has attempted to fill this lacuna, using Zimbabwe as a case study. The research was confined to only three forms of social media – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – which are widely used in Zimbabwe. The social media sites generated a lot of activity in Zimbabwe in recent years and have become sites for ideological struggles between the dominant and the counter powers in the current democratic transition.

#### 1.4.3 Transitology and the Media

This study found Sparks’s (2008) scholarship on transitology very instructive. For Sparks (2008), one of the normative debates surrounding transitology is the extent to which countries emerging from decades of dictatorial rule are prepared to transform their political systems in order to avoid a “repositioning of partnerships between elites” (cited in Wasserman, 2013, p72).

Sparks (2008) makes some interesting observations about the media in countries in democratic transition. Citing the former communist Eastern European bloc as a case study, he argues that the media in former authoritarian countries did not change overnight and he added that the media often find themselves entangled in what Sparks (2008) terms ‘elite continuity’. Sparks (2011) also discusses the media in post-

apartheid South Africa as another example, but he calls 'elite renewal' the changes that occurred in that country's media ecology.

Sparks's (2008) analysis of the media in former authoritarian countries is very appropriate and provides a perfect analogy to the state of the media in Zimbabwe under the new political dispensation of President Emmerson Mnangagwa. In the current scenario, it appears that most people are not yet clear about the direction in which the country's media are heading. We seem to have Mugabeism without Mugabe, because even though former President Robert Mugabe was deposed, his system remains intact.

Sparks's (2008) views are well supported by Friedman (2011, p109) who believes that the mainstream media in countries in democratic transition need to look beyond "the view from the suburbs" and foster debate on the future of journalism within a normative theoretical context that is based on democracy and equality. Friedman (2011) raises some salient points in his argument that can be used to expand the public sphere realm of digital media activism.

In Marxist theory, generally, the media are viewed as a 'means of production' that assist the ruling classes in neutralising or sidelining counter hegemonic narratives (Mutsvairo, 2016, p165). The State media in Zimbabwe make no secret of their support for the ruling party. This is evident from the way they frame their stories. Most of the articles are meant to put the government in a good light, while negative publicity is mostly reserved for the opposition parties. For Mutsvairo (2011, p165), Zimbabwe's State media "not only tells the truth", but also "ensure that alternative versions" are discredited. To support his point, Mutsvairo (2011) cites an article headlined *Tsvangirai Beggars for the VP Post* which appeared in the national daily, *The Herald* (2008). Although the article told the truth, it did not give details of the other options which were under consideration to accommodate Tsvangirai. It appears the details were deliberately suppressed by the national daily. However, the alternative media are

not free of such biases. Chari (2009) clearly sums up the Zimbabwean media environment, adding that:

The state media is unapologetic on its support for the ruling ZANU (PF) government while the private press seems to have signed a pact with the opposition to 'hear no evil', 'speak no evil', and 'see no evil' regarding its affairs (p10)

News production in Zimbabwe is thus influenced by the country's polarised politics (Mano, 2005; D. Moyo, 2009; L. Moyo, 2009). Herman and Chomsky (1988) further discuss how the political and economic elites create a dependency relationship among consumers of media products so as to reproduce their ideological hegemony. This condition promotes the dominant narratives at the expense of the counter narratives. This point is supported by McChesney (2008), who argues that the media unintentionally naturalise these dominant power structures and inequalities.

In Gramsci's (1971) hegemonic theory, the intelligentsia play a critical role in reproducing the hegemony of the dominant classes. This may explain why in Zimbabwe, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU – PF), often uses intellectuals to design the party's ideological campaigns (Tendi, 2010). Some of these intellectuals are also active on social networking sites and online news platforms, and they help to propagate the party's hegemonic narratives in the State media outlets.

#### 1.4.4 Democratic Transition and the Media

To have a better understanding of democratic transition, it is first necessary to unpack a few of the concepts that are often conflated with democratic transition. These terms are regime change, regime transition and leadership succession. Sachikonye (2017) argues that these terms are related, but they represent different phenomena.

While regime change may refer simply to a change of a regime, and leadership succession to the assumption of power by a new leader, these two processes do not amount to a democratic transition (Sachikonye, 2017, p119)

Sachikonye (2017) further argues that a regime transition represents a change in political ethos by a new government and this usually differs from that of the *ancien*

*regime*. A regime transition thus, can be aptly defined as “a struggle between competing political forces over the rules of the political game and for the resources with which the game is played” (Sachikonye, 2017, p119). On the other hand, a democratic transition is more complex and multifaceted “with an interplay of social forces influencing its trajectory”; “it is not a monolithic or teleological process” (Sachikonye, 2017, p120).

This study argues that democratic transition remains a grey area, one that is open to debate. In developing countries, especially in Africa, the concept is often conflated with regime and leadership change. However, it is not clear whether countries like Zimbabwe, which have not yet attained what Huntington (1991) termed the ‘two-turnover-test’ can be grouped into the same category with countries in democratic transition. This point is debatable, but it is outside the scope of this study. For our purposes, Zimbabwe will be categorized as a country in democratic transition since it has met some of the benchmarks of that terminology. The advent of the ‘new dispensation’ or the ‘Second Republic’ has resulted in some piecemeal economic reforms. However, the same cannot be said of political liberalisation. The new dispensation still has traces of Mugabeism.

A key feature of Mugabeism is the conflation of the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and security sectors, and the creation of the securocratic state (Mandaza, 2015). Despite the limited democratic space that has opened up in the past few months, it is not yet clear whether there will be transformative change in the country’s media systems in the foreseeable future. It looks likely that Zimbabwe may have elite continuity and renewal in its media systems (Sparks, 2008).

The State media in Zimbabwe bears testimony to Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory on the media and “it’s ability to transform enlightenment into barbarism” (cited in Mutsvairo, 2016, p166). This study concurs with Mutsvairo’s (2016) argument that “true to their [Adorno and Horkheimer’s] view that economic prosperity breeds mass deception, the State media in Zimbabwe has benefitted from the country’s economic

growth over the past decades and forged a strong bond with the dominant political elites” (p166).

This study uses the normative theory of Jurgen Habermas (1989) to discuss the role of digital media activism in countries in transition like Zimbabwe. The centrality of Habermas’s theory is the existence of a public sphere for the contestation of space among the dominant and subaltern groups. Habermas (1989) describes the public sphere as a discursive realm in which contestants meet to discuss issues of mutual interest through rational debate. However, the normative notion of the public sphere has been criticised for being exclusive (Fraser, 1992) by feminist, working class and minority ethnic groups. The concept has been extended to embrace digital and counter-hegemonic public spheres (Fraser, 1992). It is also worth mentioning that “the public sphere is not homogenous but heterogeneous” (Mujere and Mwatwara, 2016, p217).

Mujere and Mwatwara (2016) offer an incisive analysis of Habermas’s normative theory of the public sphere in the African context, and argue that the mainstream media in some Africa countries mostly pander to the interests of the urban elites at the expense of the marginalised majority in the rural areas. There is a body of scholarship that supports Mujere and Mwatwara’s (2016) argument. Amongst these scholars is Ndlela (2009a), who argues for the need to rethink the Habermasian model within the African cultural, political and economic context. This argument is supported by Ncube and Tomaselli (2019) who situate the public sphere within the precolonial African traditional practices of *Dariro* (dancing circle) and *Dare* (court). Within those traditional circles, all participants were treated as equals. Although Africa still lags behind other continents in terms of internet penetration, new technologies have created communicative spaces in which Africans can debate issues of mutual interest, such as democracy, good governance and human rights (Ndlela, 2009a). The advent of digital technologies has opened new vistas and enabled more people to “bear alternative information, perspectives and ideological critique in a time of national crisis” (Allan, 2007, p3).

This study adopts social constructivist ontological and epistemological positions (Wendt, 1995). According to Green (2002), an ontological position is “a statement about what the world is made of” (p10). Green (2002) further argues that ontological positions are normally calibrated on a ‘sliding scale’, ranging from realism to scepticism. Realists take a positive view about the existence of certain phenomena (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), while sceptics view such phenomena as by-products of human perception and judgement (Green, 2002). Ontological, epistemological and methodological issues have a close relationship. Ontological issues are related to “the nature of reality”, while epistemology refers to “what can be known about reality” (Savigny, 2007, p36). Methodological issues which refer to “how this reality can be known” will be discussed in the next section, and they are further explored in greater detail in Chapter 3 (Savigny, 2007, p36).

## 1.5. Methodology

The study has used a multipronged methodological approach which includes Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), Thematic Analysis (TA), participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The choice of my methodology is deliberate and it is informed by my research aims and objectives. I believe that this methodology is best suited to addressing my research questions on the use of digital activism in African countries in democratic transition, using Zimbabwe as a case study.

The study has curated archival materials from social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) and online news platforms (*The Herald*, *The Chronicle*, *NewsDay*, and *NewZimbabwe.com*). The corpus for the study comprised visual, verbal and multimodal/multimedia materials.

However, I am aware that no methodology is perfect and that is why in the next section I will briefly discuss each of the methods that I have selected for use in my research and then provided a rationale for each individual method.

### 1.5.1 Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

Qualitative Content Analysis’s distinctive features are systematic and objective and provide the latitude to “describe qualitative material in a systematic way” (Schreier,

2012, p1). This is done by “assigning successive parts“ of the data sets to “categories of the coding frame” (Schreier, 2012, p1). The method is used to identify “patterns, themes or shared categories” by using open coding, axial coding and selective coding in analysing the various texts which will form part of this study’s corpus (McDowell, 2004, p220).

Contrary to the old adage that ‘data speaks for itself’, QCA is most suitable in cases which require the interpretation of data. It is a “very transparent method” and “the coding scheme and the sampling procedures” can be arranged in such a way that “replications and follow-up studies are feasible” (Bryman, 2012, p304). According to Schreier (2012), the meanings of qualitative data are not fixed or natural. Rather, they are constructed and open to different interpretations, and QCA helps to unpack the latent meanings in the texts. However, QCA has a major shortcoming and the method “can only be as good as the document on which the practitioner works” (Bryman, 2012, p306). Scott (1990) suggests that research texts should be scrutinised for “authenticity, credibility and representativeness” to ensure the best outcomes from the QCA research. Such precautions are necessary when dealing with digital artefacts because some of the documents can be Photoshopped.

In addition, QCA is not ideal for data sets “with highly standardized meanings” (Schreier, 2012, p2). The method only works with texts whose meanings are “less obvious” (Schreier, 2012, p2). However, QCA also provided the latitude to triangulate with thematic analysis (TA) so as to analyse the data sets. In addition, to ensure validity and reliability in my research, the study has also used other qualitative methods like participant observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviewing. In the next section I will briefly discuss semi-structured interviewing and provide the rationale for using it in my research.

### 1.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviewing can be defined as “a less structured approach to the collection of data, which reflects the use of open-ended questions” (Bryman, 2012,

p12). One of the major advantages of using semi-structured interviews is that it allows the researcher to approach his or her subject with an open mind “about the contours of what he or she needs to know about, so that the concepts and theories can emerge out of the data” (Bryman, 2012, p12).

According to Kvale (1996), interviews are a vital tool for capturing qualitative data. In this regard, the study conducted 45 interviews using Zoom video conferencing software. The interviews involved a wide cross section of those Zimbabwean communities that have a strong presence on social networking sites (SNS) and these included journalists, academics, digital media activists, politicians, senior civil servants, members of social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). To create a more balanced demographic profile of my respondents. I used purposive sampling and ensured different groups were well represented in terms of gender, ethnicity, race and age. The corpus for the study was stored safely using encryption devices. Apart from semi-structured interviews, the study also used participant observation as part of the methodology.

### 1.5.3 Participant Observation

Contrary to Becker and Geer’s (1957, p28) assertion that the “most complete form of the sociological datum . . . is the form in which the participant observer gathers it”, I agree with Trow (1957, p33) that “the problem under investigation properly dictates the method of investigation”. I believe some research methods are better in some areas than others (Bryman, 2012). That is why I chose to use participant observation alongside semi-structured interviewing. I believe the two methods can complement each other very well.

As a research method, participant observation is normally used in ethnographic studies (Bryman, 2012). It is often used alongside other methods, e.g. interviewing. According to Bryman (2012, p497), participant observers usually “buttress their observations with methods of data collection that allow them access to important areas that are not amenable to observation”.

This method helped me to gain more insights into the experiences of some of the digital media activists during the Zoom video conferencing interviews. I interviewed some of my networks at their workplaces and this offered me the latitude to observe them while at work. For instance, I also interviewed some of my former students who are now working as senior reporters and editors in both Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom (UK). I took advantage of digital technologies to cultivate relationships with my former networks. This entailed spending more time observing their web-based social platforms.

However, participant observation, like any method, has its limitations. That is why I had to exercise caution when using participant observation and had to avoid being too “intrusive in people’s lives” and “disrupting rhythms of their work lives” (Bryman, 2012, p495).

This explains why this study used a triangulation approach and this included using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis, QCA and thematic analysis.

#### 1.5.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis can be defined as a qualitative method that is used to identify, analyse, organise, describe and report themes within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The method can be used alongside “a range of epistemologies and research questions” (Nowell, et al; 2017, p2).

A major advantage in using thematic analysis is that it is flexible and can be easily modified to suit the needs of different studies and to provide rich and complex data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), the method helps to unpack the similarities and differences within the data sets. By so doing this helps to summarise the key points of large data sets by selecting salient themes. However, while flexibility is a major advantage of thematic analysis, it can also be included among its limitations. This is because that very flexibility can result in inconsistency and incoherence in the development of themes arising from the

research data sets. In this regard, I agree with Holloway and Todres (2003) who argue that cohesion and consistency are vital in taking a clear epistemological stance that underpins any research's claims. To address this limitation, I triangulated thematic analysis with QCA while analysing my data sets. The next section of this study addresses issues relating to accessing information and gatekeepers.

#### 1.5.5 Access

One of the major stumbling blocks that is often faced by researchers is how to gain access to information and gatekeepers. This is normally due to suspicion. People are, by nature, wary of strangers. Hence, trust issues often come into play when dealing with strangers. One needs to tread the ground very carefully. There is a need to build trust and confidence before extracting information from the respondents, especially if they are strangers in a country like Zimbabwe, with a diverse population and different ethnic groupings (Tonkin, 1984). It is also important for researchers to design coping mechanisms that can be used in order to address any trust issues.

Lindley (2009) suggests that it is important to deal with existing networks in order to build trust. I often find this strategy very useful in my circumstances. I worked as a journalist before going into academia. Most of my former students are now working in corporate and government organisations, and they hold jobs as senior reporters, editors and public relations officers. I also have another network from my days as an editor of a community newspaper in Zimbabwe. The network comprises politicians, senior civil servants and business executives.

This study used snowballing sampling since my intention was to interview Zimbabweans from different networks in different localities. However, purposive sampling was also used occasionally to ensure that key people relevant to the research were interviewed *inter alia*.

Most of my networks have a strong presence on social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp where they normally curate and share materials from online news platforms. Some of them usually use the comments section of the online news platforms to discuss social and political issues in Zimbabwe.

Social media can also act as gatekeepers. I identified groups and individuals whom I could approach for interviews related to my research. A good example is a prominent politician living in Zimbabwe, and who has a strong presence on Twitter. I contacted him using e-mail to solicit more information on his impressions on the use of digital media activism in Zimbabwe. In the next section of this study, I will address the ethical issues that this research raises.

#### 1.5.6 Ethics

I introduced myself to all the respondents and briefly explained the nature of my research before asking them to sign informed consent forms. It is always important to ensure that respondents are not left with any grey areas about the research before appending their signatures on the consent forms. That is why I asked the respondents if there were any areas of my research which were not made clearly, before asking them to sign the forms. Another important point that I addressed during my research was the need to allow respondents to exercise their choices. Respondents should give their consent without any inducements or coercion. In addition, the respondents should be reminded that they can pull out of the research at any given time. The next section will address data storage issues.

#### 1.5.7 Data Storage

It is always important to ensure that all of the information obtained from respondents, especially information of a confidential nature, is kept under secure storage. The information should also include the names and contact details of the respondents. In this regard, I took the necessary steps to ensure that all interview notes and transcripts were stored on an encrypted device. The same security measures were taken to protect information stored on other devices like mobile handsets, laptop and desktop computers. In the next section I will discuss the study's contribution to knowledge.

## 1.6. Contribution to Knowledge

Social networking sites (SNS) and online news platforms are increasingly playing a pivotal role in the production and consumption of news. Journalists, digital media activists and politicians act pre-eminently, as the main producers and consumers of social media and online news platforms. Given the potential influence of online frames, it is critically important to theorize how subaltern groups in Africa, especially those in countries that are under authoritarian rule, are creating communicative spaces in the digital media in which to challenge hegemonic discourses. Scholarship in this area is scant. In addition, most studies in this area are written from a Western theoretical perspective. This study has attempted to fill in this void in the field of Media and Communication by evaluating how the affordances of new technologies, in non-Western countries, are creating communicative spaces in which to counter hegemonic groups can challenge the dominant narratives. The study sheds academic insights on the field of Media and Communication by using a body of empirical and verifiable evidence, together with tested theories in order to contribute to the theorization of non-Western perspectives on the democratization process and digital media activism in Africa.

The study also contributes to our wider understanding of the interface of social media, and online news platforms, and political communication in countries that are in democratic transition. In addition, it also helps to inform current debates on the role of digital media in the democratization process in countries that are in democratic transition. No doubt the study will not provide all the answers to the challenges posed by new technologies in countries that are in democratic transition. However, it will encourage more robust debate on the interface between digital media activism and democratization in such countries.

I think these issues, discussed above, fit well together and will make a novel contribution to the body of knowledge in Media and Communication. The next section will discuss the structure of the study.

## 1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

This research study is structured into seven Chapters. The first Chapter comprises the introduction and background and gives a synoptical view of the democratization process in postcolonial Africa, before discussing the research objectives and research questions in Sections Two and Three respectively. The chapter also focuses on the review of the literature that is relevant to this research. The study is situated within the concepts of “participatory communication, democracy and the public sphere” (Ncube and Tomaselli, 2019, p37). The review includes scholarly works on the use of digital media for promoting social change. The study is deeply anchored in Ndlela’s (2009) thesis that there is a correlation between democratization and communication spaces. In addition, the review discussed Sparks’s (2008) theoretical framework of transitology within the context of countries in democratic transition in Africa.

Chapter 2 attempts to address the following questions:

- To what extent is access to media central to democratic process?
- To what extent can access to media engender political participation by politically engaged citizenry?

In response to this debate West (2000), argues that a free media is intrinsically related to the democratic process. The media provide citizens with a platform for political engagement with their leaders.

Democracy depends, in large part, on a free and frank press willing to speak painful truths to the public about our society, including the fact of their own complicity in superficiality and simplistic reportage. There can be no democratic **PAIDEIA** – the critical cultivation of active citizenry – without democratic **PARRHESIA** – a bold and courageous press willing to speak against misinformation, and mendacities of elites (West, 2004, p39)

The chapter sets the tone for the debate on the nexus between democracy and the media by exploring and critically evaluating the different definitions and theoretical models of the normative concept of democracy. The study argues that democracy is a normative concept, and it is not universal. There are different models of democracy. The chapter explores and critically evaluates some canons of Western (Huntington, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Whitehead, 2002; Held, 1992; Dahl, 1989) and non-Western (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998; Adetula, 2011; Khan, 2003; Akpojivi, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Ake, 1996; Kwesi, 1995) theoretical models of democracy. The study later dissects the nexus between democratic transition and the recent phenomenon of digital media activism in Africa. This chapter also analyses the intersection of the State and civil society in Africa (Mamdani, 1996), before exploring the different media systems in Africa. The chapter contends that media systems constitute a key component of the pillars of democracy. The systems in the different African countries are unique in their own ways and they are shaped by the respective cultural and political environments in each of the countries. In addition, the systems share similarities and differences. The study partly agrees with Bofo (1987) that the media systems are a microcosm of the media systems in the entire African continent. In addition, most of the media systems have elements of both the liberal and polarized pluralism models that are demonstrated in Hallin and Mancini's (2012) paradigm.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology of the study. The study deploys a qualitative research method for data collection and analysis. Qualitative research “seeks answers to questions about the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a phenomenon, rather than questions about ‘how many’ or ‘how much’ “ (Green and Thorogood, 2004, p5).

The study uses a purposive sampling strategy for data collection and analysis. Using purposive sampling allows the researcher to select units of analysis which are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p418). The corpus for the study comprises visual, verbal and multimodal/multimedia materials from three social media platforms, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sijikile and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. The three movements represent a new phenomenon in political activism in Zimbabwe – they are run by individuals and do not have clear organisational structures. However, they have a

strong presence on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Chuma and Ndou (2019, p4) eloquently argue about why most activists use social media platforms in Zimbabwe. These scholars noted that social media platforms played a very significant role in the country's media ecosystem. Most of the platforms "feed into legacy media such as radio, newspapers and television" to foster political and social commentary (Chuma and Ndou, 2019, p4). In addition, it is worth noting that Zimbabwean politics is highly polarised, and this is reflected in the country's media system. That is why the corpus for this study will also include transcripts from 45 qualitative interviews with State and non-State actors such as editors and journalists from both the State and private media, as well as academics and key leaders of civil society.

Chapter 4 reflects on some of the methodological changes which were occasioned by the unforeseen outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The outbreak of the Covid-19 resulted in restricted mobility due to lockdowns and the ban on domestic and foreign travel in most countries, including Zimbabwe. These measures scuppered my plans to conduct field work in the country. The study ended up using Zoom video conferencing software to conduct 45 qualitative interviews. Part of the findings of this study are explored in Chapter 4. Using QCA and Thematic Analysis (TA), the chapter used five major themes – digital media; digital media activism; democratisation and digital media activism; social media and democracy; and democratic transition and digital media activism – to answer the first question on the contribution of digital media activism to democratisation in African countries in democratic transition such as Zimbabwe.

The other themes that emerged from the study – social change and digital media activism; digital media platforms and social change; digital media and political activism; the challenges of digital media activism; and the implications of digital activism – are explored and discussed in Chapter 5 to address the second research question on the contribution of digital media activism to social change. The chapter also addresses the third research question on the implications of digital media activism in African countries in democratic transition such as Zimbabwe and other similar

contexts. The chapter attempts to theorize the relationship between digital media activism and democratization processes in African countries in democratic transition like Zimbabwe. To this end, the study used Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory to create "insightful empirical generalizations" and to develop a theory from the collected data (Bryman, 2012, p27). Bryman (2012) argues that grounded theory is ideal for "generating theories out of data" (p27). However, it is important to keep an open mind during the entire research process so that "concepts and theories can emerge out of data" (Bryman, 2012, p12). This guiding principle undergirds "the inductive approach to theorizing and conceptualization" used in my research (Bryman, 2012, p12).

Chapter 6 forms the Discussion Chapter. The chapter explored and critically evaluated the research findings in Chapters 4 and 5.

Last, but not least, Chapter 7 constitutes the conclusion of the study. It highlights the key findings of the study and its limitations. It also discusses the study's contribution to knowledge production and suggests potential areas for further study on the research topic.

## 1.8 Conclusion

To sum up, Chapter 1 introduced the salient points of this research study. It explored and discussed the outline of the thesis, and this included the research aims and objectives, the research questions, the literature review and the methodology. The next chapter will focus on media and democracy. The chapter will discuss and deepen our knowledge and understanding of digital media activism and democracy in African countries that are in democratic transition.

## CHAPTER 2: Democratic Transition and Digital Activism in Africa

### 2.0 Introduction

As mentioned earlier in the preceding chapter, this study is underpinned by multiple theoretical frameworks, and these include – among others – the Habermasian theorization of the public sphere and Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) concept of radical democracy. According to Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, democracy depends on consensus, while Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) concept of radical democracy is rooted in dissensus and conflict. Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) theory is an antidote to Habermas’s model of the public sphere. This study argues that the digital media provide not only communicative spaces for consensus, but also for dissensus and conflict. In this regard, there is a need for Habermas’s (1989) theory of the public sphere to be reconfigured as a communicative space for both consensus and dissensus. In the previous chapter, we also discussed Sparks’ (2008) theory of transitology as part of the theoretical framework for this study.

Sparks (2011) uses South Africa as a case study for his theorization of transitology and examines how the country morphed from being an undemocratic political system to a new democratic dispensation in the post-apartheid era. Zimbabwe has some of the elements of Sparks’ (2011) theory, yet in practice it does not make a perfect fit with transitology. Since the demise of Zimbabwe’s founding father, Robert Mugabe, in 2017, in a military-assisted-transition, the direction in which the country is heading under its current leader, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, is unclear. Contrary to Sparks’ (2011) theorization of transitology, the country seems poised for “elite continuity and renewal” without a radical shift in its body politic (cited in Mare and Matsilele, 2020, p149).

In the previous chapter, we also examined how the social constructivist approach will be used to discuss how citizens within African countries that are in democratic

transition, such as Zimbabwe, exercise their agency in deploying digital media in political activism. The social constructivist approach is an antithesis of technological determinism (Mabweazara, 2014). The approach helps us to have a better grasp and understanding of how Zimbabwean citizens appropriate technology creatively and convivially in order to promote social and democratic change in their country.

In the next sections, this chapter will critically evaluate the relationship between democratic transition and digital media activism in Africa. This study will argue that there is a symbiotic relationship between democratisation and digital media activism in Africa. The first three sections of the chapter will interrogate the different definitions, theoretical models and critiques of the normative concept of democracy before responding to the second research question, about whether democratic transition in Africa has been influenced by digital media activism. The study will argue that many Africans are taking advantage of the affordances of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to promote democratisation. The next three sections of the chapter will discuss media systems in Africa before interrogating the major debates among techno-optimists and techno-pessimists on the use of digital media activism and the role of digital media activism in the African context.

As mentioned earlier, this chapter will start by critically discussing the normative concepts of democracy and democratization and the different models of democracy before interrogating the different non-Western theoretical perspectives on democracy and democratization.

## 2.1 Democracy and Democratization

### 2.1.1 Definition of Democracy

The terms 'democracy' and 'democratization' are often conflated and even used interchangeably in some contexts, yet the concepts denote entirely different meanings. That is why this study has decided to define the two terms at the outset, before discussing the different models of democracy.

There is no universal definition of democracy. There are several definitions. Hence, to have a better grasp of democracy and democratization, we need an anchored conception of these two terms (Whitehead, 2002). However, for the purposes of this study I found Joseph Schumpeter's seminal work, **Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (1942)** very instructive. Schumpeter (1942) critiqued "the classical theory of democracy" which defined democracy as "the will of the people" and whose sole purpose was to achieve "the common good" (cited in Huntington, 1991, p6). Schumpeter (1942) noted that this definition had several deficiencies and one of them was that it was not clear about what constitutes the "common good" and the "will of the people".

Schumpeter (1942) suggested "another theory of democracy", one that is different from the classical model. In Schumpeter's (1942) procedural concept, the notion of democracy can only be achieved through institutionalisation by creating the necessary affordances for contestants to acquire power through "a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (cited in Huntington, 1997, p6). Schumpeter (1942) further argued that democracy is premised on "democratic political systems" that allow leaders to be elected through free and fair elections that are organised on a regular basis (cited in Huntington, 1997, p6). He also suggested that all contestants should be offered unfettered access to the electorate comprising "virtually all the adult population" (cited in Huntington, 1997, p6). However, it is not clear whether Schumpeter (1942) was advocating universal suffrage when he argued for the right to vote to be "virtually extended to all adults". This study believes that true democracy should allow all adults, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender and religion, the right to vote for their leaders without undue influence.

In my literature review, I found Robert Dahl's (1989) treatise on democracy very instructive. According to Dahl (1989), democracy consists of two vital components, and these are "contestation and participation" (cited in Huntington, 1997, p7). Unlike Schumpeter (1942), Dahl (1989) was well ahead of his time and suggested seven markers of democracy (cited in Huntington, 1997) and these included the freedoms of

expression and assembly, necessary prerequisites for both political discourse and electoral contests.

Dahl's (1989) procedural notion of democracy was a great milestone. It offered the latitude to make informed debates and comparative studies about which nations were more democratic or undemocratic than others, using the bench markers (cited in Huntington, 1997). For instance, on the African continent, most countries only introduced universal suffrage after the attainment of independence. Before the attainment of independence, the countries were under colonial rule and only white minority settler communities were entitled to full civil and political rights.

This study fully concurs with Huntington's (1997) assertions that the notion of democracy is much broader than the ritual of holding regular elections. Indeed, real democracy should extend beyond minimalist definitions and include "*egalite*", "*fraternite*", citizenship, accountability, transparency, "rational deliberation and participation and various other civic virtues" (Huntington, 1997, p9). Huntington's (1997) argument is more relevant and topical in developing countries where the ritual of holding regular elections is often conflated with democracy. It is frequently easily forgotten that democracy is not a one-off event; it is a process which is always evolving. That is why indicators are necessary when comparing different systems of democracy.

### 2.1.2 Definition of Democratization

According to Whitehead (2002), while democracy is a site for contestations and deliberation, democratization can be defined as an open-ended and reflexive social construct. Democratization is continuously evolving and refers to the process which gives birth to democracy (Whitehead, 2002). Whitehead (ibid.) argues that for democratization to be meaningful, it should have clear outcomes that can be observed and analysed as part of the whole process. For instance, some of Dahl's indicators of democracy should be self-evident as the process unfolds (Whitehead, 2002).

While democracy is often in a state of constant flux, democratization is likely to be “relatively open-ended, and may well be protracted, complex, and erratic” (Whitehead, 2002, p27). Democratization is thus likely to take different routes in different countries. This is because of their different historical, political and cultural contexts. For instance, the political ethos in Zimbabwe and South Africa is diametrically different. As a result, democratization in the post Mugabe era in Zimbabwe is likely to be different from democratization in post-apartheid South Africa. In addition, the democratization process in each country is likely to depend on the State and civil society in each of the countries. This is why the next section of this study discusses the State and civil society.

## 2.2 The State and Civil Society

### 2.2.1 The State

To have a better understanding of the different models of democracy, it is necessary to define key terms like State and civil society. These concepts are closely related to the markers of democracy.

According to Potter (1997), a State is characterised by its ability to “monopolise the legitimate use of violence within a given territory” (p3). In addition, a State is supported by institutional and political organs for “administrative, legal and coercive” purposes (Ibid, p3).

According to Potter (Ibid.), there is a distinction between States and governments. States are a permanent political feature, but governments are temporary, and their terms are renewed through regular elections (Potter, 1997). Potter (1997) defines the term political regime as the relations within the State. There are different forms of political regimes and one of them is liberal democracy.

For Mamdani (1996), some of the problems that bedevil the State in most African countries date back to the colonial period. Under colonial rule, these countries had a bifurcated State which reproduces racial identities in urban citizens and ethnic

identities in rural subjects (Ibid.). In the post-independence era, little effort was made to reform the bifurcated State. Although citizenship in urban centres was deracialised, decentralised despotism was maintained in rural areas (Ibid.). The chasm between urban and rural; citizenship and ethnicity in the State in most African countries is still remains one of the major obstacles to the continent's democratisation process.

Mamdani's (1996) critique of the postcolonial State in Africa is supported by Lumumba (2022) and Nyamnjoh (2005). Lumumba (2022) posits that the postcolonial State has not been a viable "instrument for [sustainable] development" (p9), while Nyamnjoh (2005) argues that African countries need to move away from the notion of 'face powder democracy' (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p23). 'Face powder democracy' does not empower citizens (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p23). Rather, it disempowers civil society and is partly responsible for weakening "other arms of civil society in Africa" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p23). Nyamnjoh (2005) contends that the right to vote does not always empower citizens to make democratic choices. This study agrees with Nyamnjoh's (2005) arguments that democracy can only be meaningful if citizens are offered the latitude to actively participate in national politics without fear or favour. Having well written constitutions is not enough; political will power is always needed to ensure the separation of powers in the different arms of the State. This may help to democratise the State, which is often "overbearing, irrelevant and exploitative" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p24).

To have a better understanding of the critical role played by the African State in the democratization process, it is useful to interrogate the notion of power and how it has been reconfigured against the backdrop of globalization. Naim (2013) supports the Foucauldian notion that power is not concentrated in one place. Instead, he further argues that it is dispersed and situated in different localities. According to Naim (2013), over the past few decades we have witnessed a radical shift from "brawn to brains, from north to south and west to east, from old corporate behemoths to agile start-ups, from entrenched dictators to people in town squares and cyberspace" (p1).

I find Naim's (2013) insights very instructive. I agree with him that in the current age of globalization national states are increasingly finding it very "difficult to regiment and control" citizens (p58). Naim (2013) cites the example of Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, who became famous for exposing State secrets by using new technologies. Naim's (2013) analysis illustrates how power is transformative in the age of globalization. Examples of this abound. In the past few years, we have also witnessed increased acts of repression by some African governments against citizens who use the affordances of the internet to create spaces for social and political commentaries that are critical of the State. For instance, the recent internet shutdowns in Zimbabwe are ample testimony of a State under siege in the era of the internet.

Globalization is not the only challenge facing most states in Africa in their quest to democratise. The other issue is State capture. The phenomenon of State capture is particularly rampant in Southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa, due to the lack of transparency and accountability. In addition, State capture often occurs when the contours between the State and the ruling party are blurred, and this results in some elites capturing the State for their personal aggrandisement. For Madonsela (2019), State capture is associated with institutionalised corruption and systems of patronage among the ruling elites. Under State capture, networks of individuals gain material access to public resources (Madonsela, 2019). The issue of State capture gained currency during the tenure of the former South African President, Jacob Zuma, and led to his resignation in 2018, after being recalled by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party. The former South African President was later replaced by his deputy, Cyril Ramaphosa. Turning to State capture in Zimbabwe, there is a whole body of scholarly works in which the phenomenon has received great attention, and this includes studies by Zamchiya (2013), Tendi (2013), and Alexander and McGregor (2013). State capture poses one of the greatest threats to the stability of the State and that is why it is important to have independent State institutions and a strong civil society.

### 2.2.2 Civil Society

According to Wilkins (2010), civil society can be defined as the “social sphere of freedom, voluntary association, and plurality of human relations, identities, differences and values as contrasted with the coercive political power of state and government” (cited in Caldwell, 2017, p121).

Civil society refers to “the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interests and ideology – that fills this space” (Walzer, 1995, p7). Examples of these networks include trade unions, social movements, political parties and interest groups. It is worth noting that some of these network groups, like social movements, trade unions and political parties, play a key role in the democratization process. Notable examples in Africa are the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in the apartheid era, in South Africa and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in post-independence Zimbabwe.

Gramsci viewed civil society and the State as overlapping entities (Caldwell, 2017). The two concepts are not diametrically opposed nor independent of each other (Caldwell, 2017). Gramsci thus viewed civil society as an important component of the State (Caldwell, 2017). It is not “inimical to the State”; rather, it is “its most resilient constitutive element” (Caldwell, 2017, p121).

Buttigieg (1995, pp6-7) argues that Gramsci’s notion of civil society can be “best described not as the sphere of freedom but of hegemony”. The hegemony is based on consent but it is not a result of “free choice” as the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy suggests (Buttigieg, 1995, pp6-7).

In the past there has been a paucity of studies on the public sphere and civil society in African countries (Caldwell, 2017). However, recently, more studies have been

conducted on the “concept of civil society, democracy and citizenship” in the democratization process in Africa (Wasserman, 2013, p11). A good example of these scholarly works is a study edited by Mudhai et al; (2009). According to Mudhai et al; (2009) the concept of civil society in Africa normally refers to voluntary organisations which are outside the realm of the State and are funded by foreign entities. These organisations normally adopt “an adversarial attitude” towards the State (Caldwell, 2017). A major shortcoming of Mudhai et al’s; (2009) study is that it mostly focuses on the activities of the dominant non-governmental organisations, which are funded by foreign donor agencies and ignore contributions made by “other forms of civic agency” (Willems, 2014, p49).

This study concurs with Willems (2014, pp47-49) who argues that we should reject the Habermasian “prescriptive view of civil society” and locate “actually existing civil society” within African cultural settings. Willems (2014) raises a valid point which is supported by Ndlela (2009a). Ndlela (2009a) argues that under authoritarian rule, subaltern voices are often denied access to State-owned media and as a result, they end up “reverting to indigenous communication systems”, such as “the word of mouth, oral literature, theatre, festivals, and metaphysical forms”, to articulate alternative viewpoints (p91). Willems (2012) adds:

An advantage of conceptualising sites of popular culture as publics is that it avoids Habermas’s elitist connotation of his concept of the public sphere. Popular culture often engages, interacts and responds to the official debates. The concept is frequently defined in terms of its opposition to power, as is apparent from Stuart Hall’s definition: “The people versus the power – bloc: this, rather than “class – against – class” (Hall, 1981, p238), is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarised (p 21)

The State and civil society thus play important roles under different models of democracy.

### 2.3 Models of Democracy

There are different models of democracy, and this study will briefly discuss some of them in this section. According to Held (2006), there are four models of democracy:

direct democracy, representative democracy, elite democracy and deliberative democracy. Direct democracy empowers citizens to take an active part in “public affairs”, and it is normally found among small social formations like the classical Greek city States, whereas representative democracy occurs in large social formations (Held, 1992, p12). A defining feature of representative democracy is that citizens are offered the latitude to choose representatives who “undertake to ‘represent’ their interests or views within the framework of the rule of law” (Held, 1992, p12). Generally, the rationale behind representative democracy is that citizens are often believed to lack the sophistication necessary for one to make sound political judgements. On the other hand, elite democracy, as the name suggests, allows for the participation of a small part of the population, while deliberative democracy allows mass participation in democracy.

For this study, I also found Fourie’s (2017) models of democracy very useful. Fourie (2017) suggests that there are three normative models of democracy, and they are:

1. Liberal
2. Republican
3. Deliberation

### 2.3.1 Liberal

According to the liberal model, the State is primarily responsible for protecting the civil and political rights of its citizens (Habermas, 1999). The liberal State operates in a *laissez faire* fashion like the free market system (Fourie, 2017).

### 2.3.2 Republican

On the other hand, the republican model is representative and is aimed at promoting “citizen participation and solidarity of civil society” (Fourie, 2017, p143). In addition, it also fosters “a strong communitarian ethic” and views constant dialogue as vital for national politics (Fourie, 2017, p143). However, the representative model delegates “civic engagement, communicative reasoning and the constitution of public affairs to

experts and elected officials” (Fourie, 2017, p138). The citizen’s main role is to vote during elections or referenda (Fourie, 2017).

### 2.3.3 Deliberative

According to Habermas (1994), the deliberative model puts a high premium on “the communicative conditions of democracy” (cited in Fourie, 2017, p143). Habermas (1994) further argues that:

Deliberative politics should be conceived as a syndrome that depends on a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses, each of which relies on different communicative presuppositions and procedures (Habermas, 1994, pp5-6).

The deliberative model of democracy allows citizens to participate fully in the affairs of the State (Habermas, 1994). The role of citizens is not only confined to exercising their voting rights during elections or referenda, but also to “consider and form an opinion on matters of interest” (cited in Fourie, 2017, p138). In addition, citizens are also expected to engage in civic affairs through “communicative reasoning” by using the media (cited in Fourie, 2017, p138).

This study agrees with Held’s (2006) contention that no model is perfect. Each model of the three models of democracy has its strengths and weaknesses. The most ideal model of democracy should be both participative and deliberative (Held, 2006). This may explain why some African countries, e.g. South Africa and Zimbabwe, use political systems which have elements of both deliberative and representative models of democracy. This may be due to the fact that “both models share a set of interlocking concepts that are considered central to democracy: citizenship, civil society, free news media and public opinion” (Fourie, 2017, p138).

## 2.4 Critiques of Western Perspectives on Democracy

However, Western perspectives on democracy and democratization are not without their own challenges. The main bone of contention among most of the critiques seems to be premised on the notion of universalism which underpins their concepts of

democracy and democratization. Among some of the proponents of this theory is Fukuyama (1992) who argues that liberal democracy is destined to be the universal form of democracy for all nations at the 'end of history'. According to Fukuyama (1992), modernization and democratisation are interrelated, and in the final analysis, non-Western societies will be modernised, and their beliefs and practices will be "replaced with Western liberal values such as the triumph of free markets, rule of law, and separation of powers" (cited in Adetula, 2011, p13). In his seminal work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama (1992) argues that all societies will go through the same process of development which will ultimately result in democratisation. However, Fukuyama's (1992) argument that "liberal democracy equals westernisation" is challenged by Huntington (1997), who argues that it is a fallacy (cited in Adetula, 2011, p13). According to Huntington (1997), all societies will share common characteristics through the process of modernisation, but they will still maintain unique identities. Huntington (1997) further argues that, in the clash between civilizations, the dominant one will prevail in the end. Adetula (2011) believes that although Huntington (1997) argued against the permanent universalisation of liberal democracy, he "implicitly alluded to the fallacy that 'west is best'" (p13). This assertion is contested by some non-western scholars who are against "transplanting non-universal values from one cultural milieu into another" (Adetula, 2011, p13).

In his seminal work, ***A Theory of Universal Democracy***, Khan (2003) argues that Fukuyama's (1992) secular liberal democracy is divorced from reality because we have not yet reached the 'end of history' and human ingenuity (cited in Khan, 2003). Khan (Ibid.) further argues that all civilisations are unique in their different ways and that explains why liberal democracy cannot be transplanted from one society to another. I think Khan (2003) has a valid point, and this is illustrated eloquently by Adetula (2011), who points out that democracy should be situated within the specificities of each country. Adetula (Ibid.) argues that African democracy should be located in the African origins of communal life.

Others believe that African societies are still “highly patrimonial and neo-patrimonial practices” are central to “post-colonial politics” in most of the African countries (Adetula, 2011, p13).

Patrimonialism occurs when the ruler uses the State and its institutions as sources of accumulation for the family, relatives and cronies. This situation normally arises when,

[. . .] in the absence of a legitimising ideology, the ruler owes his [or her] ability to remain in power to his [or her] capacity for transforming his [or her] monopolistic control over the State into a source of opportunities for family, friends and clients (Bach, 2011, p.276).

On the other hand, neopatrimonialism refers to “a dualistic situation in which the State is characterised by patrimonialisation, as well as by bureaucratisation” (Bourmaud, 1997, p62). In a nutshell, the notion of neopatrimonialism thrives in instances where the “patrimonial logic co-exists with the development of bureaucratic administration and at least the pretence of legal-rational forms of state legitimacy” (Van de Walle, 1994, p131). As a result, the line between “private and public interests is purposely blurred” (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, p458). A key characteristic of neopatrimonialism is the appropriation of “personal favours, both within the state and in society” (Ibid.).

Patrimonial structures in most African countries are partly responsible for the rampant corruption found in those countries which poses a major stumbling block to the democratisation process (Hyden, 1976). The centrality of the argument is that “patron-client relationships and personalisation of power” should be addressed “as the basis for structuring social relations in Africa” (cited in Adetula, 2011, p13). Hyden (1976) argues that most Africans participate in “social networks of the extended family, clan and village community” that are situated outside “the formal structures and institutions” and are independent of them (Ibid.). It is argued that such a scenario is not ideal for best practices of governance and creates a breeding ground for “lawlessness, poor governance and corruption” (Ibid.). A major shortcoming of Hyden’s (1976) argument is that there is no robust and verifiable empirical evidence to support his claim about

how patrimonial structures stunt democratisation. In his critique of Hyden (1976), Adetula (2011) argued that “in a bid to explain everything, it ends up explaining very little” (p13).

According to Akpojivi (2018), one of the major flaws of Western epistemologies on democracy and democratization is that they are not inclusive of other cultures. He argues that there is need to “recognise different cultures” (Akpojivi, 2018, p1). This argument is supported by Nyamnjoh (2005, p1) who argues that Western models of democracy overlook the “social realities of African citizens’ multiple identities – and their cultural orientation to communal values”.

In the 1990s most African countries embraced the third wave of democratisation which was a key component of the neoliberal project. Foreign aid from developed countries was tied to conditionalities like good governance, media freedom, individual and civil liberties. According to Price (2002), these countries were expected to design media friendly policies that would help to deepen and strengthen the democratisation process. In addition, the countries were also encouraged to shun dictatorial tendencies and to adopt the liberal democratic ethos as part of the democratisation process. The rationale behind this thinking was that free media would help in transplanting Western democratic norms and values into these countries. However, it is not surprising that these efforts have not succeed, in most cases, because no attempt was ever made to take into account individual countries’ cultural, political and social complexities before implementing the democratic processes (Voltmer, 2008).

According to some non-Western scholars (Akpojivi, 2018), democracy is not a neutral concept; it is a site for ideological contestation. For instance, the United States (US) Statesman, Abraham Lincoln, defined democracy as “the government of the people, by the people, for the people” (cited in Akpojivi, 2018, p4). However, it is not clear who these people he had in mind are? Majority or minority? Men or women? Whites or blacks? Upper or lower class?

On the other hand, some Western scholars tend to view all the social, economic and political problems in Africa through the lens of liberal democracy. They tend to believe that liberal democracy is a panacea to all of the problems of democratisation in Africa (Lindberg, 2006). For instance, it is often argued that regular holding of elections “strengthens the quality of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa” (Adetula, 2011, p18). However, reality paints an entirely different picture of the current political situation in most African countries. The holding of elections has not produced democratic outcomes in most cases (Teshome-Bahiru, 2008). Rather, the result has been the production of what Adetula (2011, p18) calls “fraudulent leadership”, which usually contributes to “the erosion of legitimacy”. Ayittey (2011) calls the current deficit of democracy in Africa ‘freedom recession’. In this respect, this study agrees with the general tone of the Economic Commission for Africa Report, which noted that “the quality of elections remains suspect in many [African] countries and often they are less a peaceful means of transferring power than a trigger of conflict” (Economic Commission for Africa, 2009, p3).

According to Ayittey (2011), there are only 15 of the 54 countries in Africa that can be termed democracies, and the outlook seems very bleak. In addition, appraisal reports on democratisation, from Freedom House (2019), have not been very flattering in the past few years. The reports noted a reversal of some of the democratic gains that were achieved in the 1990s and early 2000s. Seven of the 13 ‘worst of the worst’ countries in the world, with the worst scores in human rights and good governance, are from Africa, and they are South Sudan, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Sudan, Central African Republic and Libya (Freedom House Report, 2019). On the other hand, recent experiences in African countries like Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), help to reinforce the view that elections “are not a sufficient condition” for the democratisation process in Africa (Adetula, 2011, p18). Against this backdrop, Amin (2011, p2) poses a very interesting question on the role of elections in democratisation in Africa: “Should we give up on elections?” He argues we should not give up on elections. Instead, Amin suggests that democratic forces need to reinvent “new and rich forms of democratisation through which elections can be used in a way other than is conceived” by the dominant powers (Ibid.). However, other

African scholars disagree, and they view these birth pangs of democratisation from a different vantage point.

Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) rejects “the notion that democracy is something being imported into Africa from outside” (p1). He argues that democracy is not the preserve of Western societies (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998). The “norms and principles” bear a universal character, but the “concrete forms of democratic practice” depend on different cultural contexts (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, p10). Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) further argues that democracy has always been part of African culture, and it was stunted during colonial conquest. Hence, he argues that the conversation should not be about “Africanising democracy” (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, p1). Instead, the debate should be focused on the need to democratise Africa (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998). To this end, Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) suggests that there is a need to make a “critical assessment of the internal and external environment of democratic transition in Africa” so as to have a better understanding of the prospects of democracy on the continent (p1).

This study found Nzongola-Ntalaja’s (1998) exposition very helpful in grasping the challenges of democratic transition in Africa. Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) pointed out that the internal environment was “the primary arena and determinant of the democratisation process” (p1). Most of the current malaises bedeviling African countries are due to “the crisis of legitimacy of the postcolonial State” which has betrayed the aspirations of the majority of the citizens (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, p2).

Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) makes some interesting suggestions, arguing that the relationship between the State and democracy needs to be revisited and interrogated to ensure that the State does not “impede or block the democratic transition” (p3). Democratisation is not a one-off event; it is, rather, “a continuous process of promoting equal access to fundamental human rights and civil liberties for all” (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, p6). These fundamental tenets of democracy also encompass the rights to “peace and security, and fair and human treatment of citizens, residents, and visitors,

by the State” (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, p6). I think therein lies the challenge for most African countries in the democratic transition.

However, scholars of decoloniality offer a different theoretical perspective to the challenges of democratic transition in Africa. According to Chiumbu (2014), most of the discourses on democratisation and democracy in Africa are frequently viewed through the lenses of Western theoretical models. “These studies broadly see the media and democracy as symbiotically related” (Ibid. p35). She further argues that there is a need to contextualise discussions of democratisation in Africa within decolonial theories. Decolonial theories are closely related to “postcolonial thought, subaltern theory, dependency, World Systems analysis and African political thought” (Chiumbu, 2014, p34). In her research study, Chiumbu (Ibid.) used the decolonial theories to critically evaluate the legacies of the colonial encounter “that continue to shape and influence” the democratisation process in Africa.

Decoloniality can be defined as an epistemological approach that “seeks to liberate knowledge, power and being, and aims to produce “a radical and alternative knowledge” outside the dominant Western episteme (Grosfoguel, 2007, p 211). Walsh (2007, p226) supports the notion of decoloniality by arguing that “Western thinking must be confronted, and a difficult thought constructed and positioned from ‘other’ histories and subjectivities”. Decolonial theories help us to have a better appreciation of “the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administration” (Ibid, p219).

The concept of the colonality of power was first coined by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2007) and he defined it as “a global hegemonic model of power . . . that articulates race and labour, space and peoples, according to the needs of capital” (Escobar, 2007, p185). Chiumbu (2014) argues that the notion of colonality clearly illustrates how “social and political power is distributed”, and how this distribution of power is interlocked with colonial history and “forms a dynamic part of global imperial designs” (p38). I agree with Chiumbu’s (2014) assertions that the Western agenda of

promoting democracy in Africa is not motivated by benign interests (Ibid.). Rather, the agenda is aimed at promoting the European countries' foreign interests. This point is underscored by Mignolo (2007), who argues that the notion of the colonality of knowledge shows how "European knowledge systems are often privileged over other knowledges and epistemes" (cited in Chiumbu, 2014, p38). The same argument is also used in universalising democracy; Western knowledges and epistemes of democracy are often privileged over other narratives. Over the past few decades, we have seen how some Western countries have used foreign aid to support social movements in African countries. This type of support might not be as benign as it looks. The financial aid is often used to impose foreign models of democracy in Africa without taking due consideration of the different countries' political typologies.

I found Quinjano's (2007) research on knowledge production in Africa very instructive. According to Quinjano (2007, p169), "African modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, and of producing perspectives became subordinated to Euro-American epistemology that assumed universal proportions and universal truth". This type of attitude also applies to the hegemonic narratives on democracy. The hegemonic narratives are privileged over other narratives on democracy.

According to Chiumbu (2014, p35), the normative concept of democracy is part of colonial Europe's "modernity projects". Suarez-Krabbe (2013, p83) argues that democracy is not an ahistorical concept and to have a better grasp of its genealogical roots, we should contextualise it within its proper perspective, which was formed **"through a relationship of exploitation, violence and control that Southern Europe practised against its African and American others"** (cited in Chiumbu, 2014, p35, emphasis original).

Chiumbu (2014) further argues that the third wave of democratisation, which was introduced in Sub Saharan African (SSA) countries in the 1990s, was part of the colonial project. Most countries in SSA were forced to implement democratic reforms and economic structural adjustment programmes in order to attract foreign aid from

Western donor countries. Those which failed to implement these political and economic reforms were often treated as pariah States, and they were denied access to lines of credit on the international financial markets. According to Chiumbu (2014, p36) these reforms were often underpinned by “discourses of democracy, human rights and good governance” and the media were viewed as being “one of the tools for achieving these ideals”. This argument is supported by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a) who argues that coloniality should not be conflated with colonialism. While colonialism ended with decolonisation, coloniality refers to “the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism” (Ibid, p13). Decoloniality is defined as “the epistemic site” of former imperial colonies in the “construction of modern world order” (Ibid.). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a), Africa has not yet broken away from coloniality. The colonial structures, including political institutions, are still in place in the postcolonial era. As a result, this may partially explain why the process of democratisation has been stalled on the African continent.

On the other hand, scholars and nationalists like Nyerere (2000), have conceptualized democracy from a very different vantage point. He believed that we should not talk of democracy in the singular sense; rather, we should talk in the plural sense. Nyerere (2000) contended that different nations had different cultural and historical backgrounds and that is why we should embrace and celebrate each other’s uniqueness. To illustrate his point, Nyerere (2000) cited the British Westminster Parliamentary model which differs from the American Presidential model.

Other scholars like Ake (1996), support Nyerere’s (2000) arguments and contend that the Western model of democracy is adversarial and alien to African norms and values. Scholars argue that Africans had their own form of democracy before colonialism (Kwesi, 1995). Under the African traditional system, chiefs and kings lead their communities by consensus. The leaders were often assisted by a council of advisers (Kwesi, 1995). In addition, dissent was tolerated if it was within the interests of the whole community. This type of democracy ensured cohesion and integration in the community. However, Akpojivi (2018) believes that the system might be viewed as dictatorial according to Western standards of democracy. I think there is some element

of truth in some of these assertions, given the fact that most dictators in recent years have run down their countries behind the cloak of acting in the national interest.

On the other hand, I agree with Jakubowicz (2002) that good policy frameworks alone are not enough for democratisation in Africa. Generally, most African countries have great institutions for the promotion of democracy. However, what is often lacking is the strong political will needed to make these institutions more effective. For instance, one of the factors which inhibit the smooth operation of these institutions is undue political interference from leaders. In this thesis, I argue that in a real democracy there is a need to respect the separation of powers between the different arms of government. This is important in order to ensure that there are checks and balances in the nation State. One of the ways to ensure the checks and balances is to establish a media system which is free of government control and manipulation.

## 2.5 Media Systems

The media play a pivotal role in maintaining checks on the democratisation process. That explains why the media are regarded as one of the critical pillars of democracy. This study agrees with Boafo (1987) that the media systems in individual African countries are a microcosm of the media systems in the entire Sub-Saharan African region.

Boafo (1987) further argues that there is a need to democratise the media systems in Africa. The spatial distribution of media products and services in most African countries is skewed in favour of the urban elites (Boafo, 1987). Most of the media products and services are readily available in the urban areas where a small portion of the national population live (Boafo, 1987). On the other hand, the infrastructure for media systems in the rural areas, where a majority of the population live is underdeveloped (Boafo, 1987). This yawning gap in the urban-rural divide restricts the circulation and reach of messages in rural areas. Hence, it is imperative for African

countries to democratise their media systems in order to promote equitable development.

Hallin and Mancini's (2012) three-model paradigm offers a useful framework for analysing media systems in developed countries. The model comprises the following key elements: the Liberal Model, the Democratic Corporatist Model and the Polarized Pluralist Model (Ibid.). In addition, Hallin and Mancini's (2012) paradigm includes four dimensions, and these are "structure of the media markets, political parallelism, professionalism, and the role of the State" (p97).

Hadland (2012) believes that a major shortcoming of Hallin and Mancini's (2012) paradigm is that it is populated with a sample from developed countries. Developing countries were not included in the original study. However, over the past few decades enough headway has been made in designing African media systems typologies that "capture the features of political regimes, many of which are undergoing processes of substantial social and political change" (Hadland, 2012, p96).

An interesting outcome from Hadland's (2012) research studies is that the elements of both the Liberal and Polarized pluralism models in Hallin and Mancini's (2012) paradigm are clearly visible in the South African media systems. Hadland (2012) adds that the media also exhibited tendencies towards partisanship and clientelism. This was mostly noticeable in the print and broadcasting media. For Hadland (2012), this recent phenomenon is not surprising, since some South African politicians were key stakeholders in the ownership of the national media, and this includes President Cyril Ramaphosa. The media system in South Africa is not unique in Africa. It shares some commonalities with the media in Angola, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where the State has interests in both print and broadcasting media.

Hadland (2012) also raises some interesting points on Hallin and Mancini's (2012) critique on state intervention in the media. He has a valid point. Hadland contends

that, while Hallin and Mancini (2012) discuss State intervention in general, they do not take a close-up look at the different forms of State interventions that are often used in African countries (Ibid.). Tetey (2001) clearly illustrates the different forms the State frequently uses to cow the media. He argues that the State uses coercive force whenever necessary, even in contravention of its own constitution (Ibid.). In addition, it is not unusual for the State to use State-owned media to “discredit media critics” and pass “laws making insulting the president or members of parliament punishable offenses” (Ibid, p17).

On the other hand, Hadland (2012) argues that Hallin and Mancini’s (2012) paradigm is akin to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. It is “predicated on bourgeois rationality and on assumptions and values that are not dominant within what might be an African model” (Hadland, 2012, p116). I believe Hadland (2012) has a valid point. Hallin and Mancini’s (2012) paradigm is Eurocentric and not in harmony with the dynamics of the media-state nexus in African countries. This explains why Hallin and Mancini’s (2012) three-model paradigm is inadequate as a framework for analysing African media systems. There is a need for the conceptualization of broader African models based on the continent’s ethnic and cultural values and diversities.

## 2.6 Digital Media

The advent of new technologies has opened up political spaces for activists who are involved in the struggle for democratisation in Africa. In 2010 we witnessed the use of Information Communication and Information (ICT) affordances during the Arab Spring revolution in North Africa. The revolution started in Tunisia, before spreading to other African countries, like Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, In recent years we have witnessed a similar trend sweeping across Sub Saharan African countries, resulting in the removal of long entrenched dictatorships in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Sudan and Zimbabwe. To have a clear understanding and theoretical conceptualisation of the impact of digital media in the democratization process in Africa, this study has reviewed a wide range of literature on social media and democracy.

Scholars are divided on the impact of digital media on democracy. On one hand, we have those who have studied the relationship between digital media and activist practices (Barassi, 2015, p18). These studies show that digital activism has “widened the scope and reach of media activism, enabling the proliferation of new media forms and strengthening activists’ ability to mobilize and organize collective actions and effective ways” (ibid.). On the other hand, in recent times, two groups have emerged – techno-optimists (Shirky, 2008; Castells, 2009, 2012) and the techno-pessimists (Morozov, 2011). Castells (2012) has a positive view of digital media and believes it opens up democratic space for political participation that is “based on horizontal networks, political autonomy and leaderless organisation” (cited in Barassi, 2015, p9).

Castells (2012) is supported by Shirky (2008) and Papacharissi (2010) who also contend that new media can help to consolidate democracy. Shirky (2008, p172) believes digital media “enhance freedom” and help to “connect with others”, while Papacharissi (2010) argues that new media are a game changer in politics and “activities pursued in the public realm are today practised in the private realm with greater autonomy, flexibility, and potential expression” (Papacharissi, 2010, p164). The argument is illustrated by Bennett and Segerberg (2011) who argue that “digitally networked connective action uses broadly inclusive, easily personalised action frames as a basis for technology-assisted networking” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p771).

However, I concur with scholars like Fuchs (2017, p80) and Jenkins and Carpentier (2013, p19) who argue that the role of digital media in the process of democratisation should not be overstated. I think Papacharissi’s (2010) line of argument is overly simplistic. New media have their limitations. They cannot replace collective action. I agree with Fuchs (2017) that the digital media can only work in certain circumstances when they are deployed alongside collective action as a coordinating and organising tool. However, I disagree with Fuchs’s argument that “a lot of online politics is harmless” (Fuchs, 2017, p228).

The extent of digital media's influence on activism is not very clear, and it is open to debate. What is certain, nevertheless, is that new technologies provide powerful mobilising and organising tools for subaltern groups, especially those under authoritarian rule. Unlike Gladwell (2010) who argues that social media can only work in circumstances that "do not require people to make a real sacrifice" (p47), I believe the use of social media is not always harmless and a preoccupation of those seeking a feel-good factor "that has zero political or social impact" (Fuchs, 2017, p230).

### 2.6.1 Political Economy of Digital Media

This dissertation deploys the political economy approach to critically evaluate the location of digital media within the social power structures. According to Golding and Murdock (1978, p72), political economy approaches help to critically evaluate the social processes through which they are constructed and interpreted and the contexts and pressures which shape and constrain those constructions". Willems (2009) further argues that "normative political economy approaches" occupy a key role in the study of media studies in Africa, adding that the centrality of the political economy approach is to analyse the relationship between the media and the State (piii).

To have a better grasp of the political economy of digital media, this study also finds Fuchs's (2017) critical theory very instructive. Fuchs (2017) argues that there is a need to locate and analyse the asymmetrical power structures of domination and inequalities so as to have a better understanding of new technologies. The new media are a double-edged sword. They have emancipatory powers for the subalterns, and can also be used by political and economic elites for surveillance purposes. Zuboff (2019) called this form of power 'surveillance capitalism', adding that some of the digital media conglomerates like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Google and YouTube wield enormous economic and political influence in countries where they operate.

Recently, there has been a lot of debate on the role of digital media corporations in the democratisation processes in Africa. There have been renewed calls from some governments for the digital media behemoths, like Google, Twitter and Facebook, to

be regulated (Madowo, 2018). This comes against the backdrop of allegations that implicated the British ICT company, Cambridge Analytics, in attempts to manipulate general election results in Kenya in 2018 (Ibid.).

Voltmer et al; (2019) also discussed some of the challenges posed by digital media corporations in Africa. Voltmer et al; (2019) said Kenya and South Africa were some of the African countries that had experienced challenges to democratisation because of digital media. In a separate study, Hitchen et al; (2019) showed the contradictory nature of digital media and how WhatsApp was deployed as a double-edged sword in Nigerian general elections in 2019. Hitchen et al; (2019) added that “[. . .] the platform was used to mislead voters in increasingly sophisticated ways. But it also shows that WhatsApp strengthened democracy in other areas” (cited in Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020, p320).

To spread their political and economic influence in Africa, digital media conglomerates like Facebook have also used a strategy of making infrastructural investments in the continent. Nothias (2020) noted that Facebook’s Free Basics app is now accessible in 30 African countries and can be used by activists to circumvent internet shutdowns and State censorship.

The digital divide in Africa remains very wide, and the rate of internet penetration is very low compared to other continents. This yawning gap in internet penetration may be attributed to different factors. Mutsvairo et al; (2021) adds:

Africa, with its (at least) 54 countries, evidently, is far from being a monolithic continent. It hosts some of the most unequal countries in the world with the highest recorded level of income inequality. While many countries in the sub-Saharan region have registered remarkable economic performance over the last years, lifting millions out of extreme poverty and making healthcare and education available to larger shares of the populations, other countries have lagged behind. Also, digital technologies have entered different regions and countries at different periods of times and at a different pace (p6)

In 2021, Internet World Stats put the rate of internet penetration in Africa at 43.1 % (Internet World Stats, 2021). However, the statistics are thin on details and do not provide further information on the different types of internet usage in Africa (Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020). For instance, Manji et al; (2012) argue that “technology amplifies social differentiation” and this is eloquently illustrated in “the way the internet is distributed in Africa” (p5). In addition, the official statistics do not show how the internet penetration is distributed in terms of gender and class. In most African countries, internet usage is unevenly spread, and middle-class citizens own more than one mobile phone with internet access (Manji, et al; 2012). In addition, most people in African countries do not have subscribers’ accounts which are cheaper than the pay-as-you-go mobile phones due to the Kafkaesque requirements of the Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The ISPs normally require someone to have a bank account in order to apply for a subscriber’s account. This arrangement works to the disadvantage of marginalised sections of the population, who end up virtually subsidising the affluent, who are charged lower subscription rates.

Despite these major challenges, the digital media are a lucrative business in Africa, especially for private telecommunication networks. These networks are mostly responsible for internet connectivity, while African governments are generally responsible for the licensing and allocation of broadband spectrums to new entrants to the sector. Internet service providers (ISPs) are thus mostly privately owned, and their motivation is profit maximisation, and African governments act as regulatory authorities and ensure that the internet charges levied by private networks are justified, in line with the best business practices. The dominant ISP networks in Africa are Econet Wireless, which is owned by a Zimbabwean telecommunications network mogul, Strive Masiyiwa, and Vodafone, which is British-owned and has an African service that is based in South Africa.

Zimbabwe is among the few African countries with a well-developed infrastructure for internet connectivity (Bosch et al; 2020). The country’s rate of internet penetration has shown a sharp rise over the past few years. It grew from 9.8% in March 2008 to around 50% in 2016 (POTRAZ, 2019), and this steep rise is attributed mostly to “mobile

internet uptake” (Mare and Matsilele, 2020, p154). Another key development has been the introduction of “data bundles and zero-rated services for social media platforms” by ISPs (Ibid.). The usage of data bundles is termed ‘social media internet’ (Willems, 2016) and has resulted in the phenomenal rise of internet connectivity in the country.

In Zimbabwe the government plays the roles of both the player and referee in the digital media sector. It is one of the major players through its shareholding in telecommunications companies (telcos) such as Net \* One, Tel \* One, Africom and Telecel (Mare, 2020b). However, in terms of market share, Econet Global Limited enjoys “a virtual monopoly in terms of the provision of fixed and mobile internet through its ownership of Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, Liquid Telecom, and ZOL Zimbabwe” (Mare, 2020b, p4249).

On the other hand, the government also maintains its leverage in the telecommunications sector by acting as a regulatory authority through its two parastatals, the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) and the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ). The Postal and Telecommunications Act (2000) and the Interception of Communications Act (2007) provide guidelines for both State and non-State actors operating in the telecommunications sector. The Interception of Communications Act (2007) gives carte blanche powers to national intelligence, security, and revenue authorities to snoop on citizens’ messages and mobile phone calls (Mare, 2020b). The statutory instrument also includes the following provisions:

Section 9 of the Act imposes intermediary liability on telcos, thereby compelling them to install the hardware and software required for the government to carry out communications surveillance. The Act also requires telecommunications operators to set up a direct connection to the Interception of Communication Monitoring Centre to allow real-time monitoring of voice and data traffic. A company executive who refuses to comply with government orders faces up to three years in prison (Mare, 2020b, p4253)

In addition to the statutory instruments, the government controls four of the five international gateways for internet and voice traffic (Mare, 2020b). Three of the

international gateways are owned by Telecel, Tel \* One and Net \* One which are State-owned Enterprises (SOEs), while the fourth international gateway is owned by the Ministry of Defence, Security and War Veterans. The fifth international gateway is operated by Econet Wireless Zimbabwe (Mare, 2020b). Under the current set-up, the government enjoys a virtual monopoly in the international gateways sector, and this allows “the government to willingly interrupt international connectivity – voice and data – at the national level” (Mare, 2020b, p4252). Over the past few years, the government has used its monopoly in the international gateway market to greater effect by controlling internet and voice traffic so as to quell digital media activism. The government used its leverage in July 2016 and January 2019 when it introduced internet shutdowns to suppress dissent among citizens in digital communicative spaces.

According to the official statistics released in 2016 by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the most popular social media platform in Zimbabwe is WhatsApp (ITU, 2016). The platform has 2.2 million users (ITU, 2016). The official ITU statistics for 2016 also showed that Facebook occupies the second place with 1.2 million users (ITU, 2016), while Twitter has about 300, 000 users in Zimbabwe. The users are mostly youths and also include “millions of other Zimbabweans in the diaspora” (Mare and Matsilele, 2020, p154).

However, in times of economic and political crises, the government has often used its leverage over digital media to quell dissent in the country, e.g, in the past few years most youths have turned to social media sites, like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, to express their disenchantment with the deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe. As part of its strategy to contain restlessness among citizens, the government used “internet shutdowns and throttling to mute dissent in 2016 and 2019” (Mare and Matsilele, 2020, p154). However, such government actions do not always produce the desired effect of silencing dissent. In recent years, digital activists are becoming more savvy, and often use “virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent these controls” (Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane, 2018, p20).

In this regard, most of the opposition parties and social movements in Africa are increasingly turning to digital media to make their voices heard. For example, it is very unlikely that recent social movements in Africa, like #This Flag in Zimbabwe and #Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa, would have achieved their phenomenal global outreach without digital media. In addition, the use of Internet shutdowns in some African countries, in times of political crisis, shows that online politics, especially in countries under authoritarian rule, is harmful to those in power; it is not harmless as Fuchs (2015) suggests.

According to Wasserman, Bosch and Chuma (2018, p2154), social activists in South Africa often deploy digital media as communicative platforms “in the context of an asymmetrical and tenuous relationship with the mainstream media”. The activists use the new media to “gain visibility in a context where access to the mainstream media is limited” (Ibid.). Certain news reports on social activists are often misrepresented in mainstream media, and couched in stereotypical discourse of “violence, anarchy, and chaos to delegitimize community struggles” (Ibid.). The activists deploy “counterpower” (Castells, 2015, p9) to challenge “the dominant elites and their networks” (Castells, 2015, p10).

However, digital media are not always a force for good. For instance, Nazi groups and ISIS jihadists using digital spaces to spread their obnoxious ideologies, and this bears clear testimony that the new media can be used as a tool for “participation outside a democratic culture” (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013, p19). In this regard, I think Jenkins and Carpentier (Ibid.) have a valid point when they argue that “the notion of participation” should not be taken in isolation. Rather, it should be applied within the context of “substantive democracy” (Ibid.). Jenkins and Carpentier’s (2013) analysis may partly explain why, in recent years, we have witnessed a deluge of digital media activism in most non-democratic countries in Africa.

### 2.6.2 Digital Media Activism

Recently, there has been a renewed interest among African media scholars in the appropriation of digital media during general elections. Most of the literature relates to the way activists deploy Facebook live, WhatsApp and Twitter as part of their political communication strategies (Mare, 2018a; Matsilele, 2019; Ndlela, 2015; Willems, 2016; Ndlela and Mano, 2020; Mare and Matsilele, 2020). In addition, there has been a plethora of studies on the use of new media during electoral campaigns (Duncan, 2014; Mare, 2018a; Willems, 2016; Mare and Matsilele, 2020). It is also interesting to note that there are some striking similarities and differences in relation to how digital media are appropriated in both the global North and South. Most activists in Africa “continue to use social media as broadcast media, not as dialogic media, even those who claim to be appealing to youth audience” (Duncan, 2014, p24). Part of this strategy includes the use of traditional media platforms, like community meetings, rallies, posters, newsletters, pamphlets, and door to door campaigns. It is also interesting to note that, in these current times of digital media, some of these traditional platforms are often ‘digitised’ and used on social media platforms (Willems, 2016). However, there are some gaps in the current body of literature. While there is a wealth of studies on the use of traditional and digital media in the global North, there is a dearth of research on the topic in Africa (Mare and Matsilele, 2020). There is a lacuna in research on how activists are deploying both traditional and digital media as part of their communication strategies. This study addresses some of the existing gaps in research by exploring the relationship between digital media and other activist strategies.

### 2.6.3 Democratic Role of the Media

The previous sections of this chapter have critically interrogated the different models of democracy, the process of democratisation, media systems, digital media and digital activism. This section will make a critical analysis of the role of the mass media in Africa during the democratisation process. The current debates on the role of the mass media in Africa should be seen against the background of the Third Wave of

democratisation, which started in most countries in the Sub-Saharan African region in the early 1990s. As part of the democratisation process, African countries were expected to liberalise the media (Chiumbu, 2014). The media reforms were used as one of the preconditions for foreign aid and those countries which did not implement the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) conditionalities were unable to attract financial support from the Western donor countries. Against this backdrop, some African countries decided to liberalise their media systems and redefine the role of the media in the democratisation process.

However, the role of the media in the democratisation process in Africa was not without its challenges. According to Ansah (1988, p3), the role of the media remains a contentious one in a continent with different political ideologies “ranging from liberalism to authoritarianism”. Opinion remains divided among scholars on this issue. They do not have a common position. Scholars, like Ansah (1988), argue that for Africans to redefine the role of the media, it is instructive for us to draw from our “political and cultural traditions, regarding human rights in general, and freedom of expression in particular” (Ansah, 1988, p4). Ansah (1988) further argues that drawing lessons from our cultural heritage will help us to critique those “who argue that the concept of media freedom is alien to Africa and, therefore, a luxury that cannot be afforded at this stage of national development” (Ibid.).

I agree with Ansah’s (1988) argument and believe that for us to have a better understanding of the role of the media in Africa we also need to “examine the concepts of democracy and development to see their compatibility” (Ibid.). This study will help to situate the relationship between democracy and development into its proper perspective before conceptualizing the role of the media (Ansah, 1988). Ansah’s (Ibid.) position is supported by Nyamnjoh (2005), who argues for home-grown African models of democracy rooted in the “social realities of African citizens’ multiple identities and communal values” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p1).

It is often argued that most of the inherent problems of democracy in Africa are due to the lack of democratic traditions on the continent (Ansah, 1988). This argument is misleading and is based on several erroneous assumptions. According to Ansah (1988), in the pre-colonial times, African societies had democratic practices rooted in their traditions. Tyranny was not part of African culture; instead, the chiefs were assisted by a council of leaders in decision-making (Ansah, 1988). This setting ensured all voices were heard, and citizens' rights were protected in the king's or chief's court. Busia (1967) cited the Akhan community of Ghana as a classic example (cited in Ansah, 1988). The rulers of the Ashanti community often made wide consultations with the council of leaders and if there "was disagreement, they spent hours, even days, if necessary, to argue and exchange ideas, till they reached unanimity" (cited in Ansah, 1988, p5).

The example of the Akhan community clearly shows that recent cases of human rights violations in Africa are closely related to the excesses of the State "rather than to any traits inherent in African traditions" (Ansah, 1988, p5). To illustrate the point that human rights have always been part of African traditions, Ansah (1988) cites the example of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The charter was adopted on 27 June 1981 (Murray, 2019). The preamble of the charter shows that the notion of human rights has always been part of African tradition (Ansah, 1988). In addition, the Charter clearly spells out that "the right to receive information" and "the right to express and disseminate opinions within the law" are sacrosanct and should always be respected (Ansah, 1988, p6).

The issue of human rights and people's political rights is still a contentious one in Africa. Some scholars argue that the discourse of human rights and other civil liberties is a luxury most African countries cannot afford, since they are still grappling with the issues of development (Ansah, 1988). But what is often ignored in this debate is that the human element is a critical part in the equation of development. According to Ansah (1988), an "enlightened view of development" discusses the notion of development "as a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement including greater equality,

freedom and other valued qualities for a majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment” (p6). Thus, “the enlightened view of development” (Ibid.) is not just interested in development for its own sake. It also puts a high premium on human dignity and the need to involve people in charting their own destiny.

The enlightenment view is at variance with the developmental theoretical perspective which “enjoins the media to carry out certain development tasks as defined by national policy makers” (Ansah, 1988, p7). The developmental theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that development should be privileged over human rights and other civil liberties. The rationale behind the theory is that developing countries are still in their early stages of development and need a breathing space to build stability and strong institutions (Ansah, 1988). In addition, it is argued that, during the interim period, there is a need to build national unity and hence criticisms of public authorities and policies should be carried out in moderation (Ibid, p7).

As noted earlier elsewhere in this chapter, this interpretation of the development role of the media is contrary to “the enlightened view of development” which is underpinned by a participatory approach (Ansah, 1988, p8). The development role of the media should always be viewed “within the context of participation” (Ibid.). This argument is supported by Christine L. Ogan (1982) who argues that participation by the media in development needs to be analysed and situated in its proper context, in order to “mean the critical examination, evaluation and report of the relevance, enactment and impact of development” (p11).

Ansah further argues that for the media to make critical evaluation of the development process, they should act as neutral arbiters and free themselves from the shackles of State ownership and manipulation (Ibid.). This interpretation of the role of the media in development “brings it closer to the libertarian and social responsibility theories than to authoritarianism” (Ansah, 1988, p8). The argument is supported by Aggarwala

(1979), who argues that the role of the media within the context of the development theory,:

. . . is to critically examine, evaluate and report on the relevance of a development project to national and local needs, the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation, and the differences between its impact on people as claimed by government officials and as it actually is (p181).

The interpretation of the development theory on the media's role is not cast in stone, it is open to debate. This study has noted two interpretations that have emerged from Ansah's (1988) and Aggarwala's (1979) analyses. It is not clear which one is correct – the normative perspective (Aggarwala, 1979), which prescribes how the media should “serve society”, or the objective analysis (Ansah, 1988), which tries to describe “what the media actually do” (cited in Ansah, 1988, p8). In this study, I found Aggarwala's (1979) normative theoretical perspective very instructive. It helps to redefine the development theory within the context of the “participative communication models favouring democratic, grassroots involvement” (Ansah, 1988, p8).

Amin (1976) suggests a more participatory media system that is undergirded by liberal and democratic values. Amin's (1976, p126) notion of participatory media should not be viewed “within the context of either an adversary or servile relationship” between the State and the media system as suggested by Lowenstein (1979). Amin (1976) argues that, in order to serve the development agenda, both the government and the media can work together in harmony by creating a platform for national dialogue, generating ideas and consensus building (p126).

From this discussion, it is apparent that Amin's (1976) participatory theory supports the notion of pluralism within the media. The theory propounds a media system that accommodates a diversity of viewpoints and this shows that its ethos is compatible with the values of democracy and development in Africa. For Amin (1976), the role of the media should thus not be prescriptive, rather, its brief should be to inform and educate, He further argues that “social criticism and conflict are not necessarily disruptive” (Ibid, p133). They are important factors in creating and maintaining “a participant society and in contributing to sound national development” (Ibid.). Nyerere

(1973) also underscores the need for “participative communication for development” by adding:

Development brings freedom, provided it is development of people. But people cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves . . . A man develops himself by joining in free discussion of a new venture, and participating in the subsequent decisions; he is not being developed if he is herded like an animal into the new venture (p2)

The relationship between the State and the media has always been a very complex one. In certain countries, like South Africa, under liberal government, it has always been characterised by a love-hate relationship. The government supports the notion of media freedom as long as the media does not rock the boat. However, in other African countries under authoritarian or one-party dictatorship, the relationship is often characterised by “tension and conflict” (Ansah, 1988, p9). In illiberal countries, like Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zambia and Zimbabwe, the State media are often used as propaganda organs of the ruling parties. Alternative voices, including those of the opposition, are often denied access to the State media in an attempt to create “monolithic political institutions” (Ibid.). Instead, most of them rely on the alternative media to ensure that their voices are heard.

According to Ndlela (2009a, p88), the alternative media are often better positioned to offer “communicative spaces” aimed at encouraging participatory democracy through informed debate among subaltern groups. The communicative spaces provide citizens with the latitude to configure, negotiate and reproduce social power relations (Barnett, 2003). Nyamnjoh (2005) clearly describes the dilemma of most subaltern groups in Africa:

However repressive a government is and however profound the spiral of silence induced by standardized global media menus, few people are ever completely mystified or wholly duped. In other words, there is always room – sometimes through radical or alternative media (p204)

However, in the past few decades there have been a few noticeable changes in some African media systems due to the Third Wave of democratisation which was introduced in the early 1990s. The democratisation project was introduced as part of the neoliberal agenda of Western countries in the continent and African countries were

expected to liberalise their economic, political and media systems. Those countries which implemented the neoliberal reforms were often rewarded with access to international lines of credit.

However, not all countries have liberalised their media systems as part of the democratisation project. Some countries, like Zimbabwe, Angola, Zambia and South Africa, still retain some State ownership of the media. The degree of ownership differs from country to country. However, the countries share similarities in that State-ownership of the media is mostly situated in the broadcasting sector. In this regard, I think Ansah (1988) raises a very important point, when he argues that it is very rare for people to “seriously question the government’s ownership and control of broadcasting” (Ibid, p10). On the other hand, Ansah (1988) noted that there is a tendency to view State dominance in the print media sector “as a sign of authoritarianism and interference with people’s right to receive information from diverse sources” (Ibid.).

There is the danger of thinking that State-ownership of the media is always bad (Ansah, 1988). What is often forgotten is that the State often enjoys the mandate of the electorate, and this puts it in a better position to educate and inform about government programmes and policies. It is often argued that the government knows what is best for the people and always acts in the national good. This argument is supported by Ansah (1988) who argues that “a de facto government” would seem to have more moral authority to inform and educate citizens than “the owner of a private newspaper enterprise or an editor” (Ibid, p10). For instance, governments are careful with information which might compromise State security. Unlike private organisations whose sole motive is profit maximisation, which might be at variance with the national interests. It has also often been argued that governments have the moral authority to speak on behalf of the nation because their power is legitimised through regular general elections (Ibid.). On the other hand, people often question, with some justification, the source of the private media’s moral authority to speak on their behalf (Ibid.). The danger herein lies in a few individuals, who may conflate class interests and national interests, and this can allow some people with self-serving agendas to

worm their way into the media systems (Ibid.). For instance, we have seen how private media organisations were used to cause national disintegration and ethnic strife in some African countries, e.g. Rwanda. The media are a powerful weapon in the right hands; they can help to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance. They are a lethal weapon in the wrong hands; they can threaten national cohesion and integration.

However, Ansah (1988) argues that there is no perfect model for media ownership in Africa. Each model has its own weaknesses. For instance, the creation of State-owned media is likely to result in the establishment of a monopoly which will silence alternative voices. That might explain why most African countries like this model of ownership. It helps to silence dissent, especially opposition voices. On the other hand, media concentration allows a few individuals to determine what type of information people should get. In a democracy, this should never be allowed because it creates oligarchies who can manipulate public opinion and destabilise national cohesion and integration. In this chapter, I argue that what is of paramount importance is the creation of a media system that accommodates both public and private ownership of the media. Ansah (1988, p11) points out that the “plurality of channels of information will serve the interests of democracy better than a monopolization of the channels by the government”. He further argues that the ideal situation would be a set-up where both the state and the private sector are able to participate in the media system (Ansah, 1988).

One of the most contentious issues related to the debate on the media’s role in development and democracy in Africa relates to the watchdog role of the media. According to Ansah (1988), most African leaders normally prefer a servile media. This is a deliberate choice, “since the media are vital to the exercise of political power” (Ibid, p13). The rationale often used to justify state monopoly in the media sector is that “political institutions in developing countries are fragile and criticism of the government may be interpreted as a challenge to the legitimacy of the government” (Ibid.).

According to the proponents of this argument, the media should not play a watchdog role. Instead, it should merely act as a conduit between the government and the citizens. The media's role should be to explain the government's policies and not to criticise them.

However, what is often ignored in this debate is that there is a causal relationship between democracy and the media's watchdog role (Kasoma, 1995). An effective media system helps to ensure the smooth functioning of democracy. It is a *sine qua non* of democracy and ensures that leaders are transparent and accountable to the electorate, not only during elections, but on a regular basis (Ansah, 1988). Ansah (1988) further argues that even in emerging democracies with "fragile political institutions", the media can play a watchdog role (Ibid, p13). The media help to keep the government under public spotlight, and they are better positioned to "gauge and reflect public opinion" (Ibid). Ansah's (1988) argument is supported by Imanyara (1992) who argues that:

Generally, the role of the press in democratisation has been that of an independent forum and mouthpiece of crusaders of change. The openness of the alternative press to the public and its bold approach to sensitive and critical political issues, has had the cumulative effect of inciting the general public to wake up to their democratic rights and demand change. (p21)

Without free media, there is the risk of the government taking its citizens for granted and adopting a more complacent attitude. The former Tanzanian Foreign Minister, Mohammed Babu (1992), was correct about the media's role in the democratisation process:

A free press is the best guardian of people's democratic rights. Ideally, it should be owned by the people, by cooperatives, trade unions, local popular authorities, or by a combination of press technicians, journalists and private finances, and democratically controlled. (p14)

Ansah (1988) further argues that it is not enough for the media to play the role of a watchdog in a democracy. Part of their remit should include "fulfilling the role of an opposition" by fighting corruption and human rights abuses (Ibid.). In addition, the media should be the purveyor of alternative viewpoints. This point is supported by

Ndlela (2009a), who argues that the alternative media give a voice to subaltern groups who are often subdued by the dominant powers. Citing Zimbabwe as an example of a country under authoritarian rule, Ndlela (Ibid.) argues that the alternative media often play a critical role by creating communicative spaces in which citizens can make informed political and social commentaries. The media help in “educating the people about the different political parties and candidates available for choice” (Ibid, p88). As a result, the media empower citizens within the context of participatory democracy.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This section summarises the key points of this chapter by critically evaluating the different models of democracy and the different counter hegemonic narratives (Mamdani, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Chiumbu, 2014) to the received understanding of democracy (Huntington, 1991; Held, 2006; Dahl, 1989; Potter, 1997) which is Western in outlook. According to Mamdani (1996), the Western notion of democracy is perverted and ahistorical. It deliberately ignores the colonial legacy of most African countries.

For Mamdani (1996), Nyamnjoh (2005), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Chiumbu (2014), there is no universal definition of democracy or democratisation. Both concepts can only be applied within a specific cultural and political context. No two nation States are exactly alike. Each nation State has its historical and cultural heritage. That is why democracy should be contextualised within the specificities of each country.

On the other hand, Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) argues that the critical factor is not the need to Africanise democracy. What Africa needs is democratisation. He (Ibid, p1) further argues that democracy should not be viewed as an “import from outside”, and continues that democracy is not only a universal normative concept, but is also a process and practice, adding that some of the basic tenets of democracy are part of the African value system. That is why there is an urgent need for Africa to democratise in order to promote social change on the continent. The central theme of democratisation as an agent of social change will be addressed in the other chapters

by assessing the extent to which digital media activism (e.g. by using social networking sites, like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) has contributed to social and political change in Zimbabwe. In that regard, the next chapter will shed more insights into the methodological approach that is deployed in this study in order to explore the nexus between democratisation and digital activism in African countries in democratic transition, such as Zimbabwe. It is hoped that the insights from this chapter will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of how citizens in developing countries exercise their agency in reclaiming their fundamental democratic rights by using the affordances of new technologies.

## CHAPTER 3: Methodology

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter explores and critically analyses the qualitative research methodology before identifying and discussing the different methods which were used in this study. There is no consensus among scholars on the differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Green and Thorogood (2014) draw a distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. They believe qualitative research refers to “language data”, while quantitative research refers to “numerical data” (Green and Thorogood, 2014, p5). However, this distinction has some faults. The dividing lines between qualitative and quantitative research are often blurred. For instance, some qualitative studies use frequency counts to analyse data, while certain quantitative studies use language data to support their claims (Green and Thorogood, 2014).

This study agrees with Green and Thorogood’s (2014) argument on the key characteristics of qualitative research. They suggest that qualitative research should not be determined by the type of data collected, or by the data collection methods used (Ibid.). Instead, qualitative research should be informed by the major objectives of the study. Qualitative research should thus “seek answers to questions about the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a phenomenon, rather than questions about ‘how many’ or ‘how much’ “ (Ibid, p5).

Using qualitative research methods, this study seeks to theorise the relationship between digital media activism and the democratisation process in countries in democratic transition like Zimbabwe. As is the norm with most qualitative research studies, this chapter used the inductive approach in analysing the relationship between the data and the theory. Using the grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the study has attempted to create “insightful empirical generalizations” and theory from the collected data (Bryman, 2012, p27). Some studies argue that grounded theory is ideal for “generating theories out of data” (Ibid.). However, it is necessary to maintain

an open mind during the research process so that “concepts and theories can emerge out of data” (Ibid, p12). This principle undergirds “the inductive approach to theorizing and conceptualization” used in qualitative research (Ibid.).

The study has also critically evaluated the different research methods, assessed the advantages and disadvantages of each method and provided a justification for using each of the methods utilised in the study. In addition, the chapter also investigates and reflects on the ethical implications and challenges the different methods have posed for the study.

### 3.1 Research Design

To clarify the methodological issues raised in this study, I shall first interrogate the relationships between its ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that there is no way we can conduct research without a well thought out framework or paradigm. A paradigm helps us to address key concepts like ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology (Ibid.).

A paradigm encompasses four concepts: ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology. Ethics asks, How will I be as a moral person in the world? Epistemology asks, How do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world. Methodology focuses on the best means for gaining knowledge about the world (Ibid, p157).

A research design can thus be defined as the framework or paradigm of a study. It is elaborative and includes “the plan, the structure and strategy of the investigation”, which is used by the researcher to get answers to the research questions (Burnham, et al; 2008). In other words, the research design forms the theoretical framework for data collection and analysis, and it helps the researcher to create new knowledge about a phenomenon.

Methodological issues which refer to “how this reality can be known” will be discussed in the next section (Savigny, 2007, p36). The study used a multipronged

methodological approach which included Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), Zoom video conferencing, participant observation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis (TA). The choice of my methodology was deliberate and is informed by my research aims and objectives. I believe the methodology is best suited to addressing the following research questions as part of this study's brief:

1. What is the relationship between democratic transition and digital media activism in Zimbabwe?
2. To what extent has digital media activism, for example using Facebook, Twitter and online media platforms, contributed to social change in Zimbabwe?
3. What are the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and in similar African contexts?

After addressing the research questions, the research study discussed the data collection methods in the next section.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The study used purposive sampling strategy to collect materials for data analysis. The advantage of using purposive sampling lies in that it offers the researcher the latitude to select units of analysis which are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p418). Patton (1990) adds:

The logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases . . . whose study will illuminate the questions under study (p169)

In addition, to avoid traces of bias, the study ensured that different demographic groups, in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, social class and political affiliation, were represented in the sample.

Using qualitative research methods, the corpus for the study comprised visual, verbal and multimodal/multimedia materials from three social media platforms, #Tajamuka/Sijikile; #ThisFlag and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. The three movements

represent a new phenomenon in political activism in Zimbabwe – they are run by individuals and do not have clear organisational structures. However, they have a strong presence on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This point is illustrated by Chuma and Ndou (2019, p4) in their recent study on the role of social media platforms in Zimbabwe. The scholars noted that social media platforms played a very significant role in the country’s media ecosystem. Most of the platforms “feed into legacy media such as radio, newspapers and television” in order to foster political and social commentary (Ibid.). In addition, it is important to note that Zimbabwean politics is highly polarised, and this is also reflected in the country’s media system. That is why the corpus for this study also included transcripts from 45 qualitative interviews with State and non-State actors, such as political activists from both the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and the opposition parties. In addition, the study also interviewed editors and journalists from both the State and the private media, academics and leaders of civil society.

The study used a qualitative research strategy to collect primary and secondary data. Webb and Webb (1932, p100) describe primary data as documents that “are secreted exclusively for the purpose of action”, while secondary data are “literature which constitutes all other writings yielding information as to what purports to be fact”. This study has used primary data in the form of personal correspondence and artefacts from social media platforms, and secondary data, such as government policy documents and legal instruments. It employed the following research methods – qualitative interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Moses and Knutsen (2007) argue that:

Different social scientists approach the world with different assumptions about how it actually is, and how they should appropriately study it. As a consequence, standard methods are used in different ways, when employed by scientists coming from different methodological perspectives (p7)

However, this researcher is aware that no single method is perfect and that is why I have used triangulation for data collection and analysis here. Triangulation involves the use of different methods when investigating a phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). Denzin (Ibid.) offers a more precise definition of triangulation. He defines it as a theoretical

perspective that employs “multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data and methodologies” in investigating a phenomenon (Ibid, p310). Denzin’s (1970) argument is supported by Burnham, et al; (2008, p40), who further argue that the use of more than one method “may provide complementary data which can strengthen” the outcomes of a research study.”

“This strategy of cross-checking data by using a variety of research methods is known as triangulation” (Burnham, et al; (2008, p40). In a nutshell, triangulation thus involves the use of two or more methods in researching a phenomenon. In the next section I will briefly discuss each of the methods that I have used in my research and provide a rationale for each of them.

### 3.2.1 Zoom Video Conferencing

The advent of new technologies has transformed ways of collecting data for qualitative research. As a result, face-to-face interviewing is no longer the only method used in qualitative research to collect rich data (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006). For instance, under the current conditions of the lockdowns created by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not feasible for me to conduct in-person interviews with my respondents in Zimbabwe. The country was under lockdown and people’s movements were severely restricted.

COVID-19 is influencing how people engage with one another in geographical space. Stay-at-home orders and social distancing have reduced people’s bodily presences and social interactions in public spaces (James, 2020, p1)

Due to the challenges created by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, I used a video conferencing platform called Zoom to conduct the qualitative interviews for my research. Zoom video conferencing can be used as an alternative method to face-to-face interviewing when the participants are “geographically dispersed, unable or unwilling to travel” (Gray, et al; 2020, p1292). The online platform was originally developed “to facilitate long-distance or international communication, enhance collaborations and reduce travel costs for business” and these attributes of Zoom

video conferencing can be easily harnessed to conduct qualitative research (Ibid.). For instance, part of my research's brief included conducting in-depth interviews with respondents from the major conurbations in Zimbabwe, like Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Masvingo and Mutare. With the help of Zoom, I was able to cover the geographical spread of most of these major cities, and some of the outlying rural areas with internet access.

From the outset, it is very clear that Zoom video conferencing has several advantages, which make it very appealing to most people as a research tool. A major advantage of Zoom is that it allows two or more participants in different geographical locations to engage in video conferencing in synchronous, real time (Gough and Rosenfeld, 2006). Respondents are more comfortable when being interviewed in their natural habitat, "without disrupting their usual work and home schedules" (Gray, et al; 2020, p1297). They can also exit from the interviewing at any time, and this is "less intimidating than leaving an in-person interview in an unfamiliar environment" (Ibid.). Respondents also have a wide range of other options to choose from: they can either connect to Zoom, using mobile telephony, tablet or desktop computer. However, Zoom is more effective when it is supported by an efficient "hardware and high-speed internet access" (Gray, et al; 2020, p1293). In addition, the participants also need access to a reliable supply of electricity in order to derive maximum benefits from the video conferencing platform. In developing countries like Zimbabwe where access to the internet is often affected by government shutdowns, one needs to come up with contingency measures in the event of internet shutdowns. In addition, it is also vital to devise contingency measures in the event of power cuts due to electricity load-shedding, which is why it is vital to have a back-up plan in the event of technical problems or loss of internet access. For instance, as the researcher, I always advised respondents before the interviewing that I would telephone them if any problems arose. In addition, the researcher can always "allow additional interview time to accommodate unexpected delays" (Hai-Jew, 2015; Smith, 2014).

The other major advantage of Zoom is that it is user friendly. The platform has key features that can be used to generate an "electronic meeting invitation" and "a live link

that only requires a click to join the meeting” (Gray, et al; 2020: 1294). In addition, these features also allow the researcher and respondents to share and discuss key documents like the informed consent form (ICF) and participant information sheet (PIS). Zoom’s features also help to protect confidentiality and the video conferencing software includes “password protection for confidentiality and recording capacity to either the host’s computer or Zoom’s cloud storage” (Ibid.). However, it is also imperative for the researcher to take precautions to ensure that any data saved on their personal computer is secure in order to ensure confidentiality. To this end, it is advisable to avoid saving data on a computer with multiple users as this may make the information vulnerable (Buchanan and Zimmer, 2012).

Zoom also offers the researcher the latitude to observe the respondents close to. It provides a rare opportunity for the researcher to observe the respondents’ non-verbal cues and this “may provide the interviewer with a glimpse into the participant’s life” (Gray, et al; 2020, p1297). In this regard, Miller and Slater (2000) argue that the “media can provide both the means of interaction and modes of representation that add up to ‘spaces’ or ‘places’ that respondents can treat as if they were real” (p4). However, we should always remember that while the interviewer and the respondents may be able to see each other through Zoom, “they do not occupy the same physical space resulting in missed opportunities for the researcher to observe the respondents’ physical space and respond to body language and emotional cues (Gray, et al; 2020, p1298). In addition, while Zoom video conferencing allows both the researcher and respondents to choose their own area, the location may be unsuitable for online interviewing due to distractions. In that case, researchers may get around issues of distraction and privacy by using private spaces and advising respondents to take similar precautions to protect their privacy and confidentiality (Ibid.).

Another advantage of using video conferencing is that it is cost-effective and allows the researcher to recruit respondents from different localities without worrying about the travel costs (Rupert et al. 2017) and also removes mobility barriers for respondents, who may have problems in accessing the research site (Benford and Standen, 2011).

However, using Zoom as a research method comes with its own challenges. The costs of the video conferencing hardware (i.e. smart phone, tablet or desktop computer) might be prohibitive and beyond the reach of the majority of people, especially in a developed country like Zimbabwe with a high digital divide. It is likely that most people in the rural areas were unable to participate in the study due to the prohibitive costs of computer hardware and internet connectivity costs. Although Zoom provides free membership, I concede that it might be advisable to upgrade the membership to derive maximum benefits from the video conferencing platform. Free membership entitles the interviewer to only 40 minutes, whereas paid membership raises the entitlement to almost one hour per session. In addition, one may also encounter technical challenges in installing and using the software. However, this problem can only be addressed through training. Otherwise without sufficient training, the interviewer will experience challenges in making the most out of Zoom's features for recording, uploading, storage and retrieval of data. To overcome some of these challenges, the study triangulated its data collection strategies and included other methods, such as semi-structured interviewing.

### 3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is sometimes referred to as qualitative or in-depth interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Mason, 1996). The interview format falls between a formal and informal interview. A distinct feature of a semi-structured interviewing is that the interviewer acts as a moderator and guides:

. . . the interview but permits the various aspects of the subject to arise naturally, in any order, and can allow digressions if they seem likely to be productive" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p79).

Hence, semi-structured interviewing can be defined as "a less structured approach to the collection of data, which reflects the use of open-ended questions" (Bryman, 2012, p12). The semi-structured interview thus has both elements of "the open-ended interview and informal conversation" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p79).

Semi-structured interviewing is most convenient in situations where the research study has a specific focus and the research questions are clearly defined (Bryman, 2012). This study seeks to explore the relationship between digital media activism and the democratisation process in Zimbabwe. The research study's brief entailed interviewing State and non-State actors who are involved in digital media activism. State actors included senior civil servants, State media journalists, editors and politicians, while non-State actors included academics, private media journalists, editors, social movements, gender and human rights activists.

The other advantage of using semi-structured interviewing is that it allows the researcher to collect data without breaching best ethical practices. The method is less intrusive compared to other methods like participant observation. This study conducted semi-structural interviews in the interviewees' 'natural habitat', and attempted to "elicit very personal responses, without taking as much time as informal conversation" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p79).

Another major advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that it allows the researcher to approach his/her subject with an open mind "about the contours of what he/she needs to know about, so that the concepts and theories can emerge out of the data" (Bryman, 2012, p12).

However, it is worth noting that semi-structured interviewing has its own disadvantages and one of them is that "it takes more time than the structured interview" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p79). Due consideration should be taken when moderating a semi-structured interview to ensure that all the relevant answers to the research questions are answered within the agreed time slot (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005).

Nonetheless, despite this shortcoming, Kvale (1996) argues that interviews are a vital tool for capturing qualitative data. In this regard, the study conducted 45 interviews as

part of the primary data collection exercise. An actor-based approach was used to purposively select respondents both in the diaspora and inside Zimbabwe. According to Stieglitz and Dan-Xuan (2013), “in political communication, particularly in the blogosphere and recently on SNS and microblogging platforms”, there are some users who command a lot of respect and influence among their peers (p1283). These influencers wield a lot of power within their communities (Stieglitz and Dan-Xuan, 2013). In this regard, this research purposively selected actors who are involved in opinion-making in digital communicative spaces. The respondents were drawn from a broad spectrum of Zimbabweans, both in and outside the country, and these included journalists, academics, digital media activists, politicians, senior civil servants and non-governmental organisation (NGOs) officials. I was also concerned to ensure the balanced demographic profile of my respondents. Accordingly, I made sure that different groups were well represented in terms of gender, ethnicity, race and age. The actor-based approach was also used to systematically select the social media platforms of the influencers, while QCA and TA were used to analyse the texts and images. The corpus for the study was stored safely using encryption devices. Apart from semi-structured interviews, I also used participant observation as part of my methodology.

### 3.2.3 Participant Observation

Participant observation is one of the methods normally used in qualitative research. A key feature of participant observation is that “it entails the relatively prolonged immersion of an observer in a social setting” (Bryman, 2012, p273). The method provides the researcher with a rare opportunity to “observe the behaviour of that setting and elicit the meanings they attribute to their environment and behaviour” (Ibid.). Moug (2007) adds that:

Watching and listening to what people do, and how they behave in particular situations is the foundation of all observational methods (p109)

Moug’s (2007) observation reinforces the argument that participant observation helps to create rich data by not only listening to the respondents’ accounts, but also through observing how they behave in their social setting.

Contrary to Beckter and Geer's (1957, p28) assertion that the "most complete form of the sociological datum . . . is the form in which the participant observer gathers it", I agree with Trow (1957, p33) that "the problem under investigation properly dictates the method of investigation". I believe some research methods are better in some areas than others (Bryman, 2012), and that is why I chose to use participant observation alongside semi-structured interviewing. I believe the two methods complement each other.

As a research method, participant observation is normally used in ethnographic studies (Bryman, 2012). It is often used alongside other methods like interviewing. According to Bryman (Ibid, p497), participant observers usually "buttress their observations with methods of data collection that allow them access to important areas that are not amenable to observation". This method helped me to gain more insight into the experiences of some of the digital media activists during the data collection exercise. For instance, I interviewed some of my former students who are now working as senior reporters and editors in Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom (UK). I also took advantage of digital technologies to cultivate relationships with my former networks. This entailed spending more time observing web-based social platforms.

However, participant observation, like any method, has its limitations. That is why I was a little bit discreet when using participant observation and avoided being too "intrusive in people's lives" and "disrupting rhythms of their work lives" (Bryman, 2012, p495). It is thus important to "maintain a degree of detachment so as to maintain the role of observer and researcher" (Burnham, et al; 2008, p269). Otherwise, there is the great risk of going 'native'. Hence, it is always important to remember that no matter how much you might try to fit into the group, you should always remember that you are an outsider, and should "therefore negotiate a role which is acceptable to the group and where you can function as both participant and observer" (Ibid.).

So far, I have discussed this research as if I were physically and emotionally separated from the study. However, as a Zimbabwean citizen I could not completely detach

myself from the study emotionally, intellectually and practically (Tedlock, 1991). Furthermore, whilst observing the respondents, there was ongoing interaction between me and them, even when there was no verbal exchange. This was because I was observing the respondents and making judgements about their behaviour, and they too were observing me and 'reacting' to my behaviour during the Zoom video conferencing interviews. Analysing the behaviours of respondents as if they were completely abstracted from such interactions would therefore be misleading (Tedlock, 1991). It is for this reason that this study used participant observation alongside other data collection methods like semi-structured interviewing and documents as sources of data, in order to gain a more objective reality.

#### 3.2.4 Documents as Sources of Data

This study also used documents as sources of data. Documents are an invaluable tool in social research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) noted that the importance of documents in research cannot be overemphasised as they are like "the anthropologist's informant or a sociologist's interviewee" (p163).

Scott (1990) outlines four types of documents in his typology of documents, and these include personal documents, official documents, mass media output and online data. However, this study's corpus was curated from official documents and social media platforms, e.g. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The official documents included government policy and statutory documents on digital media, while online data included materials from the social media platforms of #Tajamuka/Sijikile; #ThisFlag and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. In addition, the study also used a corpus of artefacts from the digital platforms of some of the prominent Zimbabwean social media influencers like the veteran journalist and award-winning film-maker, Hopewell Chin'ono, and the late United Kingdom (UK)-based lawyer and academic, Dr Alex Magaisa.

Documents, as sources of data, have several advantages in social research. Firstly, the documents reveal a certain time period and allow the researcher to "follow changes in policy and practice" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p133). The other advantage is that documents are "relatively permanent" and can be used several times (Ibid.).

However, using documents from social media platforms poses a few challenges. One of them is the issue of authenticity and credibility. Not all the material posted on social media platforms is authentic and credible. Some of the posts are fake. To this end, this study used Scott's (1990) criteria for evaluating documents. Scott (Ibid.) postulates that for a document to be validated, it should be assessed using four critical factors, which are authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Authenticity relates to the document's originality, while credibility refers to its accuracy (Scott, 1990). On the other hand, representativeness looks at the totality of the document's category or class and meaning alludes to whether the document conveys what it is meant to say (Ibid.).

In addition, documents also have a few disadvantages as sources of data. One of them is that documents can be very "difficult to track down" without an efficient and reliable data management system (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p133). However, document collection as a source of data can be more effective if used alongside other sources of qualitative data collection, e.g. semi-structured interviewing and participant observation and data analysis methods, like QCA and thematic analysis (TA). The next section of this study will discuss data analysis.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical stage of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000). That is why some scholars believe that it is important for data analysis to be systematic and transparent (Malterud, 2001; Sandelowski, 1995). In addition, it is pertinent for researchers to be very succinct about all the processes and outcomes of data analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Tuckett, 2005). Bryman (2012) contends that:

The data analysis stage is fundamentally about data reduction – that is, it is concerned with reducing the large corpus of information that the researcher has gathered so that he/she can make sense of it. Unless the researcher reduces the amount of data collected, by grouping textual material into categories like themes – it is more or less impossible to interpret the material (p13).

This study used the following methods for data analysis – Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and Thematic Analysis (TA). In the next section the study will discuss these different methods of data analysis.

### 3.3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

Berelson (1952) defines Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) as one of the most effective qualitative methods used in research when working with large data sets.

According to Berelson (1952), QCA is:

[ . . . ] is a research technique for the objective, systemic and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication (p18)

Another definition by Holsti (1969) is more precise:

Content analysis is a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (p14)

QCA normally uses two types of strategies in analysing data and these are “concept-driven categories” and “data-driven categories” (Schreier, 2012, p94). Concept-driven categories are based on “theory, prior research, logic or everyday knowledge”, while data-driven categories are derived grounded theory and include the “use of open and selective coding” (Ibid.). This study has confined itself to data-driven categories and these included open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding involves the breaking down of data into categories, using the research question as a guideline. On the other hand, axial coding focuses on linkages between the different categories, while selective coding aims to identify the core theme from the data set.

Contrary to the old adage, which says that ‘data speaks for itself’, QCA is most suitable in cases which require interpretation of data. It is a “very transparent method” and “the coding scheme and the sampling procedures” can be arranged in such a way that “replications and follow-up studies are feasible” (Bryman, 2012, p304). According to Schreier (2012), meaning is neither fixed nor natural. Rather, it is constructed and open to different interpretations, and QCA helps to unpack the meanings in the texts.

This may explain why most researchers use QCA as an objective tool of analysis. The research method is objective and suppresses any traces of bias in its analysis.

The other advantage of QCA is that it helps the researcher in dealing with rich data by focusing only on the salient points relevant to the research question (Schreier, 2012).

However, QCA has some major challenges, too. The main disadvantage is that it takes a lot of time. There is a need to check the data's accuracy and to ensure its representativeness (Burnham, et al; 2008). In a nutshell, the method "can only be as good as the document on which the practitioner works" (Bryman, 2012, p306). Scott (1990) suggests that research texts should be scrutinised for "authenticity, credibility and representativeness" in order to ensure the best outcomes from QCA research. Such precautions are necessary when dealing with digital artefacts because some of the documents may be photoshopped.

The other limitation of QCA is that it focuses on themes which frequently recur in the data. The other minor themes which appear infrequently in the data set are often "neglected or ignored altogether, even though they may be important" (Burnham, et al; 2008, p264). In addition, QCA is not ideal for data sets "with highly standardized meanings" (Schreier, 2012, p2). The method only works with texts whose meanings are "less obvious" (Ibid.). However, to ensure validity and reliability in my research, I triangulated Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) with Thematic Analysis (TA). In the next section, I will briefly discuss thematic analysis (TA) and offer my rationale for using it in my research.

### 3.3.2 Thematic Analysis (TA)

Thematic Analysis (TA) can be defined as a qualitative method that is used to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). They further argue that TA not only "organises and describes rich data", it also allows the researcher to interpret "the various aspects of the research topic" (Ibid, p79).

The method is also not aligned to one theoretical framework. Instead, it can be used alongside “a range of epistemologies and research questions” (Nowell, et al; 2017, p2).

A major advantage of using thematic analysis is that it is flexible and can be easily modified to suit the needs of different studies and provide rich and complex data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). For Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), this method helps to unpack similarities and differences within the data sets. By so doing it helps to summarise the key points of large data sets by selecting salient themes. However, while flexibility is a major advantage of thematic analysis, it can also be included among its limitations. This is because flexibility can result in inconsistency and incoherence in developing themes from the research data sets. In this regard, I agree with Holloway and Todres (2003) who argue that cohesion and consistency are vital in taking a clear epistemological stance that underpins any research’s claims. To address this limitation, I intend to triangulate thematic analysis and QCA when analysing my data sets. After analysing the data set, this study addresses issues relating to accessing information and gatekeepers in the next section.

## 3.4 Access

### 3.4.1 Challenges in Nondemocratic Countries

In recent years a good number of scholars in the global North have taken a keen interest in research practices in what is termed ‘closed contexts’ (Ahram and Goode, 2016; Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018; Reny, 2016; Richardson, 2014; Roberts, 2013; Sordi, 2016). Other scholars use different terms and refer to these political settings as “illiberal”, “authoritarian,” “nondemocratic,” “coercive,” or “exceptions” within the prevailing “liberal” system (Koch, 2013, p390). While there is a wide body of literature in the global North on research practices in nondemocratic countries, there is a paucity of scholarship on the subject in nondemocratic contexts in the global South, particularly in African countries. The focus of this study is on the use of digital media

in countries in democratic transition in Africa, with Zimbabwe as the case study. Some studies on democracy categorise countries like Zimbabwe as hybrid regimes. A hybrid regime has the attributes of both a democratic and an authoritarian regime (Loyle, 2016). While Zimbabwe holds regular general elections, its key institutions like the judiciary and the media, do not enjoy unfettered freedoms. The media and judiciary are 'captured' by the State. Against this background, it is necessary to discuss some of the challenges that I experienced in accessing data and the "ways of coping with the limitations imposed by closed regimes" (Good and Ahram, 2016, p823).

The current political situation in Zimbabwe is extremely volatile and highly polarised. Some respondents tended to hide their true feelings about the political situation in the country for fear of being victimised. Others preferred to be non-committal in their responses, in order to avoid surveillance by State security agents. This observation is supported by Kuran's (1995) argument on the challenges of collecting data in countries under authoritarian rule. Kuran (Ibid.) argues that "the forces that discourage truthful expression [in nondemocratic regimes] also inhibit the collection of data" (p1538).

Goode and Ahram (2016) argue that repression in nondemocratic societies can take different forms. Apart from using state-sanctioned violence, hybrid regimes can also "withhold patronage or use bureaucratic harassment to induce compliance" (p827). While in high-capacity hybrid governments the state has a virtual monopoly of the coercive and violence apparatus, in low-capacity nondemocratic regimes, the state does not enjoy the monopoly of violence. In both instances, respondents can "engage in preference falsification" because they feel threatened by violence and coercion from state and non-state actors like "*caciques*, warlords and crime bosses" (Ibid.). Confronted with such cases, it is important for the researcher to be more discreet and circumspect when dealing with respondents and give them assurances of confidentiality and privacy. In this regard, Goode and Ahram (Ibid.) argue that:

Without awareness of context gained from immersion in the field and the corresponding sense of the 'on stage' and 'off stage' differences in a community's life (Kuran, 1995, p1542), the interviewer potentially becomes the unwitting agent of the respondent (p827)

However, it is necessary to note that preference falsification is not only restricted to nondemocratic regimes in the global South. The practice is also widely used by some prominent politicians during interviews in some of the well-established democracies in the global North (Morris, 2009). Moynihan (1997) further argues that no State is perfect and even the so-called paragons of democracy have some elements of authoritarianism embedded in their political systems.

On the other hand, conducting research in a hybrid regime like Zimbabwe is not without its challenges. It is like treading in a minefield full of booby traps, and the red lines are not always black and white, so to speak. Against such a backdrop, a researcher demands a lot of methodological creativity and resilience. In addition, it is very important for researchers to “make difficult choices about personal safety and the safety of informants” among their priorities during fieldwork (Goode and Ahram, 2016, p828). In this regard, there are several works on the protection of subjects during research in established democracies but very scant material on the best practices which should be deployed in similar situations in nondemocratic contexts (Burgess, 1984; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011; May, 2011; Kapiszewski, MacLean and Read, 2015; Smeltzer, 2012).

In addition, researchers should guard against taking things at face value without probing further so as to find out what lies in the underneath. It is normal for hybrid regimes to condition and embrace research, and reflexivity helps to unpack the underlying “power differentials that define research on authoritarian regimes” (Goode and Ahram, 2016, p828). One of the major differentials is the relationship between the researcher and the subjects and it is defined by “the capriciousness of regimes, the risks of coercion or intimidation, and the consequent possibilities of censorship, either on the part of respondents or the scholar herself [or himself]” (Ibid.). Without a sense of reflexivity, researchers working in nondemocratic environments risk metamorphosing into partisans by “presenting one-sided data drawn only from opposition figures or unintentionally replicating the agendas of State agencies or nongovernmental organisations” (Ibid.).

Hence, the importance of reflexivity during qualitative interviews cannot be overemphasised. Reflexivity helps the researcher to unpack a lot of meaning. Koch (2013) argues that a lot of meaning is attached to silences during interviews, adding that “more meaning can often be found in **silences** [emphasis in the original], rather than what is openly expressed or practised” (p393). Free speech in hybrid regimes often comes at great cost to civil and political liberties. For instance, it might break one’s career or put one’s family in danger of State violence.

### 3.4.2 Access to Gatekeepers

One of the major stumbling blocks that is often faced by researchers is how to gain access to information and gatekeepers. This is normally due to suspicion. People tend to be wary of strangers. Hence, trust issues often come into play when dealing with strangers. One needs to tread the ground very carefully. There is a need to build trust and confidence before extracting information from the respondents, especially if they are strangers in a country like Zimbabwe with a diverse population and different racial and ethnic groupings (Tonkin, 1984). It is also important for researchers to design coping mechanisms with which to address trust issues.

Lindley (2009) suggests that it is important to deal with existing networks in order to build trust. I often find this strategy very useful in my circumstances. I have worked as a journalist for nearly four decades before going into the academia where I rose through the ranks from a junior lecturer to principal lecturer and Head of the Division of Mass Communication (from February 2002 to June 2005) at the Harare Polytechnic. Most of my former students are now working in corporate and government organisations and hold senior jobs as reporters, editors and public relations officers. I also have another network from my days as the editor of a community newspaper and as a sub-editor for the national broadcaster in Zimbabwe. The network comprises politicians, senior civil servants and business executives. However, I was aware that some of my former students and close associates might be tempted to falsify their preferences during the interviews in order to tell me what they think I might want to hear. I tried my best to ensure that research subjects were free to respond to my questions during data collection. I assured them that their confidentiality would be

respected and protected both during and after the research. The next section of this chapter addresses ethical issues.

### 3.5 Ethics

This study finds Lincoln and Guba's (2000) model on qualitative research very instructive for any discussion of ethical issues in media and communication studies. The model comprises five paradigm categories: and these are positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory action research.

Proponents of the positivist theoretical perspective believe that ethical issues are outside the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Instead, the researcher has total control over the research output and can determine what is or is not, acceptable. From that perspective, the researcher can use deceptive methods to collect data if this helps to contribute to knowledge production. Positivists are thus guided by the principle that "the end justifies the means (deception is acceptable)" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p14). On the other hand, post-positivists agree with the position of positivists in the main, although post-positivists believe that the researcher should take responsibility for "the effects of the research on research subjects" (Ibid.).

The third paradigm category of Lincoln and Guba's (2000) model is called non-positivism and is comprised of three types of researchers: the critical theorist, constructivist and participatory. This theoretical perspective views "the moral dimension of the research as intrinsic" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p14). Lincoln and Guba (2000) contend that the critical theorist should always act in the interests of the research subjects and be motivated by the need to act morally and minimise harm. On the other hand, constructivists and participatory researchers argue that research subjects need to be involved at every stage of the research process and this includes making ethical decisions. This study was guided by the non-positivist theoretical perspective. It was guided by the ethical imperative to minimise harm to the research subjects and to include them in any ethical processes. However, it should be noted that ethical issues not only involve the researcher and the research subject. Other

stakeholders, like the university's ethical committee, are also involved. This study is bound by the University of Westminster's ethical procedures and guidelines. In this regard, an ethical form was submitted to the university's Ethics Committee and the project was approved before I undertook any data collection.

The need to follow the university's ethical policy before undertaking any research need not be overemphasised. The policy guidelines help to protect the researcher and subjects from any form of harm, and also to "reduce the likelihood of legal action by research subjects against researchers and their institutions" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p15). Bertrand and Hughes (2005) argue that institutional ethical policies "should be seen as an opportunity, to be taken advantage of, rather than a burden, to be circumvented" (Ibid.).

Bertrand and Hughes' (2005) argument shows why ethical issues lie at the heart of any credible research processes and these issues are addressed in three phases, as follows:

1. Pre-implementation stage of the research study
2. Implementation stage of the research study
3. Post-implementation stage of the research study

### 3.5.1 Pre-implementation Stage

Before undertaking the research project, there is a need to address ethical issues that are critical to the research process. These issues include voluntary participation and informed consent (Dane, 1990).

Voluntary participation is key to the research subjects' participation in the study. The concept of 'voluntary participation' refers to the right of research subjects to submit themselves to scrutiny during the study without undue influence or force. In a nutshell, the research subject "should be a willing participant in the research study (Dane, 1990, p39).

To have a better understanding of the concept of voluntary participation it is necessary to discuss two issues that are related to voluntary participation. The two terms are coercion and awareness. Coercion is related to the ability of the research subject to “freely choose” as stated in the definition of voluntary participation (Dane, 1990, p39). Dane (1990) offers an apt description of coercion as “presenting participants an ‘offer they can’t refuse’” (Ibid.).

There are two forms of coercion: subtle and direct. Examples of direct forms of coercion are the use of force or threats, while offering inducements can be described as a subtle form of coercion. However, coercion issues are not always in black and white. How do you deal with issues like inviting a research subject for coffee or lunch? Although some people may treat such actions as inducements, I submit that, at times, such actions are necessary in order to establish rapport with the participants. In this regard, I believe that it is the researcher’s moral duty to strike a balance between the use of any inducements and the dire need to contribute to knowledge production (Dane, 1990). If the scales tip heavily against knowledge production, then the researcher needs to rethink. The university’s ethical policies are very explicit on coercion. Researchers are not allowed to use or to be implicated in any forms of coercion.

The other issue related to voluntary participation is awareness (Dane, 1990). In this regard, awareness relates to the research subject being well informed about their role in the research. Awareness can only be created by making sure that the research subject knows everything that is taking place during the research process, including their role and the purpose of the research. Without that vital knowledge, it is not possible to create an open environment conducive to voluntary participation. For instance, if a researcher is using a survey, it is important to explain to the participants the purpose of that survey and what it is expected to measure.

Another key component of any ethical processes is the designing of the informed consent form. Dane (1990) argues that informed consent is guided by the principle of

openness and transparency so as to enable the research subjects to make the necessary decision on their participation in the research process. However, Parsons (1969) cautions that the most important point about the informed consent form is not the amount of detail in it, but its relevance to the research subject's judgement. The form is used to inform research subjects of their rights and to seek their consent to participate in the research (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005). The informed consent form includes vital information such as the purpose of the research, how data will be collected, stored and published. By signing an informed consent form, the research subject undertakes to participate in the research, but is entitled to withdrawal from the process at any stage. In my study, the research subjects had the right to withdraw from the research at any time before the publication of the research. However, once the study has been published this right falls away.

Another key element of the informed consent form is the provision of complaint procedures, confidentiality and anonymity for research subjects (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005). Research subjects need to be well informed about complaint procedures in case their rights are breached during the study. For instance, research subjects can invoke the complaints procedures if they feel aggrieved during the research. On the other hand, at the end of the data collection exercise, the researcher should ensure that the anonymity of research subjects is respected by making sure that "there is no way that subjects can be identified, including through details of their cases, even where their names have been changed" (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p18).

It is important to note that voluntary participation and informed consent are often conflated because the two terms are closely related. However, there are some nuances between the two terms. For instance, a researcher may recruit participants and brief them only on certain parts of the research processes and withhold some vital information related to the study. In this case, the research subjects' participation in the project will be voluntary "but their consent would not be informed" (Dane, 1990, p42). A researcher should thus not take anything for granted. It is important for the

researcher to ensure that the research subjects are provided with all the key information related to the research (Veatch, 1982). Nothing should be left to chance.

The ethical issues of voluntary participation and informed consent are closely linked to the notion of self-determination. Self-determination speaks to the right of research subjects to have access to all information and to critically evaluate it before passing judgement. The researcher's moral duty is to ensure that all research processes are conducted "without undermining individuals' self-determination" (Dane, 1990, p45).

Preventing awareness undermines self-determination by preventing participants from knowing that a choice is available. Similarly, restricting informed consent undermines individuals' ability to evaluate and weigh alternatives. Self-determination is also important once the research project is underway (Ibid.)

### 3.5.2 Project Implementation Phase

The second phase of this discussion relates to ethical issues that apply during the research process and these include the "researcher's identity, behaviour changes in participants and retraction of consent" (Dane, 1990, pp46-48).

It is important that the researcher should identify himself or herself to the respondents right at the outset. In addition, the researcher should disclose all the relevant information relating to the organisation s/he represents, including its affiliates. This disclosure is vital because it "may affect someone's decision to participate and should be considered relevant to informed consent" (Dane, 1990, p46). For instance, some research subjects may not feel comfortable participating in a study underwritten by an organisation that does not subscribe to their personal values. That is why it is always necessary to be very open with research subjects and provide them with all the relevant information to enable them to make informed consent.

During the research process, it is important to monitor the research subjects' behavioural changes (Dane, 1990). The notion of behavioural change relates to "any change in respondents from which one may infer some alteration of behavioural style

or capability” (Dane, 1990, p46). The researcher should always try to respect the respondents’ right to self-determination, because any actions that may undermine their self-determination are likely to create some behavioural changes. Dane (1990) argues that behavioural changes can be triggered even by “the most innocuous of observation procedures” (Dane, 1990, p46). Some respondents may experience behavioural changes if the research process has an adverse effect on their natural habitat. That is why it is always important for the researcher to strike an ethical balance between the behavioural changes that are induced by the “natural environment” and the “unnatural environment” created by the researcher (Ibid, p47).

The other ethical issue which relates to respondents during the research process is the retraction of consent. As discussed earlier, the research subject retains the right to withdraw consent at any stage in the research process (Dane, 1990). Retraction of consent may be triggered by several factors. For instance, the research subject may retract consent if new information emerges which forces them to re-evaluate their judgement. However, the issue of retraction of consent is not always cast in stone. In some cases, researchers may feel that their duty “to obtain knowledge is sufficiently strong to justify an attempt to convince a participant to continue” (Ibid, p48). Nevertheless, in this study, retraction of consent was not a big issue. Research subjects were assured of their right to retract consent any time before the publication of the study, and this is in line with the university’s ethical guidelines.

### 3.5.3 Post-implementation Phase

The third category of ethical issues relates to those that apply on completion of the research project and these are the anonymity of research subjects and confidentiality. Anonymity should be maintained, especially in cases where the researcher retains sensitive information about the research subjects. Anonymity helps to protect the participants’ identities. Dane (1990) argues that anonymity can only be guaranteed “when no-one, including the researcher, can relate a participant’s identity to any information pertaining to the project” (Ibid, p51). In other words, the source of anonymous data cannot be traced after the research process; it remains anonymous.

The other ethical issue that is related to anonymity is confidentiality. The terms are closely related but they have different meanings. In the case of anonymity, the data remains anonymous to all the stakeholders in the research process, while confidentiality exists only if the identities of the research subjects are known only to the researcher (Dane, 1990). The researcher is not supposed to disclose the identities of the participants to anyone else. Any disclosure of this information will be regarded as a breach of confidentiality. That may explain why Mead (1969) argues that confidentiality is critical to any type of research and places a heavy responsibility on the researcher. In addition, it is always important to ensure that research subjects' data is kept under very secure conditions to avoid the breach of confidentiality. Dane (1990) further argues that the need for informed consent can put researchers in a "double bind" position (Ibid, p51). Signing an informed consent form, may be construed as sufficient evidence of a research subject's participation in a research study (Dane, 1990).

In this study I introduced myself to all my respondents and briefly explained the nature of my research before asking them to sign informed consent forms. It is always important to ensure that respondents are not left with any grey areas about the research before appending their signatures to the informed consent forms (ICFs). That is why I asked the respondents if there were any areas of my research which were not clearly put to them before asking them to sign the forms. Another important point to bear in mind is the need to allow respondents to exercise their choices. Respondents should give their consent without any inducement or coercion. In addition, the respondents should be reminded that they can pull out of the research at any given time. The next section addresses data storage issues.

### 3.6 Data Storage

It is important to ensure that all information obtained from respondents, especially information of a confidential nature, is kept under secure storage. The information should also include the names and contact details of the respondents. In this regard, necessary steps were taken to ensure that all interview notes and transcripts were kept securely on an encrypted device. The same security measures were taken to

protect information stored on other devices, like a mobile handset, laptop and desktop computer. In addition, all the interview recordings with respondents were saved on a secure OneDrive software application which is linked to the University of Westminster's main server. The next section concludes by recapitulating the major highlights of this chapter.

### 3.7 Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has critically examined the methodology that was used for data collection and analysis in this research study. Initially, the study selected face to face interviews, participant observation, documents and online archives as parts of the data collection methods, while Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis (TA) were selected for data analysis. However, this was not to be as I later discovered that nothing is ever certain in research. I had to make a few changes to my methodology and include video conferencing as one of my data collection methods in view of the disruptions caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I included Zoom online conferencing among my major data collection methods since I was unable to travel to Zimbabwe and conduct fieldwork, as earlier arranged, due to the restrictions imposed by the outbreak of the pandemic. In line with my research timeline, I was supposed to visit Zimbabwe in August 2020 for fieldwork. I expected the fieldwork to last for 5 months. However, my plans were disrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic, and I had to make some adjustments to my methodology.

As part of the primary data collection exercise, I started conducting Zoom video conferencing interviews from August 2020 to December 2020. I conducted 45 online in-depth interviews and a major advantage of Zoom is that it allows two or more respondents in different geographical locations to engage in video conferencing in synchronous in real time (Gough and Rosenfeld, 2006). This also helped to reduce operational costs. For instance, during data collection I did not incur any travelling costs. However, Zoom also has its shortcomings and one of them is that body language cues are slightly diminished during the online interaction. Another limitation is that computer hardware and internet connectivity costs are very prohibitive in a country like Zimbabwe, where there is a huge digital divide.

Last but not least, this study also explored and interrogated all the ethical issues related to the research project. It discussed the theoretical and practical issues related to accessing research subjects in countries under competitive authoritarian regimes. Zimbabwe has some of the characteristics of a competitive authoritarian regime. That is why it was very important for me to exercise due diligence during data collection in order to minimise physical and psychological harm to my research subjects. This study guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality to all research subjects. Any information given in confidence was kept in secure storage with end-to-end encryption.

## CHAPTER 4: Digital Activism and Democratic Transition

### 4.0 Introduction

On completion of the data collection, the interview notes were transcribed before being generated into codes and collated into themes, using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a very succinct definition of thematic analysis. The scholars define thematic analysis thus:

Thematic analysis is not just a collection of extracts strung together with little or no analytic narrative; nor is it a selection of extracts with analytic comment that simply or primarily paraphrases their content. The extracts . . . are illustrative of the analytic points the researcher makes about the data, and should be used to illustrate/support an analysis that goes beyond their specific content, to make sense of the data, and tell the reader what it does or might mean (Ibid, p94)

Ten major themes related to the theoretical framework and the research objectives emerged from the data. The themes were germane to the study objectives and were used to answer the following research questions:

- (a) What is the relationship between digital activism and democratic transition in Zimbabwe?
- (b) To what extent has digital media activism contributed to social change in Zimbabwe?
- (c) What are the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and in other similar African contexts?

The themes which emerged from the analysis were underpinned by the research theoretical framework and the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. For Habermas (1989), the public sphere denotes communicative spaces in which citizens engage in rational discourse and consensus. In a nutshell, Habermas' theoretical framework on democracy conceptualises the media as a public sphere (Garnham, 1986; Dahlgren, 1995). This chapter explores and critically evaluates how Zimbabwean citizens have

been deploying digital media as a democratic site of their struggle for political participation. It will further argue that digital media as alternative media, constitute a public sphere in which counter narratives can challenge hegemonic discourses. Gramsci (1971) defines counter hegemony as efforts that are aimed at resisting or overthrowing the dominant power (hegemony) at any given time. Donaldson (1993) offers a more elaborate definition of the Gramscian concept of hegemony. He adds:

Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organisation of social institutions in ways that appear 'natural', 'ordinary', 'normal'. The state, through punishment for non-conformity, is crucially involved in this negotiation and enforcement (Ibid, p645)

Hunt (1990) situates hegemony at "the intersection of state and civil society" (p316). It is the site where popular consent is negotiated and renegotiated (Hunt, 1990). However, it is not enough for the hegemonic power to constitute its leadership by only "articulating the immediate interests of its own constituents" (Hunt, 1990, p311). For a hegemonic project to be "dominant it must address and incorporate, if only partially, some aspects of the aspirations, interests, and ideology of subordinate groups" (Ibid.). Juxtaposed to the hegemony is the counter hegemony and this is "the process by which subordinate classes challenge the dominant hegemony and seek to supplant it by articulating an alternative hegemony" (Ibid.). Magure (2009) further argues that the notion of counter hegemony "instils a sense of hope – that another world free from suppression and domination is possible" (p27). The two forces - hegemony and counter hegemony - are often in a constant state of flux.

The study explores and discusses "the alternative, popular forms of media through which citizens in Africa either receive information on political affairs or contest political elites" (Willems, 2011b, p46). Using Zimbabwe as a case study, Willems (2011b) gives an analytical framework of 'converge culture' and "highlights the multiple, conflictual and dialogical ways in which the State and citizens communicate with each other" (Willems, 2011b, p456). Willems (2011b) further argues that some media studies scholars posit "the liberal-democratic model of the media-state relations as the normative ideal in Africa" (p47). This is misleading, and ignores the role of popular culture. Popular culture in the African context denotes a different meaning and "refers

to the production of popular arts or artisanal forms of cultural expression” (Willems, 2011b, p49). The media form which Willems (2011b) terms ‘informality’ includes music, songs, theatre, clothes and videos (p49).

An interesting observation is that popular culture in the African context, is situated in relation to “its oppositionality to power” (Ibid.). This point supports Gramsci’s argument that popular culture is a site of conflict and dissent in which hegemony is constantly challenged (cited in Willems, 2011b). Willems’s (2011b) argument is very apt, especially in most post-colonial countries in Africa like Zimbabwe, where the ruling political elites monopolise the State-owned media (Ibid.). The point is clearly illustrated by James and Kaarsholm (2000) who suggest that:

[. . .] in countries where colonial and more recent histories have left legacies of stark inequality and intolerance, the building of a democratic culture has often necessitated more informal means of expression. Sometimes this is because what is understood to be institutionalized as ‘politics’ has become the scene of such alienation, self-seeking and irrelevance that a real articulation of needs and values appears possible only within cultural realms which do not, at first sight, appear to be really political. Sometimes it is because the sphere of politics seems remote and inaccessible (pp193 – 194)

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that, recently, some Zimbabwean citizens have increasingly been deploying popular culture genres in digital spaces as part of their panoply of methods used in the struggle for democracy and social justice. For instance, digital media activists like Magamba TV and Bustop TV use satirical videos to critique the excesses of authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe. Siziba and Ncube (2015) argue that digital media platforms such as Magamba Tv and Bustop Tv help to create “alternative spaces for free discussion and exchange of information as well as activism” (Siziba and Ncube, 2015, p519). The two scholars cite Mbembe’s (1992) seminal work on the “banality of power” and Goffman’s (1959) “dramaturgical model” to support their argument. In this regard, the use of popular culture helps digital activists to navigate and circumvent the minefield of stringent media regulations.

This study also finds Ndlela's (2009a) scholarship on the use of alternative media as a public sphere very instructive. Ndlela (Ibid.) defines the alternative public sphere as a communicative space normally used by counter publics whose voices are "suppressed by the existing social order" (p88). In addition, Ronning (2005) clearly describes the media environment in Zimbabwe by arguing that the State media is used to crush dissent, while the private media provide the latitude for dissenting voices to articulate and amplify their concerns and to keep the government under public scrutiny.

Ndlela (2009a) and Ronning's (2005) arguments underscore Naim's (2013) ideas on the potency of new technologies. Naim (Ibid.) argues that in the age of digital media activism, power is increasingly dispersed and governments face challenges in suppressing citizens' voices. In his seminal work, *The End of Power*, Naim (Ibid.) argues that power is transformative in the digital era and he cites, as an example, the Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, who gained prominence worldwide among political activists for exposing government secrets in the public domain by using new technologies. Naim's (2013) arguments are very poignant, especially in countries like Zimbabwe that are ruled by hybrid regimes. Citizens often turn to digital spaces to challenge the dominant narratives.

However, there is need for caution when discussing the use of digital media in both the Global South and the Global North. There are some nuances between the ways in which citizens deploy new technologies in the two global spaces. This study agrees with McNair's (2000) argument that democracy does not exist in a vacuum. It is firmly anchored in the social and cultural environment in which the media operate (Ibid.). That is why it is important for researchers in the Global South to study how citizens in those contexts mediate in the new communicative ecosystems.

There is an existing wide body of knowledge on the role of alternative media in African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Olukotun, 2004; Mare, 2015; Mare, 2020a; Ruhanya, 2014; Ndlela, 2009a; Mabweazara, 2018). Most of the

researchers share an “ahistorical, somewhat deterministic and mostly optimistic” view about the impact of new technologies in Africa (Srinivasan and Diepeveen, 2019, p19). The researchers postulate that the new media have the capacity to leapfrog the massive continent into late capitalism. Furthermore, it is argued that these ‘liberation technologies’ have the potential to promote the democratisation processes on the continent (Diamond, 2010). This chapter takes a realistic view and argues that digital media activism has the potential for incremental democratic change. It concurs with Curran’s (2002) argument that alternative media have the potential to create communicative spaces in which to liberate subalterns from the control and regimentation of the political elites.

This study covers the period from 2016 to date, variously described in extant literature as ‘the military-assisted transition’, ‘the new political dispensation’ or ‘the Second Republic’ (Chuma and Ndou, 2019). As discussed earlier, the year 2016 was very significant in relation to the use of digital media activism in Zimbabwe. Two social movements, #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka were formed in 2016, and there was a noticeable upsurge in digital media activism by citizens belonging to those two groups. In addition, there were intra-party succession debates in both the ruling ZANU (PF) Party, and the main opposition party, MDC Alliance, as we inched towards the military-assisted transition of 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017. ZANU (PF)’s long-standing leader Robert Mugabe was deposed in a military coup after a long-drawn factional fight which involved the Generation-40 (G-40), which was supposedly led by his wife, the First Lady, Grace Mugabe, and the Lacoste faction, which enjoyed the tacit support of the former Vice-President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and the military. Mugabe was later replaced by his erstwhile comrade Mnangagwa. Chuma and Ndou (2019) have argued that the events of November 2017, created a field day for digital media activism and the social media provided platforms for unfettered debate, “speculation, falsehoods and truths all combined” (Chuma and Ndou, 2019, p4). Social media platforms like Twitter “fed into legacy media such as radio, newspapers and television to promote debate” (Ibid.).

In a nutshell, the ten themes that emerged from the research findings were digital media; digital media activism; democratisation and digital media activism; democratic transition and digital media activism; social media platforms and democracy; digital media activism and social change; digital media and political activism; the intersection of online and offline activism; the implications of digital media activism; and the challenges of digital media activism. Five of the themes – digital media; digital media activism; democratisation and digital media activism; democratic transition and digital media activism; and social media platforms and democracy – were used in this chapter to answer the first research question of this study. The other five themes – social change and digital media activism; digital platforms and social change; the intersection of online and offline activism; digital media and political activism; the challenges of digital media activism; and the implications of digital media activism – were used to answer the other two research questions which are dealt with in Chapter 5.

This chapter continues from the previous methodological chapter. The chapter comprises three distinct sections. The first section will expand and deepen details on the method, respondents, procedure and ethical issues encountered during data collection and analysis, while the second section will include responses from in-depth interviews on the role of digital media activism in the promotion of democratisation in Zimbabwe. The section critically evaluates findings from the research, suggesting that digital media have the potential to promote democratisation. Most participants shared this utopian notion, while others shared dystopian views on the subject. The proponents of the dystopian narrative argued that digital media activism on its own is not enough to create transformative change in the Zimbabwean body politic. There is a need to align on and offline activism. The chapter argues that the way citizens in the Global South deploy digital spaces as enablers of communicative spaces, transcends utopian and dystopian perspectives (Mabweazara, 2018). Hence, the third section of this chapter specifically explores how ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe are deploying digital media activism as a site for manufacturing resistance in the struggle for democracy (Mare, 2020a). This section argues that digital media activism was implicated as a site of struggle for democracy in the following distinctive ways:

- (a) As a counter public sphere by the main Opposition MDC Alliance and civil society against the ruling ZANU (PF) Party's hegemony and the ways in which civil society was re-strategised and then pushed for a different agenda;
- (b) During factional fighting within both ZANU (PF) and the MDC Alliance. The section critically analyses how digital media activism was deployed before and after the end of Mugabe's rule and discusses how the different factions within ZANU (PF), and the MDC Alliance, used digital media to manipulate, gain sympathy and power.

Towards the end, the chapter will have a concluding section highlighting the key points.

## 4.1 Contextual Summary from the Field

### 4.1.1 Respondents

Initially, 50 respondents were recruited for the study. However, some of the respondents withdrew from the study due to bureaucratic hurdles. The respondents failed to secure clearance from their employers. In Zimbabwe, most employers, especially quasigovernment organisations and government, restrict workers from participating in research activities without authorisation. As a result of these challenges, the number of respondents for this study was finally scaled down to forty-five.

The respondents were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, with the help of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Respondents were drawn from a broad spectrum of Zimbabwean citizens. The study noted that some of the respondents had a lot of experience in both the State and private sectors and they were able to give critical and more nuanced assessments without appealing to their emotions. In addition, most of the respondents were well known to me as former journalism students and peers, and so they agreed to participate in the study. Others were drawn from pre-existing personal networks I have built over the past three decades as a lecturer in tertiary colleges in Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom. I was

aware that some of the respondents might be tempted to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. As a precautionary measure, I impressed upon all the respondents that they should be very candid in their responses to my interview questions as I wanted my study to capture a critical assessment of their lived realities in relation to digital media activism in Zimbabwe. I asked them to be as honest as possible, without making any embellishments. Before scheduling the respondents for the Zoom video conferencing interviews, I e-mailed them copies of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and the Informed Consent Form (ICF). The PIS explained the aims and objectives of my research project, while the ICF assured the respondents of their inalienable right to anonymity and confidentiality.

#### 4.1.2 Data Collection

Initially, I had planned to travel to Zimbabwe to conduct fieldwork. However, my plans were scuppered by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the time of writing, there were almost 73 million confirmed cases worldwide and 1.6 million coronavirus deaths. Zimbabwe has recorded over 11 000 cases and over 1 000 deaths. The Covid-19 pandemic is overwhelming health systems and leading the world into a global recession (Maverick Citizen, 2021, p5)

In addition, the pandemic created mobility challenges for me. Most countries, including Zimbabwe, were under lockdown and imposed travel restrictions on foreigners in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Against this backdrop, I decided to make changes to my methodology and used Zoom video conferencing and desktop research for data collection. These changes had some inherent advantages and disadvantages. Zoom helped me to reach out not only to Zimbabweans inside the country, but also to some respondents scattered in different areas of the Zimbabwean diaspora, e.g. Australia, Canada, Ireland, Namibia, South Africa, UK and USA. The other advantage of using Zoom is that it has a recording function, and this enabled me to record most of the interviews. However, Zoom has its own disadvantages. For instance, body language was slightly diminished during the interviews and some participants in Zimbabwe were unable to participate

due to the high costs of connectivity and data bundles. However, most of the respondents interviewed had access to Wi-fi at their workplaces.

This study sought answers to the research questions by conducting qualitative interviews with the 45 respondents in and outside Zimbabwe, using Zoom. The duration for each interview was 45 to 60 minutes. The data collection exercise was conducted between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021 and structured into two stages: the trial-run (pilot) and the final stage. Ten percent of the main respondents (4) were selected for the trial-run. This helped to identify some gaps and weaknesses in my interview guide schedule. In addition, the trial run also helped me to test the validity, reliability and replicability of my research instruments. After interviewing the 4 respondents for the pilot study, I then embarked on the main data collection exercise. A total of 45 respondents representing a broad cross section of Zimbabwean citizens, in and outside the country, were interviewed for the study. The respondents were drawn from different professions, e.g. journalism, media advocacy, law, media management, politics, academia, human rights and gender activism, and they gave insights from their lived experiences on how Zimbabweans deployed digital media to create democratic spaces for debate and political activism. The profiles of the respondents also represented the different demographic groups in Zimbabwe in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and marital status. In addition, the study also used secondary data sources such as blogs, online news platforms, websites, social networking platforms, e.g. Facebook and Twitter. These digital media sources provided thick data for the study and confirmed Papacharissi's (2002) suggestion that digital media can create communicative spaces for participatory democracy.

#### 4.1.3 Ethical Environment and Limitations

During the interviews, I reminded respondents about their right to confidentiality and anonymity. I also overemphasized their right to withdraw from the study at any stage before the publication of the final research report. However, despite these efforts some respondents did not take these rights seriously. For instance, I had to remind one respondent about the inherent dangers of not opting for anonymity, especially in cases involving information that might be deemed politically sensitive by authorities in

countries under hybrid regimes like Zimbabwe. I told him that, as a researcher, my motive was always to try to minimise harm and maximise the benefits to respondents. After my wise counsel, the respondent opted for anonymity. This incident provided a learning curve for me as a researcher. After some reflexivity, I later decided to anonymise all the 45 respondents, including those who had opted to be identified in the research. All the respondents were identified using an alphanumeric. The alphanumeric included a generic identity for their initials, e.g. (XX). I deliberately avoided using the actual initials (first name and surname) for the respondents in order to safeguard them from any harm. I also included in the alphanumeric the gender of the respondent (Male/Female/Non-binary) and their number on my list of interviewees (Appendix 4). However, reasonable steps were taken in order to ensure that the respondents' expertise and experience were briefly included to underpin the respondents' relevance to the study without unwittingly disclosing their identities.

It was also interesting to note that some respondents, who had confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, withdrew at the last minute. Most of these respondents were in Zimbabwe and did not give any reasons for their withdrawal. I deliberately avoided following up on them for fear of undermining their right to informed consent. With the wisdom of hindsight, I suppose there might be two possible reasons for their withdrawal. One of them might be the expensive costs of connectivity in Zimbabwe. Data bundles are very expensive in the country. The other likely reason could be the fear of State surveillance. Several journalists and activists have been arrested in the past year for posting 'politically sensitive' texts and images on social media platforms, like Twitter and Facebook. These include the prominent journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono, and two political activists Jacob Ngarivhume and Job Sikhala, who were arrested for allegedly posting seditious materials on social media platforms.

On the other hand, it is likely that other respondents were forced to withdraw from my study because they are beholden to the ruling political elites and were afraid of losing their jobs, especially in the current economic environment, where almost 90 percent of the workforce in Zimbabwe is employed by the State. This sad state of economic and political affairs in the country often creates fertile ground for prebendalism. Joseph

(1987) defines prebendalism as “elite clientelism, practised by a head of government who awards persons with positions in the state, which the appointees treat as an entitlement and use to gain personal access to resources” (cited in Tendi, 2013, p841). In Zimbabwe the ruling political elites are known for their “shrewd use of loyalty” among their supporters (Tendi, 2013, p829). However, as a researcher, I respected my subjects’ decisions and their right to voluntary participation in my study without undue influence. That is why no attempt was made to discover the reasons for which they decided not to participate in the study at the last minute.

In addition, interviewing respondents living under authoritarian rule also comes with a host of problems. These include issues of governmentality. Conducting research in Zimbabwe has both its bureaucratic formalities and potential hazards, which admittedly has implications for logistical operations and ultimately the nature and quality of research findings (Mhiripiri; Ureke; and Mubayiwa, 2020, p87).

Cannella and Lincoln (2018, p179) refer to this form of bureaucratic control as “institutionalised forms of governmentality”. Governmentality describes “the way people think about accepting control, the internalization of beliefs that allow regulation” (Dean, 1999, cited in Mhiripiri; Ureke; and Mubayiwa, 2020, p88).

Research ethics and researchers’ acceptance of structures of control are part of ‘governmentality’, whether values and moral commitments are socially negotiated or arbitrarily adopted by researchers as a ‘right to know’ the other, or are reflexively applied, or are ‘forms of legislated research regulation . . . that create an illusion of ethical concern’ (Lincoln and Tierney, 2004, cited in Mhiripiri; Ureke; and Mubayiwa, 2020, p88)

The notion of governmentality in a politically polarised political country like Zimbabwe is real and complex. Researchers need to gain the respondents’ trust and assure them that they do not have any hidden political agendas before interviewing them. In most cases they wanted to know the aims and objectives of my research, among other things. Such attitudes from some of the respondents were hardly surprising given that

Zimbabwe is among the few hybrid regimes that disenfranchise citizens in the diaspora from participating in some of the civic affairs of their country. Since the onset of the Zimbabwean political and economic crisis in 2000, it is “estimated two to four million Zimbabweans are living abroad and these citizens are not allowed to vote in their foreign country of residence” (Dendere, 2020, p2). Such overbearing actions do not help to endear most Zimbabweans in the diaspora to the ruling political elites in the country. That may partly explain why the Zimbabwean diaspora constituency is often viewed with suspicion by some of the citizens inside the country. Such notions help to create and buttress misguided perceptions that most Zimbabweans in the diaspora belong to the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance, notwithstanding the fact that ZANU (PF) also enjoys a sizable amount of support among some sections of the Zimbabwean diasporic communities.

However, let me concede at the outset that the notion of governmentality is not only confined to hybrid regimes. It is also encountered in well-developed liberal democracies. Nevertheless, there are stark differences in relation to how governmentality is often deployed in liberal democracies and hybrid regimes. Most liberal democracies are anchored in strong and independent institutions whose sole purpose is to protect the citizens’ civil liberties, while under hybrid regimes citizens do not often enjoy such privileges.

That may explain why in several instances, I encountered inordinate delays caused by respondents keeping me on hold while waiting for clearance from their supervisors. Some of the respondents required clearance from their employers or heads to participate in the study. However, I anticipated some of these challenges well in advance during the recruitment stage. To this end, I recruited more respondents and some of them were used to replace those who had cancelled their appointments at the last minute.

The other challenge was the infrastructure, mostly in Zimbabwe. The country is currently in the throes of an economic and political crisis. Most citizens do not have

reliable sources of electricity and connectivity. On a few occasions, I had to cancel some interviews at the last minute because of these challenges. I later rescheduled the meetings.

Establishing remote rapport with the respondents was not easy. In my case, I was lucky that most of the respondents were familiar to me from my previous work as a former journalism trainer at the Harare Polytechnic in Zimbabwe. While some of the respondents were my former students, others were colleagues from my social networks, and these were recruited using purposive sampling. However, I later recruited more respondents through my colleagues using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling can be defined as a research technique that is normally used to recruit respondents through using referrals from the sample population selected for the study (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Bloch, 2008). Researchers normally use it “when conducting research on sensitive topics and/or hard to reach communities” (Dendere, 2020, p4).

The other ethical issue encountered during data collection was that some respondents were not comfortable with the use of Zoom video recording. The respondents did not feel comfortable about being interviewed remotely on Zoom and felt that they were vulnerable to State surveillance. Instead, they preferred WhatsApp texts and telephone calls. I suppose they felt safer using WhatsApp because of its end-to-end encryption. As a result of these concerns, two of the respondents were interviewed using WhatsApp.

## 4.2 Thematic Analysis

As noted earlier, four major themes will be explored in this chapter, and these are digital media; digital media activism; democratisation and digital media activism; and democratic transition and digital media activism.

#### 4.2.1 Digital Media

Before discussing how Zimbabweans appropriate digital media spaces to promote democratisation, it is pertinent to examine the reasons why activists are migrating from legacy to digital media.

Digital media are a by-product of the new technological revolution. Larry Diamond (2010) termed digital media a liberation technology because of the ease with which most citizens weaponize it to create democratic spaces for debate and commentary. It enables users to create and distribute content on social media and online news platforms. Digital media come with some inherent advantages compared to legacy media. One of them is that they offer users the latitude to communicate with each other with minimum interference from the filtering processes by the gatekeepers (Hansen, 2020). The other advantage is the relative ease of access and usability.

The promise of the ICT revolution is that more information will seamlessly lead to greater opportunities for collective action and progressive change. From this perspective, the proliferation and abundance of information provides individuals who have access to ICTs with an unprecedented number of options to exercise voice and influence in political processes. Thus, the argument goes, ICTs have great potential to enable collective mobilisation and to broaden political participation (Menocal, 2021, np)

These points were confirmed by some of the respondents during the interviews. One of the respondents, a Zimbabwean academic and postdoctoral scholar based at a university in South Africa, said that during the first 20 years after independence, the State made every effort to control print and electronic media, adding that:

People later started to look for alternative spaces like digital media. Digital media is popular because it is cheaper and more accessible. In addition, it provides an element of anonymity (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM21, 19/10/2020)

There was a consensus among the respondents that the digital media are a game changer, especially in countries under authoritarian rule where citizens feel asphyxiated by the State's control of the mass media. The respondents believe that under these circumstances, digital media empower citizens and open democratic

spaces for counter narratives. This point was underscored by one of the respondents, a Zimbabwean national working for an international development agency in Eastern Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021). The respondent said:

Digital media are important in our national politics. The political landscape has changed in recent years. The State-owned media's monopoly has been eroded. In addition, the demographics of our population has shifted over the years. Youths now constitute the majority and are politically active in digital media spaces. These spaces are important for democracy and have rekindled our politics (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021).

This respondent's point was supported by a veteran Zimbabwean journalist now based in Johannesburg, South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021). He said digital media were a game changer for contentious politics in Zimbabwe.

There is a huge difference between where we are today and where we were yesterday. For instance, during apartheid in South Africa, media organisations were banned from naming the African National Congress (ANC) and its leaders. We also had a similar situation in Rhodesia after the banning of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The ban was later lifted in 1978 after the signing of the Internal settlement agreement (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021)

From the above discussion, we can see that there was a consensus among respondents on the pivotal role played by digital media in promoting political activism. Most respondents agreed that digital media opened spaces for political commentary and debate. One of the respondents, a Zimbabwean postgraduate student based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Dubai, (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 29/01/2021) said digital media offered citizens the latitude to participate in political activism without fear. She said:

Now if something happens . . . people can express their opinions and emotions. For some people it is a new way to express themselves behind hidden identities to avoid State surveillance (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 29/01/2021)

The respondent's point was supported by a former managing director of a state-owned media organisation in Zimbabwe (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020). He said the advent of new technologies had a far-reaching global impact, like the former Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev's, perestroika (reconstruction) and glasnost (openness), adding that:

Digital media have opened up societies. In the age of digital technologies, no one enjoys sole monopoly over media ownership. An individual has as much reach as a major newspaper stable (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020)

A former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio manager (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF35, 06/11/2020) added that there are several reasons why people have migrated to digital media spaces in recent years. She said:

Zimbabweans are fatigued by the hunger for authentic news in real time. The digital spaces also offer counter narratives which are not readily available in the mainstream media (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF35, 06/11/2020)

The respondent's sentiments were echoed by another respondent, who was working for a quasi-governmental organisation in Zimbabwe (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF36, 12/10/2020). She said that, compared with five years ago, there was a wider use of digital media in the country, adding:

Digital media give citizens a voice. As a result of digital media, people have gained a lot of confidence in articulating what they want. However, the current media environment in Zimbabwe is polarised and skewed. That scenario leaves the rural majority without a voice. For most people in the rural areas, digital media are a luxury. Under the current economic challenges, the people are more concerned with putting food on their tables (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXF36, 12/10/2020)

Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021) concur with the argument that digital media technologies are beyond the reach of most people under the current situation in Zimbabwe, which is characterised by high unemployment and low economic growth.

Given the prevailing socioeconomic hardships, many Zimbabweans are focused on meeting their basic needs rather than digital rights. Issues such as SIM card registration, facial recognition and online disinformation are not given the attention they

deserve. At the same time there is limited realisation that the continued suppression of civic space and curtailment of digital rights leaves Zimbabweans limited in their ability to contest political corruption, fuel and food prices, or abuse of civil liberties and political freedom (Karekwaivanane and Msonza, 2021, p56)

As mentioned previously, my research recruited respondents from a wide spectrum of Zimbabwean citizens and one of the respondents interviewed for this study is a veteran broadcaster and former head of a private radio station (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020). The respondent believes that the digital media give a voice to the voiceless. She offered a more nuanced response, adding:

Digital media are doing quite well. They are offering a great service. The government is finding it very difficult to control the digital media. That is why it freaks out very often. However, the main problem is the cost of data. It is huge. In addition, not all people have access to digital media. The majority living in the rural areas have no access to digital technologies (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020)

Bosch, et al; (2020) concur with this respondent's views. The notion of a digital divide is still a major challenge in most developing countries in Africa like Zimbabwe and "permeates and influences the levels of participation on social media platforms" (Bosch, et al; 2020, p361). As a result, only citizens with access to new technologies are able to communicate using digital media "at the expense of the disconnected and poor citizens" (Ibid.). On the other hand, a Zimbabwean post-doctoral media scholar based in Namibia (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020) criticised the content of most posts in digital media spaces. Although digital media help to amplify and circulate dissenting voices, most of the content lacks reflexivity.

In recent times we have seen the amplified use of digital media spaces as platforms for free speech and expression. The digital media spaces are very active and vibrant platforms for circulation of ideas. However, most of the posts in these spaces lack reflexivity (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

The respondent raised a valid point. Some of the posts in digital media spaces lack reflexivity. There is a need for more light and less heat in the communicative ecology

of the digital spaces. We need more robust debate in digital media spaces to promote transformative change. Dahlberg (2001) argues that:

. . . a cursory examination of the thousands of diverse conversations taking place every day online and open to anyone with Internet access seems to indicate the expansion on a global scale of the loose webs of rational-critical discourse that constitute what is known as the public sphere (p1)

Dahlberg (2001) further argues that an ideal public sphere should meet six normative benchmarks, and these are as follows: “autonomy from state and economic control; exchange and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role-taking, sincerity, discursive inclusion and equality” (Ibid.). This chapter argues that digital media meet some of Dahlberg’s (2001) criteria for a public sphere. In addition, Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013) argue that digital media meet some of the normative benchmarks of “a traditional public sphere” (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2013, p411). They add:

Certainly, citizens’ ability to freely post stories on Facebook or provide comments on online stories shares the same characteristics of the traditional public sphere (Ibid.)

In his seminal work, *The End of Power*, Moises Naim (2013) argues that the new media are a game changer and create opportunities for more interactive communication among individuals and communities. He added that these new technologies “are tools – and to have an impact, tools need users, who in turn need goals, direction, and motivation” (Ibid, p14). Naim’s (2013) argument is ample proof of the potency of digital media and “shows that new media environments empower individuals and communities to mobilise for change by creating and distributing content” (Milton and Mano, 2017, p184).

#### 4.2.2 Digital Media Activism

Over the past decade, digital media has transformed the communicative ecologies of social activists. Examples abound on how activists have used digital spaces to promote their causes to much wider audiences. Using the Moldova protests as a case study, Morozov (2009) referred to the use of digital media in the European country as the ‘Twitter Revolution’. Protesters in Moldova used Twitter “to challenge pending parliamentary elections” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). African countries have not

been spared by this rising global tide of digital media activism. During the same period, we witnessed revolutions unravelling in the Maghreb countries of Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Libya, with the help of digital media activism. In recent years, we have seen the citizenry in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, such as Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, using digital spaces to clamour for democratic change in their countries.

In principle, ICTs can profoundly democratise the public sphere because they make it possible for everyone, not just those perceived to be elites, to contribute to and shape ongoing debates. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have upended the relationship between political authority and popular will. The function of curating content has shifted from traditional mediating mechanisms or ‘gatekeepers’ – such as newsroom editorial boards, journalists, or political parties – towards individuals and their social networks. In theory, this flattening of information hierarchies has the potential to make the political arena more open and accessible, expose people to more diverse viewpoints and enable them to connect across time and space at a speed and scale that was unimaginable before (Menocal, 2021, np)

In terms of positionality, this study covers the period from 2016 to 2022. The choice of that period is deliberate and significant because that was the year when social movements like #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka/Sijikile were formed during the Mugabe era. Since 2016, there has been an upsurge in the number of Zimbabwean activists using digital spaces as a site for manufacturing resistance to the dominant narratives in the country (Mare, 2020a). In recent years, during the Mnangagwa era, whose nomenclature is variously described as the ‘Second Republic’ or the ‘New Dispensation’, we have witnessed more social movement players like #ZimbabweLivesMatter and #DemLoot joining the fray.



**FIGURE 1:** The euphoric moment after the ousting of the Zimbabwean strongman, Robert Mugabe, in a 'soft' coup in November 2017 when the country's citizenry coalesced, converged, and broke the barriers of difference: race, ethnicity, gender and class. *Photo Courtesy: The Zimbabwean online newspaper*

On the other hand, the State has used two key strategies in response to the upsurge in digital media activism. The first strategy involved the use of the State repressive apparatus to clamp down on political activism, while the second strategy included the appropriation of digital media spaces by using trolls and bots.

A former prominent member of the ruling ZANU (PF) Party, who decided to maintain anonymity during the interview, said the political elites in Zimbabwe were aware of the potency of digital media. He said that a few days before the ousting of Mugabe on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017, there was a blackout in the mainstream media. Social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, became one of the main news sources from which people could access information about the ‘military-assisted-transition’ negotiations between Mugabe and the military junta.

The appropriation of digital media during the ousting of former President Robert Mugabe from power in November 2017, was well timed and deliberate. It was part of the overall military coup strategy. Some activists were used by the military as proxies to help in mass mobilisation and give the coup a ‘civilian face’. In recent times we have seen the political elites deploying bots and trolls on social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, to manufacture legitimacy for the ruling party (WhatsApp Telephone Interview with Anonymous Respondent XXM44, 12/09/2020)

There might be some grain of truth in these sentiments. According to Zamchiya (2020), some senior ZANU (PF) officials were aware of the waning political fortunes of the former President, Robert Mugabe, before he was ousted by the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017 coup. The officials mobilised cross-party support and reached a pact with the MDC-T party. The main opposition party was promised “an internationally supervised free and fair election or a transitional government involving both MDC and ZANU (PF)” (Zamchiya, 2020, p4). However, after the successful ousting of Mugabe, ZANU (PF) reneged on its earlier promises to the MDC-T party.

The events above underscore Nyamnjoh’s (2005) argument that digital media activism underpins African core values of “solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p16). Nyamnjoh’s (2005) argument is valid, and it might explain why, in Zimbabwe both the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and the main opposition MDC Alliance, weaponize digital media spaces as a site of political activism. ZANU (PF) uses digital media activism to legitimate their political hegemony, while MDC Alliance uses it as a site for political resistance (Mare, 2020a).

Against this backdrop, the study of digital media activism as a site of contestation in the struggle for democracy is now more relevant than it was previously in Zimbabwe. This study seeks to answer questions on the effectiveness of digital media in the country. For this study, respondents from a wide spectrum of Zimbabwean professionals were interviewed. The consensus among the respondents was that the digital media are a game changer in the country's contentious politics. One of the respondents, a Zimbabwean foreign correspondent based in Harare (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM9, 26/10/2020) said that, over the past few years, digital media have fuelled digital activism.

Digital media activism is growing at a phenomenal rate. There is a lot of it. It is turning out to be a major avenue for activism. It helps to reach more audiences. In a nutshell, digital media activism helps in terms of mobilisation and creating awareness. It is easier for activists to reach a groundswell of support for their causes among other citizens. For instance, the #ZimbabweLivesMatter hashtag movement grew like a wildfire in digital spaces and helped to put the Zimbabwean political crisis into the international spotlight. It is now difficult for authorities to silence citizens. Digital media help people to break the barriers of oppression (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM9, 26/10/ 2020)

This argument was supported by a prominent newspaper publisher, who is a veteran journalist with several years' experience in both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM38, 08/10/2020). The respondent believes that the digital media empower citizens, adding that:

The people of Zimbabwe have taken to digital media activism in a big way. This comes against the recent backdrop of shrinking democratic space. Digital media activism offers citizens the opportunity to vent their anger and frustrations against the declining standards of living and basic freedoms. But whether this achieves anything, it is very debatable (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM38, 08/10/2020)

The respondent's ambivalence is understandable, especially when viewed from the vantage point of Mnangagwa's new political dispensation. During the early days of his administration, Mnangagwa promised to repeal of some of the draconian legislation against freedom of speech in Zimbabwe. Some of the laws like Access to Information and Protection of Privacy (AIPPA) "have either been repealed or remain under parliamentary review" (Mutsvairo, 2021, p77). As a result of these political overtures,

“more citizens are now accessing platforms, and in comparison to the Robert Mugabe era, digital dissent is being tolerated” (Ibid.).

However, some respondents disagreed, and they offered a more nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of digital media activism. For example, a former editor of a State-owned newspaper (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM39, 20/11/2020) said digital media activism had been vibrant in the last few years. He added:

We have witnessed digital media activism driven by politics. It was quite effective towards the build-up to the November 17, 2017 (military-assisted transition). We also saw a lot of digital media activism in the streets of Harare on August 1, 2018 (during the post-election demonstrations and shootings of civilians by soldiers). However, some of the digital media social movements fizzled out without bringing any tangible results (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020)

On the other hand, other respondents felt that digital media spaces are a contested terrain. The government has total control of these spaces, both directly and indirectly, for example, by using internet shutdowns and changing the regulatory framework for the Internet Service-Providers (ISPs). However, a chief executive officer of a media advocacy organisation in Zimbabwe (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 7/10/2020) said these repressive measures by the State do not stop people from freely expressing themselves. He said:

Subalterns are very savvy and know how to circumnavigate around State control of the digital media spaces. They have found digital spaces which are not under control of government. In addition, a lot of digital media activism is fuelled by Zimbabweans in the diaspora. (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

The respondent above has raised a valid point. This study found there was some tension between Zimbabweans inside the country and those in the diaspora. Most respondents in the diaspora were forthcoming with information during the interviews, while some local Zimbabweans were circumspect about participating in the study. I

suppose most Zimbabweans in the diaspora were willing to participate in the research because of the freedoms they enjoy in their host countries, freedoms which are not normally taken for granted in their country of origin. However, in recent years, some Zimbabweans have used the Virtual Private Network (VPN) to circumvent internet shutdowns by the State. Others use social messaging apps like WhatsApp that give users the advantage of end-to-end encryption, but there is a need for caution, though. The end-to-end encryption is not one hundred percent foolproof. In recent years there have been instances where hackers were able to break into the social messaging app and extract data. Against this backdrop, what hope is there for democratisation and digital activism in Zimbabwe?

#### 4.2.3 Democratisation and Digital Activism

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is no different from that in other African contexts. Most countries on the continent tend to conflate democratisation with the holding of general elections. This is a false narrative. There is more to democratisation than the periodic holding of general elections (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998).

Democracy can neither be imported from abroad, nor be handed down to the people on a silver platter by Africa's rulers. The people of Africa must democratise the continent on their own (Ibid, p2)

Nzongola-Ntalaja's (1998) views are shared by other African scholars. Wamba-dia-Wamba (1992) defines democracy as a "process of struggles to win, defend and protect rights of people (producers, women, minorities), and individuals against one sidedness (for tolerance, respect of the absolutely other, for example) including the rights of self-organisation for autonomy and not necessarily the right of participation in the state process" (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1992, p30). Zimbabwe's former Minister of Information, Prof Jonathan Moyo, was once quoted in *The Chronicle* newspaper in 2016, as saying that the ruling party ZANU (PF) will never reform itself out of power (Tshili, 2016).

This study argues that there is an urgent need to reform the postcolonial state in Zimbabwe to ensure democratisation. The current state still bears many hallmarks of its colonial predecessor, and this includes intolerance and use of violence. According

to Hyden (2006) some of the political challenges bedeviling most African countries can be “traced to colonial rule and anti-colonial mobilization” (p314).

Outside of Ethiopia, modern states did not exist in sub-Saharan Africa prior to colonization. The states inherited upon independence lacked roots in African society and culture and were generally unable to rule in the sense of shaping social, political and economic activity (Poteete, 2006, p1)

Hyden (2006) raises a very pertinent point. There is ample scholarship that suggests that the root cause of poor governance and corruption in most African countries can be traced to patrimonialism. Pre-colonial societies in Africa did not have nation states (Hyden, 2006). Most African nation states were an import of European colonialism. As a result, in the pre-colonial era, most transactions were made using relationships instead of formal institutions. These relationships are underpinned by what Hyden (ibid, p2) terms ‘the economy of affection’.

This state of affairs is still widespread in most African countries in democratic transition like Zimbabwe and this is a major drawback to nation building and democratisation. Under such conditions, leaders owe their allegiance to their kinship and ethnicity, thereby “rendering formal state institutions ineffective” (Poteete, 2006, p1). To ensure democratisation, there is a need to rethink and reimagine the role of the State in nation building and to “break out of the economy of affection by capturing its citizens” (Poteete, 2006, p2).

Schudson (2008) argues that democracy “is not about maximizing popular involvement in decision-making” (p6). Instead, it is about creating an enabling environment for:

. . . popular participation and for popular review of governmental performance within a system of competitive elections, due process, the protection of individual rights, the protection of freedoms of speech, press, petition, and association, and the preservation of a pluralistic culture (Schudson, 2008, pp7-8)

Zimbabwe is still in the early stages of democratisation. Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) argues that the “internal environment is the primary arena and determinant of the democratisation process” (p1). Democratisation is thus a political imperative in Zimbabwe if the country is to move forward from its current gridlock. The critical issue is not about “Africanising democracy, but rather, the necessity of democratising Africa” (Ibid.). The country needs to reform the postcolonial State and its institutions as a prerequisite for the democratisation process. Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021) argue that the democracy deficit in Zimbabwe is unique. The “inexorable descent into an ever-deepening crisis” has not been consistent over the past two decades (Ibid, p45).

Instead, there has been an alternation between periods of opening and closing of civic space. However, it is arguably true that there has been a progressive drift away from open, inclusive democratic practices (Ibid.)

Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021) argue that recent events show that the ruling ZANU (PF) Party will do anything to close democratic space when it feels that its hegemony is under threat. In the past few years, the political outlook has been very bleak and “the predominant trend has been towards shrinking civic space” (Ibid, p47).

Without independent institutions like the media, judiciary and legislature, democratisation will remain a pipedream. In this regard, this study argues that digital media activism has the potential to open space for democratisation in the country. This argument was supported by a public relations manager for a State-owned organisation in Harare. She said digital media had a critical role to play in the country’s democratisation process (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF36, 12/10/2020). The respondent said access to information was one of the prerequisites of democracy, and this includes providing access to electoral information for citizens to make informed political choices. She said non-governmental organisations, such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), used digital platforms for voter education. The voter education exercise included information asking voters to register on the national voters’ roll and explaining voters’ rights and obligations during general elections.

However, the relationship between digital media activism and democratisation is not without its inherent weaknesses, especially in countries like Zimbabwe which is ruled by a hybrid regime. A majority of the people in Zimbabwe live in rural areas and have no access to digital media. This is due to the high costs of internet connectivity and data bundles.

Bundles are promotional voice, data and SMS packages with a fixed validity period, offered by mobile network operators at significant discounts to normal, out-of-bundle services. Operators offer bundles in packages valid for a day, a week and a month (daily, weekly and monthly) (NewsDay, 2021, n. p.)

On the other hand, Zimbabwe's economy is in the doldrums and currently experiencing levels of unemployment, and most people struggle to buy the basic necessities of life. In such a situation, digital media become a luxury.

In addition, some scholars contend that the usage of digital media tends to be lower among marginalised social groups (Menocal, 2021). Menocal (2021) adds:

More generally, research shows that ICTs tend to reinforce the socio-cultural, economic, and gendered environments in which they are embedded, which can entrench discrimination and social exclusion rather than increase accountability to the broader public. Not surprisingly, active ICT users tend to be urban and educated young men (Ibid, np)

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that some people have a negative attitude to the potential of digital media activism to promote democratisation. Does digital media activism have a positive role to play in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe? Techno-pessimists, like a Zimbabwean foreign correspondent based in Harare (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM9, 26/10/2020), offered a different perspective, and argued that there is no relationship between digital media activism and democratisation. Instead, he argued that digital media activism forestalls democratisation:

I see no correlation between the growth of digital media activism and democratisation. Digital media activism delays democratisation. The tools are not effective in confronting

the regime. For instance, #ZimbabweLivesMatter hashtag did not result in reform. On the contrary, the authorities hardened their attitude towards the movement and described the hashtag activists as terrorists who should be flushed out (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM9, 26/10/2020)

There could be some element of truth in these assertions. While there is a lot of activity in digital spaces by Zimbabweans both in and outside the country, there is a glaring disconnection between on and offline activism. That is why it is necessary to avoid the romanticisation of digital media as being a 'liberation technology'. This study argues that for digital media activism to be more effective in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe, there is a need to combine on with offline activism. Without that missing link, the nexus between digital media activism and democratisation in Zimbabwe will remain a pipedream.

Mutsvairo (2021) argues that digital media activism in Zimbabwe is not effective due to a weak leadership. There could be some element of truth in Mutsvairo's (2021) observations. Most of the hashtag movements are rudderless and do not have a hierarchical leadership, while others are a one-man outfit.

Who are the legitimate leaders of the movement? What is their strategy? What exactly is their goal? Zimbabwe's political terrain remains muddy and bumpy (Ibid, p79)

However, the disconnect between on and offline activism cannot be attributed to one factor. It is due to several factors, and these include weak leadership and the lack of strategies amongst social activists, the deployment of the State's repressive apparatus, censorship and internet shutdowns. These factors have often been used by most African governments "to blunt the transformative potential of smart phones" (Cheeseman, et al, 2021, p1). To ensure the effective use of digital media activism in the democratisation process, there is a need for activists to re-strategise their on and offline activities.

A former managing director of a state-owned newspaper organisation in Harare (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020) offered a

more nuanced response. He said digital media activism is a double-edged sword for democratisation.

It can promote democratisation or kill it. It can also promote integration and cohesion among the people. Or it can create divisions. The risks are real because of the unfiltered nature of the information in most digital media spaces. Digital media activism undermines democracy if the information is not factual. Citizens need accurate information to make democratic choices. Without accurate information, people are not able to make well-informed democratic choices. For instance, some digital media spaces like WhatsApp are good at discussing the superficial. Digital media activism should not dwell on the superficial. It should go deeper and discuss the subterranean issues. For instance, why is the Zimbabwean currency in a freefall? Why is the country in a vortex? Is it because of the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA)? (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020)

The Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) is an American piece of legislation which was enacted by the United States (US) Senate in 2001, and which later amended, in 2018, placing certain individuals of the ruling elite and companies under targeted sanctions (Matenga, 2021). The punitive measures were also supported by the US's allies, the United Kingdom and the European Union, in response to "allegations of human rights abuses and electoral fraud" in Zimbabwe (Ibid, np).

The respondent above raised some important issues. Some of the discussions in digital spaces lack depth and are based on conjecture. The issue of ZIDERA and targeted sanctions against some members of the ruling elite and companies has attracted a lot of controversy, on some of the digital media platforms, from Zimbabwean State and non-State actors. The dominant narrative is that the punitive sanctions imposed by ZIDERA are responsible for Zimbabwe's current economic woes. It is argued these sanctions are not only hurting the targeted individuals and companies, but that they are affecting the overall performance of the national economy. On the other hand, the counter hegemonic narrative that is often peddled on digital media platforms is that the economic challenges facing Zimbabwe are self-inflicted and have nothing to do with ZIDERA. It is argued that the economic meltdown

in Zimbabwe is due to endemic corruption and misgovernance within the Mnangagwa administration.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to know where the truth lies. However, non-State actors believe that the truth lies somewhere between the two polarised positions. ZIDERA not only imposes targeted sanctions on some members of the ruling elites and companies, it also prevents the country from accessing cheaper lines of credit on the international money markets. Most of the infrastructure in Zimbabwe, especially the national railway and airline cannot access spare parts due to these sanctions. On the other hand, corruption has worsened under President Mnangagwa's government. Although some Ministers have been fired or arrested in recent months for corruption, no one, to date, has been convicted before the courts. Most of the criminal cases have collapsed, due to lack of sufficient evidence.

Dumisani Moyo (2009) raises an interesting point about the "digital public spheres involving Africans", adding that:

The non-professional journalists are not accountable to anyone but themselves, and their 'journalism' is not guided or constrained by any ethical norms or principles but rather by gut feeling and common sense. In a crisis situation, such as the one obtaining in Zimbabwe after the 2008 election, citizen journalism may worsen things by spreading untruths and half-truths which could lead to panic and disorder (p12)

Mano (2010) argues that there "is so much blind fury and anger in the online discussions to the extent that it partly explains the political violence in Zimbabwe" (p67). However, a senior Zimbabwean journalist for a private newspaper based in Bulawayo agreed that digital media activism had a role to play in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe, but he cautioned that it had its limitations, adding that:

Digital media activism certainly has a role to play in the democratisation process. It has expanded democratic space for political activism. However, there is still a lot of scepticism about its effectiveness. People are sceptical about it. There is this phenomenon of 'The Big Brother' is watching you. In addition, digital media activism is mostly concentrated in urban and peri-urban areas. Some people in areas like Hwange

and Lupane (Matebeleland North Province) do not even know what digital media means (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM40, 31/08/2020)

It is true that the digital divide still poses big challenges for online activism in Zimbabwe. The country is going through economic woes and most people will prioritise basic necessities before thinking about accessing digital technologies. However, all hope is not lost. This chapter argues that civil society should adopt a holistic approach in ensuring the broader participation of rural people in digital media activism through media literacy programmes and other empowerment initiatives. Such support might help to promote digital media activism in forging a democratic transition.

#### 4.2.4 Democratic Transition and Digital Activism

Zimbabwe's democratic transition clearly illustrates the inherent pitfalls experienced by most former conflict countries in Africa that are charting a democratic path from a colonial to a postcolonial phase. It is unique and different from transitions in other countries, like China and India, that had single transitions (Mkandawire, 2020). Since independence, Zimbabwe has gone through multifaceted transitions and these transitions include:

. . . decolonisation, deracialisation of the economy and polity; economic liberalisation and dismantling of sanctions-related control measures, attempts at democratisation; agrarian transformation through radical land reform and corporatist state to economic liberalisation (Ibid, p21).

It is interesting to note that although Zimbabwe's multiple transitions are not sequenced separately, they tend to overlap in many ways (Mkandawire, 2020). For instance, there was an overlap between the country's agrarian revolution and the democratic transition in the 2000s. However, this study will not discuss the other historical transitions and how they are intricately linked to democratic transition. Instead, it will confine its remit to the discussion of Zimbabwe's recent democratic transition.

Over the past three decades, ZANU (PF) Party has been in power, it has always viewed any opposition to its rule with suspicion. According to ZANU (PF) mandarins, the opposition became a fixation to be liquidated or swallowed up by any means and at the slightest opportunity. This has been ZANU (PF's) trope since independence when the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) was the main opposition to the ruling party before circumstances forced it to enter into a Unity Agreement with its erstwhile liberation ally in 1986. The political scientist, Prof Brian Raftopoulos, noted that "the nature of ZANU (PF's) hegemonic position was characterised by a popular level of consent, and a distinctive coercive strain, which sought to enforce a particular strategic unity" (cited in Dorman, 2003, pp846-7).

In recent years, especially after the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017 coup, that ousted Mugabe from power, we have seen ZANU (PF) creating by stealth what the Zimbabwean academic Ibbo Mandaza (2021) terms the 'securocratic state'. For Mandaza (2021), an archetypal securocratic state is "the antithesis of democratic governance" (Mandaza, 2021, p1), adding that:

It underscores the reality of the military-security state apparatus: the antithesis of democratic governance; the abrogation of the principle of the separation of powers; and, therefore, the blatant reliance on the military-security apparatus for the maintenance of law and order" (Ibid.)

This backdrop gives a glimpse into the stark reality of Zimbabwe's democratic transition. What hope is there for the future of democratic transition in the current age of digital media activism? Are the authorities' attitudes softening or hardening? Are there any nuances between the Mugabe and the Mnangagwa eras?

A Zimbabwean investment and banking specialist based in the United Arab Emirates (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 30/09/2020) said there were some nuances between how citizens negotiated in digital spaces in the Mugabe era and in the current 'New Dispensation' era. One of the major spin offs of the New Dispensation era is that people are now enjoying freedoms of speech and expression that were not taken for granted during the Mugabe era.

People are beginning to find their own voices. The atmosphere is more relaxed. People are not muffled. We are now seeing the opening of more democratic space in digital spaces. For instance, we have political satire on digital platforms such as BusStop.com. People caricature ED (President Mnangagwa) without facing any reprisals from the State. This is a departure from the old days of the Mugabe era (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 30/09/2020)

However, other respondents expressed different sentiments in regard to the freedoms ushered in during the Mnangagwa new dispensation era. While some respondents felt that the new dispensation had expanded democratic space for ordinary citizens, others felt that the situation had deteriorated under the current administration. A Women's University in Africa (WUA) academic based in Harare (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 9/10/2020) believes that in the past few months most people in the country have been withdrawing from digital media spaces.

Digital media created spaces not only for journalists, but also for ordinary citizens to air their views. After the demise of the Mugabe regime, democratic space opened up and people felt like they were free to say what they want. But after the arrest of some journalists following the foiled 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2020 demonstrations, most people realised that you could be prosecuted for posting political stuff in digital media spaces. As a result, we have been seeing less use of digital media among those living in Zimbabwe. Most people are withdrawing (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 09/10/2020)

A veteran Zimbabwean journalist and prominent businessman (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020) concurred with the above respondent's perspective. The prominent businessman based in Harare, worked for several years as a senior journalist for local and international media organisations, before venturing into private business. According to the respondent, while digital media have opened spaces for discourse on democratisation, the future did not look so rosy. Instead, it was very bleak, due to State repression against activists. He added:

Digital media have made lots of impact in Zimbabwe. People now know what is happening. People are now more enlightened. But in terms of democratisation, digital media activism is not effective in Zimbabwe. The government is scared of a free media. People are stifled. There are more arrests now. The more you use digital media the more you become vulnerable (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020)

However, another respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous respondent re: XXF16, 30/09/2020) disagreed with this argument, adding that citizens enjoyed more freedoms now than during Mugabe's era. She added that the major problem was that some citizens were abusing their newly-found freedoms:

There has been a significant improvement in the digital media spaces during the current democratic transition. After the November 2017 military-assisted transition, people started opening up without fear of being victimised. But other people are abusing the freedom. During Mugabe's era, people did not have that freedom (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent XXF16, 30/09/2020)

The argument above was validated by Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021). These media scholars argued that the military-assisted transition "ushered in a short period of widening civic space between the November, 2017, coup and the July, 2018, elections" (Ibid, p49). This was a deliberate ploy to hoodwink the international community and attract the much-needed direct foreign investment into the country. However, the newly created democratic space was shortlived "in the weeks leading up to the July 2018 elections" (Ibid.).

A former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) senior reporter, who is now based in the United States (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF10, 30/09/2020), said some digital media platforms are helping citizens to be better informed by leaking information on bad governance and corruption. She said the Baba Jukwa Facebook page wreaked havoc, and it had become a big hit during the Mugabe era.

Digital media activism also helped to mobilise and organise cross-party support during the military-assisted transition in November 2017. Mnangagwa would not have come to power without digital media (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF10, 30/09/2020)

However, a Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020) disagreed with the previous respondent's assertions. He said the agency of digital media activism had nothing to do with the military-assisted transition. He added:

The military ushered in a new era by opening democratic spaces. Over the past few years, digital media activism has helped in exposing corruption in the Mnangagwa administration. It has also helped in amplifying the Zimbabwean political crisis to the international community. Hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter helped to put the country under the international spotlight, and this resulted in the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, sending envoys to Zimbabwe (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

These sentiments were supported by a prominent Zimbabwean academic and human rights activist based in South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020). He said digital media activism has become a powerful mobilising tool in the country. There are no structures to go with it as we have witnessed from the journalist Hopewell Chin'ono's social media campaigns recently. The respondent added:

With the informalisation of the economy, digital media have come to play a role in mobilising, and the strength of that is that information gets out quickly and you don't have to rely on State-owned media. You are able to keep people updated on a fairly regular basis. The weakness is that you don't usually have structures to go with it. Social media events like [Pastor] Evans Mawarire's intervention, and now the issues around Hopewell Chin'ono and Jacob Ngarivhume are all social media events, but they seriously lack sustainable structures, especially at a time when the MDC itself is going through a rough period – increasing divisions, etc. The problem is that the Zimbabwean State now relies less on consent and more on coercion. Mnangagwa has shown that, as bad Mugabe was, he has got even worse. I think ZANU (PF) is losing the narrative very fast. Increasingly, critical voices are coming out, not only in Zimbabwe, but in South Africa – even the ANC [African National Congress], as you can see its criticising what is happening in Zimbabwe. Opposition parties in South Africa and Botswana; Catholics, Anglicans and Evangelicals in Zimbabwe; the nine Catholic Bishops in Zimbabwe and South Africa; Pan-African jurists and the African Union.... Mnangagwa is now facing more criticism than Mugabe ever did, and it's coming not only from the West, its coming from the region and the continent. He is very much losing the national narrative. I think digital messaging and social media have played a part in winning that narrative for the opposition forces. I think #ZimbabweanLivesMatter has been very important. I think all the reporting around the corruption in the State, particularly on the Covid issue, Farm Mechanisation Programme – all that has shed light on the deeply corrupt nature of the Zimbabwean State. So, in that way, the information that has gone

through digital formats has played a key role in helping to undermine ZANU (PF)'s control of the national narrative (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020)

The respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020) raises some salient points on the role of digital media activism in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe. Despite some political and economic constraints, in recent months, Zimbabwean citizens have taken to social media in a big way, ahead of the harmonised parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023. In this regard, Zimbabwean award-winning film maker and journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono is one of the most conspicuous activists in the digital spaces. His posts, which attract thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter, cover a wide variety of issues, including corruption, State capture by cartels and human rights abuses.

Corruption in Zimbabwe is endemic for several reasons, but the most prominent one is ZANU (PF) Party's "failure to structurally differentiate the State from the ruling party" (S. Moyo, 2014, p306). This state of affairs is worsened by the fact that "ruling party and public officials have treated the state as a private resource, a source of wealth accumulation" (Ibid.). In addition, Zimbabwe lacks strong and independent institutions "to develop and sustain independent law enforcement and judicial institutions that are germane to the maintenance of the rule of law" (Ibid, p308). Moyo (2014) further argues that the general political environment in the country is not conducive to the growth of a vibrant civil society (Ibid.). ZANU (PF) does not hide its disdain for an independent civil society and often views it not only as an existential threat, but also as "unpatriotic and devoid of national interest as well as threatening the stability of society and endangering state security" (Ibid, p312). Magure (2009) aptly captures ZANU (PF)'s attitude towards civil society:

As a way to manufacture consent, ZANU (PF) perpetuate moral panic around the supposed role of civil society in eroding the gains of the liberation struggle. ZANU (PF) accuses dissenting voices of being used as fronts of the British government's machinations to re-colonise Zimbabwe (p8)

According to the hegemonic narrative within ZANU (PF), digital media activists like Chin'ono are thus not supposed to be framed as citizens exercising their social

agency. Rather, they are cursorily dismissed as lackeys of the colonialists for exposing malfeasance among the ruling political elites.

Apart from exposing corruption and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, Chin'ono's posts also include critical housekeeping issues related to electoral democracy, like encouraging citizens to inspect and register on the voters' roll. However, some of Chin'ono's posts have inherent biases. They tend to be more partisan towards the main opposition MDC Alliance party and they downplay corruption and poor service delivery in urban councils which are mostly dominated by the party's mayors and councillors.



**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

Yesterday at 22:55 · 🌐

2023 General Election is going to be fought on TWO things.

1. CORRUPTION;

The looting of public funds, plunder of the nation's natural resources and abuse of State institutions.

This will define the economy mess.

2. INCOMPETENCE;

The appointment of clueless people who have destroyed the State.

This will define the tragic failures that have turned Zimbabwe into a pariah State!

The Youth will DECIDE in 2023!



662 Likes · 82 comments

**FIGURE 2:** Corruption is endemic in Zimbabwe's body politic and digital activism is critical to Zimbabwe's democratisation process. **Cartoon Credit:** Tony Namate

Nevertheless, despite the shrinking democratic space in the country, this study agrees with the previous respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020) that digital media activism is critical to the democratisation process in Zimbabwe, not only as a mobilising tool, but also as a platform for engaging citizens on deliberative and participatory democracy.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the third section will firstly, critically evaluate how digital media activism was implicated in two key areas during the period under review. The study will start by examining how digital media activism was implicated as a counter public sphere by the main Opposition MDC Alliance and civil society, against the ruling ZANU (PF) Party's hegemony.

Dorman (2016) sums up the current state of the Zimbabwean body politic, saying "Zimbabwe's politics are ultimately a battle over who speaks for the nation, and that battle is fought in multiple spheres" (p3). Recently, civil society has been transformed into one of the multiple public spheres in Zimbabwean politics. Chirimambowa and Chimedza (2014) argue that civil society in Zimbabwe is "the contested terrain" on which "post-colonial political and social forces for democratisation have dominated and emerged" (p72).

However, before making a critical analysis of the Zimbabwean civil society and discussing how it has deployed digital media activism to promote democratisation, some contextual specifics must be noted. Firstly, there are two categories of non-governmental organisations that form civil society in Zimbabwe. The first category comprises development NGOs, which are mostly involved in "community-based organisation and service delivery activities" (Ncube, 2010, p1). Examples of NGOs in this category include organisations that are involved in 'soft politics' and are not viewed as a serious threat to the State (Ncube, 2010). The other category comprises NGOs that are involved in 'hard politics' and are viewed as a serious threat to the State. This category of civil society comprise NGOs involved in 'governance work' and these organisations form the thrust of the discussion in this section of this chapter. For Ncube

(2010), “these organisations are involved in ‘hard politics’ because their struggles for social change are embedded in political party politics (in particular, the MDC) and are seen as a threat by the State” (Ncube, 2010, p25).

The other characterisation of civil society in Zimbabwe is that there are two types of civil society, and this includes hegemonic and counter hegemonic civil societies (Ncube, 2010). This point is very critical in avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism and assumption that all civil society organisations are against the State. Not all civil society NGOs are against the State; others support the State hegemony (Ncube, 2010). In Zimbabwe, we can single out a few of such organisations and they support ZANU (PF)’s nationalist project through the use of both coercion and consent. Examples of such NGOs are the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWA), the Zimbabwe Political Detainees and Restrictees Association (ZIPDRA) and the Zimbabwe Liberation War Collaborators (ZILWACO). However, hegemonic civil society does not fall within the remit of this discussion. Rather, the discussion is centred around counter hegemonic civil society organisations, and these include the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (ZHRF), Crisis Coalition Zimbabwe (CCZ), Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), etc.

The civil society in Zimbabwe has been reconfigured over the past few decades. The significant change was due to many factors, one of which was “the reconfiguration of Zimbabwe’s political economy in the 2000s forced both the opposition MDCs and the civic movement to rethink issues of social agency, in Zimbabwe’s public sphere” (Raftopoulos, 2014, p100). In the past, most civil society organisations looked up to the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) for leadership. This was due to the ZCTU’s organisational strength and capacity. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Zimbabwean economy went through a meltdown due to the government’s Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) and most workers lost their jobs and sources of livelihoods. These changes had an adverse impact on the ZCTU’s membership, resulting in the “central force of the labour movement being lost to civic struggles” (Ibid.). In addition, during the same period, civil society gained more

influence in Zimbabwean politics and formed a strong nexus with the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Civil society in Zimbabwe is mostly involved in electoral politics, and this includes “civic and voter education, research and advocacy, election monitoring and documentation of political violence” (Ncube, 2010, p211). Ncube (2010) argues that the ruling ZANU (PF) Party has always been “suspicious of civic and voter education outside its sphere of influence” (Ncube, 2010, p211). This is not surprising. The party became more suspicious about the counter hegemonic civil society after losing the vote in the constitutional referendum in 2000. The loss marked a turning point in Zimbabwean politics – the first time since independence that ZANU (PF) had tasted defeat in an electoral contest. On one hand, ZANU (PF)’s defeat in the referendum showed that the ruling party was not invincible.

On the other hand, ZANU (PF)’s defeat in the constitutional referendum was not attributable to a single political actor, like the MDC party. It was the result of a strong nexus between the newly formed MDC party and a broad cross section of NGOs that included the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and ZimRights.

However, Raftopoulos (2014) argues that, in recent years, a “palpable sense of disorientation and the desperate search for new forms of political renewal” has wormed into civil society NGOs (Raftopoulos, 2014, p99). The quest for renewal comes against a background characterised by:

. . . an ideology which separates politics from economics and instead motivates limited battles over ‘human rights’, ‘governance’ and the ‘rule of law’, while quietly discarding the glaring inequalities in the economy often tied to historical processes of colonialism, imperialism, domination and dispossession (Chirimambowa and Chimedza, 2014, p78).

To redress this chasm between politics and the political economy, the NGOs have been exploring “new ways to engage the State and citizenry in a new political context” (Raftopoulos, 2014, p99) to which Ncube (2013) noted that “the efficacy of deploying

“human rights discourse to demonstrate the illegitimacy of the ZANU (PF) regime “ has been curtailed” (cited in Raftopoulos, 2014, p99). Against this backdrop, Ncube (2013) argues that some civic organisations, like the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, have reviewed their strategies to strike a sound balance between “rights and redistribution questions” (cited in Raftopoulos, 2014, p99). For instance, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum contends that there is a “need to acknowledge that Zimbabwe human rights violations cannot be addressed separately from the broader political economy issues” (cited in Raftopoulos, 2014, p100)). This point is supported by Chirimambowa and Chimedza (2014) who argue that the universalised narrative of ‘constitutionalism’, ‘democracy’, ‘good governance’ and ‘human rights’ is not benign and neutral; it is value laden. The Kenyan, Professor Mukau Mutua, adds that:

The bias towards civil and political rights favours vested narrow political interests and kleptocracies which are entrenched in the bureaucratic, political and business sectors of society and represent interests that are not interested to challenge economic powerlessness of the masses in postcolonial Africa. Yet the human rights movement assumes the naturalness of the market and the inevitability of the employer-employee, capitalist-worker, and subordinated labour relations. It seeks the regulation of these relationships, but not their fundamental re-formulation (Mutua, 2008, p34)

The schism between politics and political economy has created an ideological crisis within the civil society movement. Most civil society organisations, including the MDC-T party and its formations, ignored calls to redress the historical injustices of the colonial legacy by arguing that the whole project was “a smoke and mirrors issue”, aimed at distracting citizens from the economic malaise in the country caused by endemic corruption and misgovernance (Chirimambowa and Chimedza, 2014, p80). In this regard, most civil society organisations were wrong footed by the ruling ZANU (PF) Party, which claimed the role as the torchbearer of the national revolution with a mission to redress the historical injustices of colonialism.

The disunity within the civil society movement helped to reinforce ZANU (PF)’s hegemony. Some civil society organisations, like the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) and the Zimbabwe Council of Chiefs, were captured by ZANU (PF) and were used as key components of its election strategy (Chirimambowa and Chimedza, 2014).

In the past few years we have also seen noticeable structural changes in some of the civic organisations like the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions which had a very cosy relationship with the main opposition party, MDC-T. Some of the MDC-T leaders cut their teeth as political activists in the civil society movement and after the formation of the MDC party, they still continued to enjoy a close relationship with the civic organisations. On the other hand, other leaders in the main opposition party had their feet in both oppositional politics and civil society. However, in recent years, most civil society organisations have reconfigured and maintain, a distant relationship with the main opposition MDC Alliance. Magure (2009) adds:

The failure by civil society to make a critical distinction between civil society and political parties as espoused in liberal democratic theory explains their fallout and current love-hate relationship (p269)

It is also likely that the shift in the relationship of the civil society with the main opposition was partly triggered by factional fighting within the MDC-T party. Hence, part of this chapter's brief is to explore how digital media were deployed during the factional fighting within both the ZANU (PF) and the MDC-T parties.

Factionalism within ZANU (PF) was triggered by the succession war to replace the ruling party strongman, Robert Mugabe. The struggle for the heart and soul of ZANU (PF) started with the expulsion of Vice-President Joice Mujuru's camp, which was known as Gamatox.

The increased loss of favour of the Mujuru faction in the last half of 2014 was not an overnight event. In fact, the expulsion was designed by Military Intelligence (MI), which created a case that the Mujuru camp was plotting to eliminate Mugabe and communicated this intelligence to the President. The Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) – a civilian-led institution, largely responsible for the president's security – also communicated its findings. Mugabe did not believe the CIO views against the Mhangagwa faction because he thought that the CIO bosses were appointed by General Mujuru and were thus pro-Mujuru. Moreover, careful planning by the Mhangagwa faction was supported by MI surveillance and a constructed controversial

gendered case was orchestrated to destroy Mujuru's aspirations to succeed Mugabe (Hove, 2019, p202)

Factionalism within ZANU (PF) proffered a few insights into how digital media can be both a boon and a curse for citizens living under authoritarian rule. Military Intelligence (MI) produced what it termed authentic video footage obtained during the State surveillance of the Vice-President. The video showed "what the MI insisted was a genuine surveillance video recording of Mujuru naked and carrying out witchcraft work, designed to eliminate Mugabe", so that she could urgently succeed him (Hove, 2019, p209). These malicious allegations were carefully manufactured to legitimize the expulsion of Vice-President Mujuru. Hove (2019) contends that this might be the case since no criminal charges were ever filed against Mujuru.

Following the ousting of Mujuru and her supporters from the party in 2014, Mnangagwa was appointed as her replacement in both the party and government. But it was not long before factionalism reared its ugly head again within ZANU (PF). Ironically, the protagonists in the long-drawn-out succession war were First Lady Grace Mugabe's faction known as Generation 40 (G40) and Vice-President Mnangagwa's Lacoste camp, erstwhile allies who had played a pivotal role in the expulsion of the Mujuru faction from ZANU (PF), using State-owned media and digital media spaces. The protracted factionalism almost shook the party to its core.

On one hand there was the G40 led by First Lady Grace Mugabe and its key ideologues were Prof Jonathan Moyo, Saviour Kasukuwere, Dr Walter Mzembe and Patrick Zhuwao. G40 enjoyed tacit support from Mugabe, and that might explain why, during the initial stages of the succession war, the faction received acres of space in state-owned and digital media so as to assert their hegemony within ZANU (PF). It is likely that G40's major tiff against Lacoste was that they felt that they were not sufficiently rewarded for helping Mnangagwa in the expulsion of Mujuru and her acolytes from the party. The G40 faction used against Mnangagwa's Lacoste faction the same script it had deployed to neutralise the Mujuru camp. Hove (2019) adds:

From the outset of his appointment, Mnangagwa was covertly and overtly attacked in a similar way to Mujuru through the state media after 2014. Furthermore, Grace Mugabe used her rallies to denigrate Mnangagwa and his faction (p213)

The denouement of the G40 and Lacoste conflict for the control of ZANU (PF) and the State was finally accelerated by the intervention of the military on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The military coup tipped the scales in favour of Mnangagwa's Lacoste faction and took control of the ideological state apparatus (ISA). During the first few days after the coup, there was a news blackout about it on most media channels. The media were caught unawares by the unusual turn of events and did not know how to mediate this historic event. Others were not sure about which nomenclature to use in describing the event, which was variously described as a 'military-assisted transition', the 'New Dispensation' or the 'Second Republic', or 'a coup that is not a coup' (Chuma and Ndou, 2019). As a result, most ordinary citizens turned to social media platforms, like Twitter, for news updates (Ibid.). However, the digital and social networking sites were not without their own challenges and they created communicative spaces for unfettered debate "speculation, falsehoods and truths all combined" (Chuma and Ndou, 2019, p4). On the other hand, without access to State-owned media, G40 was deprived of its resources for manufacturing propaganda. As a result, it resorted to digital and social networking sites to create its counter narratives against the Lacoste faction. It is necessary to note that although the G40 lost its hegemony within the ruling ZANU (PF) party after the military-assisted transition, it was not neutralised like the Mujuru faction. Despite the purges that were carried out in ZANU (PF) after the advent of the 'military-assisted transition', it appears that G40 still commands a few pockets of support within the rank and file of the ruling party. It is likely that these members might be the source of some of the inside information which is often posted on digital platforms and social networking sites that are run by other G40 members. Some key members of the G40 faction, like Prof Jonathan Moyo, Saviour Kasukuwere, Dr Walter Mzembe, Mandy Chimene and Patrick Zhuwao, went into self-imposed exile after being charged with criminal charges while in office, and often use digital and social networking sites to manufacture counter narratives against the Lacoste faction. Other G40 members, like Dr Ignatius Chombo, Dr Walter Chidhakwa and Prof Francis Gudyanga, were not so lucky and are facing criminal charges in Zimbabwe, and their cases are still pending before the courts.

However, “the intergenerational contestations for power in anticipation of the post-Mugabe era” (Zezeza, 2021b, p172) was not only confined to the ruling ZANU (PF) Party. The main opposition, MDC-T, had its own share of intergenerational contestations for power, and it almost caused their implosion, following the death of the charismatic founding father, Morgan Tsvangirai. Before his death, the MDC-T leader made two key appointments to the party leadership without following the party’s constitution. Nelson Chamisa and Elias Mudzuri were appointed Vice Presidents, “in addition to the existing Vice President Thokozani Khupe, who had been elected at the 2014 Congress” (Raftopoulos, 2019, p16). Some analysts believe the decision was meant to:

. . . respond to ethnic/regional and gender issues in the MDC-T, namely the belief that an individual who was both a woman and from the minority Ndebele ethnic group, like Khupe, could not win a national election in the country (Ibid.).

However, these changes created a political albatross for the party leadership’s legitimacy which is still unresolved.

According to Article 9.21.1 of the party constitution, when the President dies or resigns, the Deputy President assumes the role of Acting President, pending the holding of an extraordinary congress, which must be held within a year of the death or resignation (Magaisa, 2018). After Tsvangirai’s death, Chamisa moved swiftly to fill the leadership vacuum and organised a National Council meeting “which endorsed him as the new President of the party, a decision whose legality was questioned” (Raftopoulos, 2019, p16).

In his quest to assert his authority, Chamisa made purges within the party with the support of a paramilitary outfit known as ‘Vanguard’. The supporters unleashed violence against those who questioned Chamisa’s legitimacy. Amongst those who were specifically targeted for the attacks was Vice-President Dr Thokozani Khupe. She was targeted with vitriolic and violent attacks, most of which were deemed to be “tribal and gender insensitive” (Western Region Collective, 2018), and shared on some

digital media platforms. For instance, some gory photos were posted on social media platforms, like Facebook showing a group of Vanguard youths baying for Dr Khupe's blood during Tsvangirai's burial in Buhera District. Dr Khupe and some of her supporters were later rescued by onlookers and sought sanctuary in a hut where they were threatened by arsonists. In the wake of these persistent attacks, Dr Khupe and her lieutenants, the former organising secretary, Abednico Bhebe, and the former party spokesperson, Obert Gutu, were summarily dismissed from the party in 2018. Factionalism in the main opposition resulted in two formations: MDC Alliance, a coalition of opposition parties led by Chamisa and MDC-T led by Dr Khupe. The two parties contested as separate political entities in the general elections in 2018. However, a Supreme Court ruling recognised Dr Khupe's party as the legitimate MDC-T party and requested that an extraordinary congress should be organised as per the constitution in order to choose the party's leadership. The extraordinary congress was held amid a lot of irregularities and accusations and Douglas Mwonozora was elected as President of the MDC-T. However, it looks as if the wounds of factionalism will take some time to heal between the two MDC formations. Currently, the MDC Alliance, rebranded under a new name, as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), seems to be the de facto main opposition, while the MDC-T is the de jure and official main opposition.

### 4.3 Conclusion

To sum up, the focus of this chapter was to explore the method used in the study, before discussing some of the core themes that emerged from it.

Initially, the study was supposed to use fieldwork as part of its methodology. However, the plans were scuppered by the unforeseen outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, most countries imposed lockdowns and mobility restrictions on both foreigners and their own citizens. That explains why there were some last-minute changes to the methodology.

Forty-five respondents from a broad spectrum of Zimbabweans, both in and outside the country were recruited for the study, using Zoom video conferencing interviewing. Like any other method, Zoom video conferencing interviewing has its advantages and disadvantages. The method helped me to break geographical mobility barriers and to reach out to some Zimbabweans inside the country and others scattered in the diaspora in South Africa, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States of America. On the downside, Zoom video conferencing is not a perfect substitute for face-to-face interviewing. The method slightly diminishes body language cues.

A major outcome of this study was that there was a broad consensus among the respondents on the key role of digital media in political activism. Most participants felt digital media has a potential role to play in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe, especially by mobilising, coordinating and creating platforms for political deliberation and participation. However, most respondents felt that activists in Zimbabwe have not yet realised the full potential of digital media because of the existing disconnect between on and offline activism. For activists to effectively utilise digital media for participatory democracy, there is a need to create a nexus between on and offline democratic spaces.

Another interesting outcome from the study was that there was overwhelming support for the study from Zimbabweans based in the diaspora, if compared with those locally based in Zimbabwe. This could be due to several factors, but two factors came out very strongly in the research. It seemed that most members of the Zimbabwean diasporan community were keen to participate in the research because, presumably, of the newly found freedoms they enjoy in their host countries; freedoms that are not normally taken for granted in their country of origin. In addition, the costs of connectivity are comparatively cheaper in the diaspora, while in Zimbabwe the costs may inhibit most people. In addition, some respondents felt that the political environment in the country was repressive, and this inhibited most people from participating in digital media activism.

This chapter addressed the first research question on the use of digital media activism as a catalyst for democratisation in African countries that are in democratic transition, such as Zimbabwe. The next chapter addresses the second research question, on the contribution of digital media activism to social change in Zimbabwe and discusses how citizens are deploying digital media activism to expose corruption within President Mnangagwa's government and are mobilising the citizenry to register on the voters' roll for the 2023 harmonised presidential and parliamentary elections. In addition, the chapter also addresses the third research question, on the implications of digital media activism in African countries that are in democratic transition, such as Zimbabwe.

## CHAPTER 5: Digital Activism and Social Change

### 5.0 Introduction

In the preceding chapter we explored and critically evaluated the use of digital media activism in African countries, especially those, such as Zimbabwe, that are undergoing democratic transition. We noted how citizens were deploying digital media in Zimbabwe to create spaces for deliberative and participatory democracy under authoritarian rule.

This chapter examines the impact of digital media activism in Zimbabwe as a catalyst for broader social and political change. Using the objectives stated in the Methodology chapter, it uses Thematic Analysis (TA) to analyse the following themes: social change and digital media activism; social media platforms and democracy; and the challenges of digital media activism. These themes will help to address the research question for this study on the contribution of digital media activism to social and political change.

In recent years the ruling political elites in Zimbabwe have been facing renewed opposition from a very unlikely quarter. They have experienced consistent onslaughts by digital media activists against misgovernance and massive corruption within government and quasi-governmental organisations.

Against this backdrop, this chapter interviewed respondents and sought answers about the extent to which digital media activism could be considered the new frontier and the site of the struggle for social and political change. It also sought to investigate how some of the digital media activism has contributed to social and political change in Zimbabwe. Citing most recent examples from the Zimbabwe case study, the research discusses how citizens have deployed digital media activism as a site of political contestation under very challenging authoritarian conditions. The study starts by examining the nexus between social change and digital media activism in the first

section, before discussing the other themes that have emerged from the chapter's research question. In the second section, the chapter explores and unpacks the new trope of hashtag activism in Zimbabwe, using #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka as case studies. In the third section, the study investigates the use of popular culture genres in digital media activism in Zimbabwe as a site of struggles for social change. Some of the alternative social media spaces included in this research are Magamba TV and Bustop TV. In the fourth section, the study critically explores the impact of digital media activism in exposing corruption in President Mnangagwa's government; organising and mobilising citizens to register on the voters' roll for the 2023 harmonised presidential and parliamentary elections. In the fifth section, the chapter will discuss the challenges and implications of digital media activism in African countries in democratic transition such as Zimbabwe. Last, but not least, the concluding section highlights the key points of the chapter. As was noted earlier, this chapter starts by discussing the nexus between social change and digital media activism.

## 5.1 Social Change and Digital Activism

The nexus between social change and digital media activism is highly contestable in the extant literature. Gladwell (2010) argues that digital media activism does not have the capacity to promote real social change, and further argues that real social change can only be created by "high-risk meaningful activism" (cited in Joseph, 2012, p150). For Gladwell (2010), a key feature of high-stakes activism is a "strong group identity and cohesion with strong ties" (cited in Joseph, 2012, p150). On the other hand, digital media activism "promotes weak ties and low-risk activism, or 'slacktivism'" (Ibid.).

Some of the arguments raised by Gladwell (2010) are valid. For instance, the danger that digital media "may lull people into thinking that they are creating change without making any real stands" is very significant (Specht and Ros-Tonen, 2017, p1913). Kristofferson, et al; (2014) clearly describe such a situation as "slacker activism" or, briefly, 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' – a 'token display of support for a social cause without willingness to devote significant effort to generate social and political change ( p1149).

Gladwell's (2010) argument is supported by Morozov (2011). He argues that digital media activism is ineffectual and distracts citizens from fundamental social issues. Morozov (2011) argues that most people do not use digital media for political activism. Instead, they use it for entertainment purposes (Morozov, 2011). In addition, Fenton (2008) contends that digital media activism does not promote sustainable social change. Instead, digital media activism "runs the risk of raising our hopes without the likelihood of deliverance" (Fenton, 2008, p244).

Fenton (2008) raises a very important point with a universal appeal. Her concerns are shared by Mutsvairo (2021) who argues that digital media activists in Zimbabwe lack strategies and viable plans. Mutsvairo (2021) adds:

Digital activism in Zimbabwe lacks leadership, coordination and in some cases identity. Who are the legitimate leaders of the movement? What is their strategy? What exactly is their goal? Zimbabwe's political terrain remains muddy and bumpy (p79)

However, it is often forgotten that "social change feeds off small acts of protest, however seemingly ineffectual they might be" (Echchaibi, 2013, p859). This type of activism resonates with what James Scott (1985) terms 'everyday forms of resistance'. This refers to a form of activism in which "individuals prefer tactical wisdom and quiet defiance to outright encroachment when resisting dominance and dealing with situations of asymmetrical power relations" (Echchaibi, 2013, p859).

Resistance for Scott often takes ordinary forms because the powerless do not have access to other alternatives or are not interested in large-scale, organised political activity. Individual action is also discarded as hardly subversive in the researcher's eye as they are looking for big movements, protests and other classical but misleading parameters of resistance (Ibid.)

Given the above, Scott's (1985) analysis is based on his Malaysian experiences with disadvantaged communities fighting for social justice. This study finds very instructive Scott's (1985) advice on the relevance of the everyday forms of resistance "as a tactical moment" in analysing the deployment of digital media activism in other Global South contexts, including the Zimbabwean experiences (cited in Echchaibi, 2013, p859).

In addition, contrary to the techno-pessimists (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011), this study argues that digital media activism has the potential to influence social and political change. Gladwell's (2010) analysis smacks of universalism. The category of high-risk activism is problematic, though. What might be low-risk in the Global North is not necessarily low-risk in the Global South. Digital media activism in countries under authoritarian rule is no stroll in the park; it is a high stakes game. Specht & Ros-Tonen's (2017) analysis of the use of digital media in Colombia, another Global South country in South America, resonates with the typology of digital media activism in most African countries. The scholars argue that digital media activism can be deployed as a force for change, adding:

Digital and social media transform political activism and Social Movement Organisations (SMOs), notably in terms of action repertoire, spatial scope of action, international exposure and potential social influence (Specht and Ros-Tonen, 2017, p1908)

Bennett (2003) also underlines the role of digital media activism in breaking down barriers to geographical mobility. He adds:

Reducing communication costs, facilitating communication between geographically dispersed persons and aiding the formation of collective identities, Internet and digital media allow a space for voice and political mobilisation (Bennett, 2003, p143)

In recent years, activists and politicians have been arrested in Zimbabwe for posting innocent political messages that are deemed to be seditious by the State. These include the journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono, and the politicians, Jacob Ngarivhume, Job Sikhala and Fadzayi Mahere.

This study concurs with Jenkins's (2012) argument that the digital media "foster a new participatory culture that has its own logics, aesthetics, new cultural competencies and new forms of processing information and interacting with the world" (cited in Echchaibi, 2013, p855). To validate Jenkins's (2012) argument, some scholars cite the overthrow of some of the leaders in the Maghreb region during the Arab Spring, and the

unseating of the Sudanese strongman, Omar Al Bashir, more recently, through on and offline activism.

According to Shirky (2011), “access to information is less important, politically, than access to conversation” (Shirky, 2011, np). Digital media has the capacity to empower citizens to engage in conversations about political and social change. Admittedly, not all conversations in digital spaces influence social change. Some of the content may seem like harmless hot air, but parts of those conversations may help to trigger political participation as a launching pad for social and political change.

As alluded to in the previous chapters, this study will critically evaluate the role of digital media activism as an agent for social and political change in the Zimbabwean context. The research covers the period from the Mugabe era in 2016 to the current Mnangagwa or ‘New Dispensation’ era. Why the year 2016? The year was very significant in the development of digital media activism in the Zimbabwean body politic. During that period there was an upsurge in political activism in digital media spaces by Zimbabweans both in and outside the country. Some of the most prominent social movement organisations formed during that time were #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka. In recent months, we have also witnessed more social movements occupying these digital spaces, including #ZimbabweanLivesMatter and #DemLoot. A common thread runs through these social movements. The movements’ motivating factors include the fight against bad governance and corruption in the Mnangagwa administration.

Against this backdrop what prospects are there for social and political change in Zimbabwe using digital media activism? There was no consensus among the respondents on the contribution of digital media activism to social change. The responses showed contestable perspectives. A Zimbabwean working for an international development agency in Eastern Africa said that the current political environment in Zimbabwe was not conducive to effective digital media activism. For instance, the State wields a lot of power under the current legislative framework for the opening of space for new entrants into online news platforms. He further said:

The ruling elites feel threatened in Zimbabwe. For instance, how is it possible that an African city like Nairobi has more radio stations than the whole of Zimbabwe? Our leaders do not want the ordinary people to organise. They feel very threatened

(Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021)

This respondent's views were supported by a veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021), who said:

We now have a regime less tolerant of dissent than Mugabe. The situation has deteriorated, and we see the determination of the state to monitor citizens through surveillance. However, it's a battle the government cannot win. It can hack laptops. But digital technology is too entrenched to be nipped in the bud. Digital media empowers the small man. People have the tools themselves (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021)



**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

1 hr · 🌐

Zimbabweans MUST understand that a VOTE will put an end to these humiliating experiences.

ZANUPF has been able to rig elections because Zimbabweans choose to stay away from voting.

Running away has never provided a lasting solution.

Those abroad who can, should come home and vote!



260 Likes · 103 comments

**FIGURE 3:** Is digital activism alone enough for transformative social change in Zimbabwe?

For Mano (2010, p59), the advent of new technologies presents new challenges for “ordinary Africans to begin to theorise in new ways about both new and old media”. Mano (Ibid.) further argues that “the notion of victimhood’, which often presents Africans as powerless victims of officialdom, is now being reconsidered in a context in which, however powerful and repressive some African governments or global conditions are,” (Ibid.) most citizens are now aware that “there is always room – sometimes through radical or alternative media – for initiative and agency to challenge domination, exploitation and the globalisation of poverty” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p204). Castells, et al; (2007) further argue that the advent of new technologies offers a rare opportunity for ordinary citizens to deploy “many-to-many and one-to-one horizontal communication channels that bypass political or business control of communication” (p209), thereby creating a host of “new possibilities for citizens to produce reliable and credible information” within their different contexts (Moyo, 2010, p71). This point is supported by Mare (2020) who argues that “pro-democracy forces have used alternative media spaces, like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, to circumvent the gatekeeping and filtering practices of the state media empire [. . .]” (Mare, 2020, p1).

A former editor of a State-owned newspaper (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020) offered a more nuanced response on the role of digital media activism in the creation of social and political change. He said digital media activism has been effective in a few instances.

We saw this during the shootings of civilians on the streets of Harare on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2018. It is effective, as long as it is true. We also saw the government revoking the granting of the mining concession in the Hwange conservancy to the Chinese, without following due processes. Digital media activism also played a positive role in exposing the Covid-19 procurement scandal. The scandal resulted in the arrest and resignation of the Minister of Health and Child Welfare, Obediah Moyo. The criminal case is still pending before the courts. However, there is need to be cautious. Political digital activism relies mostly on emotions, and not facts. There are times when artifacts are just uploaded into those digital media spaces without providing the context. A lot of the stuff is not accurate. A photo of a woman carrying a bucket of water went viral on social media and it later turned out that the woman was not Zimbabwean; she was from

Sudan. Why not get real images from Zimbabwe? (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020)

The respondent's well-informed analysis supports the notion that digital media activism can be a force for good in creating social change. The three cases which he cited in his responses are very topical and relevant.

### 5.2.1 Hwange National Park

The first case involves the granting of a mining concession in Hwange National Park to Chinese companies without following due processes. The government directed Zimparks Director-General, Fulton Mangwanya, to allow the Chinese entities to prospect in the area in spite of his professional oversight against the arrangement. The Tourism Minister, Mangaliso Ndlovu, wrote a letter to Mangwanya, requesting him to comply with the government directive:

Following a meeting I held with a Mr Stevens representing ZZEE [Zimbabwe Zhongxin Electric Energy] Company (a subsidiary of the Zhongxin Coking Company) and the Permanent Secretary on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July to discuss their application for permission to prospect in Sinamatela, which is a part of the National Park, I noted the following: That procedurally the company ought to have applied for permission [from] Zimparks before applying for a Special Grant (SG) to do an ecological report and advise . . . That since a MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] was signed in the presence of His Excellency, the President, and that the investment is in line with our Vision 2030, it will receive Government support, as promised by His Excellency. I, therefore, advise that you grant ZZEE Company permission to do drilling and exploration at the cited concession after which they will indicate to you in writing the specific areas they do mining on and an agreement made between national parks and the investor on the mining project consistent with the government position (Kairiza, 2020, np)

In his letter to the Parks' boss, Minister Ndlovu, despite expressing misgivings about the business venture in "a national park which houses . . . free range black rhinos . . ." ignored the environmental issues and directed Mangwanya to grant the Chinese companies the license to commence their work in the Hwange National Park (Kairiza, 2020). However, the Parks' boss highlighted the potential risks of allowing the Chinese

enterprise to “operate in a wildlife protected area, but nevertheless agree to license the Chinese firm as instructed by Ndlovu [the Tourism Minister]” (Kairiza, 2020, np).

Through a letter dated July 28<sup>th</sup> [2020], and addressed to the Tourism Minister, the Parks’ boss wrote:

The Authority has taken note of your advice to give ZZEE Company a letter of no objection, being permission to drill and explore the Sinamatela area inside Hwange National Park. This will be done as instructed; nevertheless, I wish to bring to your attention the following salient issues for the record . . . Zimbabwe has no history of mining in a National Park. We have six categories of protected areas in the country and National Parks should receive the highest levels in line with the laws of Zimbabwe and associated international obligations. The proposed area is inside Hwange National Park and Zimbabwe has no history of mining in our crown jewel category of protected areas, the bedrock of the tourism industry. It will be the first time for coal mining to be permitted in a national park, a precedent that will be very difficult to sustain (Kairiza, 2020, np)

The government was later forced to revoke the mining license following a public outcry, with hashtag #SaveHwangenationalpark going viral on Twitter.

### 5.2.2 Post-election Shootings

The other example cited by the previous respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous re: XXM39, 20/11/2020) refers to the shooting of civilians that ensued during the post-election demonstrations on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. The shooting of the civilians occurred following the historic election of July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. The election was very significant in that it was the first to be held without Zimbabwe’s founding father Robert Mugabe, after his ousting by the military, and the death of his nemesis Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the main opposition party, MDC-T.

Mungwari (2019) clearly described the events leading to the shooting of the civilians on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018: “On voting day, voting proceeded peacefully, no cases of violence were recorded” (Mungwari, 2019, p20394). However, events took a different turn the following day.

[. . .] opposition supporters expressed growing impatience over the slow release of the historic presidential election results, and they took to the streets, alleging that their vote was being ‘stolen’. What started as a peaceful protest quickly turned violent, with opposition supporters allegedly burning cars and buses belonging to ZANU (PF) (Motlanthe Report, 2018, p5)

The anti-riot police tried to control the violent demonstrators, but they were overwhelmed and later sought reinforcements from the military to quell the situation (Mungwari, 2019). In its report, the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR) said that “within a few minutes of the army’s deployment, Harare’s Central Business District (CBD) resembled a warzone, with army trucks and helicopters patrolling the city, and soldiers opening live ammunition to the fleeing protestors” (ZADHR, 2018, p7).

The military and police deployed disproportionate and indiscriminate force, resulting in the deaths of 6 civilians, and several others were seriously injured (Motlanthe Report, 2018). This incident dented the image of Mnangagwa’s government among the international community. Since ousting Mugabe from power with the assistance of the military, Mnangagwa has always tried to distance himself from his erstwhile mentor. He reinvented himself as a reformer, but after the civilian shootings on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018, the international community saw him for what he was: a worse imitation of Mugabe. To salvage his reputation, Mnangagwa appointed a 7-member Commission of Inquiry into the post-election violence, comprising the former President of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe, the British Barrister, Rodney Dixon, QC, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the former Commonwealth Secretary, General Davis Mwamunyange, the former Chief of the Tanzania People’s Defence Forces, Professor Charity Manyeruke, Political Science Department, University of Zimbabwe; Professor Lovemore Madhuku, Faculty of Law, University of Zimbabwe, and Ms Vimbai Nyemba, the former President of the Law Society of Zimbabwe (Motlanthe Report, 2018).

The Motlanthe Commission’s public hearings received submissions from a broad cross section of Zimbabwean society, and this included video footage and photographs which were posted on social media and networking sites. In addition, the

public hearings were streamed live on different digital platforms including ZBC-TV and this “enabled people to be actively involved through social media discussions” (Mungwari, 2019, p20402-20403).

This was a refreshing development because people wanted to know the reason behind the demonstrations and shootings. Relatives of the deceased and the nation at large longed for closure to the tragic violent incidents. Zimbabwe also wants to move on and resolve other critical challenges such as the economy (Ibid.)

Moyo (2010) argues that by putting ordinary citizens at the heart of new technologies, digital media “is suggestive both of agency and subaltern transformative power” (p77). For example, some of the photos and video footage taken during the post-election demonstrations and shootings of the civilians by the military were later used as admissible evidence during the proceedings of the Motlanthe Commission. This shows that digital media spaces can be used as sites of struggle for counter hegemonic narratives against repressive governments’ propaganda (L. Moyo, 2007).

### 5.2.3 Covid-19 Medical Supplies Scandal

The third example cited during the interview with the respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020) involved the arrest and sacking of the former Minister of Health and Child Welfare, Obediah Moyo, for abuse of office and corruption. Moyo was fired for “inappropriate conduct after he was accused of illegally awarding a multi-million-dollar contract for COVID-19 medical supplies to a shadowy company that sold the government face masks and other materials at inflated prices” (Mutsaka, 2020). The former minister was arrested by the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Agency (ZAC), following a public uproar on both social media and networking sites. The government relented to public pressure and cancelled the contracts.

The scandal revealed how corruption was still entrenched in Mnangagwa’s administration, 3 years after coming to power and promising to make a clean break from Mugabe’s tyrannical and corrupt dictatorship. One of President Mnangagwa’s sons was “forced to issue a statement denying a link to the company after photos emerged of its Zimbabwean representative with the president and his wife and sons

at several events” (Mutsaka, 2020, np). The representative, Delish Nguwaya, and some senior officials of the national drugs procurement agency, were also arrested and charged. According to the court documents, Nguwaya was accused of lying, by saying the company was a drugs manufacturing company based in Switzerland, “whereas it was merely a consulting company with no experience in the manufacture of drugs and medical products” (Ibid.).

Moyo was the second minister to be fired by Mnangagwa after his ascendancy to power in 2017. Earlier, the former Minister of Tourism, Prisca Mupfumira, was arrested for criminal abuse of office. She was accused “of misappropriating US\$95m from the national pension fund [National Social Security Authority] (Chin’ono, 2020).

### 5.3 Fake News

However, we must not be too romantic about the role of digital media activism in promoting social change. To this end, the study concurs with the respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020) that digital media activism can also be a curse at times. That is why it is always advisable to be circumspect and take any information in those spaces with a pinch of salt. There have been instances where images were posted on social media sites, and it later turned out that the posts were either fake or inaccurate. For instance, an image of a woman, who was purported to be a Zimbabwean, was appropriated on social media. However, it was later shown that the woman carrying a bucket of water was not a Zimbabwean, but was from Sudan.

However, it is important to note that the use of fake news is not the preserve of counter hegemonic forces. State authorities are equally guilty of these infractions in digital spaces. According to Mare (2020b) hybrid regimes often deploy “hard and soft legitimization strategies to influence public opinion and shape political narratives” (Mare, 2020, p2). He further adds:

This is accomplished, for example, through restricting space for private media outlets, policing the internet, sponsoring nominally independent newspapers, circulating ‘fake

news' (content that is false or misleading, as well as intentionally sensationalised to drive up the volume of 'clicks' and 'shares'), and awarding lucrative government advertising contracts to state-friendly media outlets (Mare, 2020b, p2)

However, despite these constraints, this chapter argues that digital media activism still offers hope and the potential for promoting social change in African countries, like Zimbabwe.

## 5.4 Social Media Influencers and NGOs

In recent years citizens, have taken to digital media spaces in exposing the rampant corruption in Mnangagwa's government but to little avail. The online campaigns include "social media influencers and NGOs [Non-Governmental Organisations]" (Chin'ono, 2020, np).

According to Transparency International, corruption is costing the country US\$6 billion annually (Ibid.).

The statistics on corruption cited by Transparency International are likely to be the tip of the iceberg in Zimbabwe. Corruption is endemic and permeates nearly every sector of the economy. Thanks to digital media activism, some of the corrupt practices are now in the public domain. However, due to the repressive media environment in the country, activists often deploy different strategies in the fight for social and political change. A Zimbabwean media consultant (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF20, 02/11/2020) said digital media activism was very complex in the country, adding:

Digital media activism is very difficult to define within the Zimbabwean context. The genres come in different forms. A lot of it is coming out from artists, comedians and satirists as popular culture. The activists make commentaries on political issues. Bustop TV and Magamba TV are some of these activists. Other prominent social movement organisations (SMOs) with a huge presence in digital media spaces are #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #ZimbabweLivesMatter (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF20, 02/11/2020)

This respondent raises a valid point about digital media activism in Zimbabwe, as the typology has metamorphosed in recent years. The new entrants into digital media activism share a unique characteristic: they do not have a hierarchical leadership structure. Instead, the organisations are led by individuals. #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka are among this new trope of social movement activism, which is normally referred to as hashtag activism, and both were formed in 2016 at the zenith of Robert Mugabe's rule.

#### 5.4.1 ThisFlag Hashtag

#ThisFlag was formed by Pastor Evans Mawarire as a non-partisan social movement. Before critically evaluating the #ThisFlag's contribution to social and political change, it is pertinent to discuss the significance of its name in the Zimbabwean body politic.

A flag is one of the symbolic rituals of the State in Zimbabwe. Shanafelt (2009) shows that flags are very important in State-power relations by arguing that:

. . . flags are explained as symbols of group solidarity that achieve force through ritual processes [and] our evolved social intelligence makes us sensitive to the topographic features of flag displays that signal relationships of dominance and subordination (Ibid, p167).

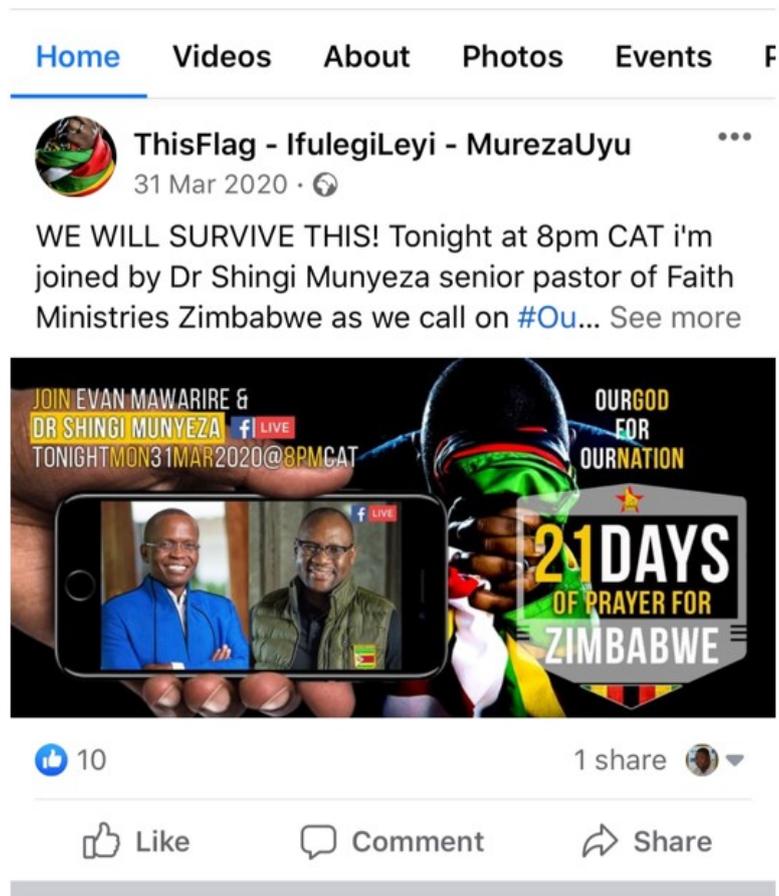
There is a symbiotic relationship between the Zimbabwean flag and the ruling ZANU (PF) Party. The colours of the national flag are drawn from the ZANU (PF) Party flag. According to Mawere (2020), #ThisFlag's choice of the flag as a national symbol is not coincidental; it is deliberate (Ibid, p167). The social movement used the flag "to resist and subvert grand and naturalised dominant discourses of nationalism and citizenship to foster new imaginations of the nation" (Ibid.). Thus, by reappropriating the flag, #ThisFlag "provoked ZANU (PF)'s ownership of the national flag" (Ibid.).

However, to have a better understanding of how #ThisFlag rose to prominence as a social movement, it is imperative to foreground the state of the economy in Zimbabwe in 2016. During that time, the economy was literally comatose, as stated in McGrath's (2016) commentary:

President Robert Mugabe and his ruling party have run the economy into the ground and appear to be out of options: Diamond reserves have run out. China is no longer interested in extending condition-free loans, and government coffers are completely empty. The situation is so bad that even military personnel did not receive their pay on time last month. As if this wasn't bad enough, the country is facing a severe El Nino-induced drought that has forced the government to declare a state of disaster in some of the worst-affected areas (p1)

In addition to the economic malaise, corruption became more endemic in government and State-owned enterprises and reports also emerged that diamond revenue worth US\$15 billion had disappeared mysteriously from the State coffers. It is at this critical juncture that #ThisFlag was born as a hashtag social movement. Within a short time, the social movement has made some inroads, under very difficult circumstances. The #ThisFlag social movement attracted a lot of support from Zimbabweans both in and outside the country, because of its non-partisan nature. The movement introduced a new type of politics that subverted the ruling ZANU PF Party's use of the national memory and symbols (Mawere, 2020). The centrality of #ThisFlag's message was that several decades of ZANU PF rule had betrayed the aspirations of Zimbabwean citizens and that the time was now ripe for people to reclaim their civil liberties and rights from the ruling party. The hashtag movement did not operate in isolation. Instead, it coalesced with other "campaigns, like #MyZimbabwe by the MDC Youth Assembly and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, a defiant and proactive youth movement" (Ibid, p175).

Among its notable achievements were the mass stay away on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2016 (Aucoin, 2016) and the protest against the government's profligacy, by allowing the former Vice-President, Phelekezela Mphoko, to stay in a plush hotel at a time when the majority of citizens were wallowing in poverty.



**FIGURE 4:** At its zenith, the This Flag hashtag social movement inspired an entire nation by coalescing it around its rallying cry for social and political change.

However, despite these remarkable achievements, #ThisFlag is not without its fair share of criticism. Some scholars have criticised the social movement’s over-reliance on digital media activism (Aucoin, 2016; Tendi, 2016). These scholars further argue that hashtag social movements, like #ThisFlag, need to regroup and re-strategize in order to create sustainable social and political change in Zimbabwe. However, some of the criticisms are based on erroneous assumptions. As part of its toolkit, #ThisFlag often deploys on and offline activism in order to create change. The mass stay away on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2016, was the result of mobilisation and coordination, using on and offline spaces. Mawere (2020) validates this argument, adding:

Despite some claims that #ThisFlag has been limited to social media revolution, the movement has been proactive on the ground as evidenced by its countless engagements with government officials, political parties, civic societies, citizens and the mainstream media. These include the Undenge Must Go petition (of 13<sup>th</sup> June 2016), a meeting with the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe Governor John Mangudya attended by Mawarire and other activists in June 2016, where Mawarire started the conversation by stressing that ordinary citizens were against the introduction of bond notes into the monetary system and a video post on 6 July 2016 calling for a stay away (Ibid, p175)

Despite its weaknesses, #ThisFlag has shown positive sides over the past few years. It showed how digital media activism could be deployed positively to advance social and political change. In addition, the movement showed how digital media social movements can create greater impact in social change through synergies with other social movements like #Tajamuka.

#### 5.4.2 Tajamuka Hashtag

Tajamuka means “outraged, angry and defiant”, in Shona, Zimbabwe’s main language (Quist-Arcton, 2016, np). The hashtag social movement is led by a former student leader, Promise Mkwanzani. Mkwanzani envisions a bright future for digital media activism and says:

We have to do something about our anger. The focus now is on citizen activism, where citizens express themselves in a peaceful and non-violent way (Quist-Arcton, 2016, np)

Mkwanzani understands the limitations of the main opposition in Zimbabwe and believes social movements, like #Tajamuka, can make a big difference and help to create change more effectively. He adds:

The major limitation of the opposition political parties has been that they’re straitjacketed, they’re rigid. Now we have created platforms where people can operate freely, can participate very easily. One of the major differences is the centrality of the social media in the whole equation (Quist-Arcton, 2016, np)

Mkwanzani (2016) raises a valid point. According to the former Minister of Information, Prof Jonathan Moyo, social media have changed the media landscape in Zimbabwe (Mhlanga, 2020). He says:

Some people say social media is irrelevant. It is not true. The majority of people are getting their information from digital media. If they write nonsense, we are able to reply in real-time. The truth we have faced in Zimbabwe is that it is wrong for the State to own the media. It is propaganda. A democratic country does not need a Ministry of Information. Wherever you find a Ministry of Information you should know that you have a democratic deficit (Online interview by Blessed Mhlanga, 25/09/2020)

In this regard, social movements like #Tajamuka and #ThisFlag are a clear testimony of the potential of digital media activism in creating transformative change in African countries under authoritarian rule, like that in Zimbabwe.



**FIGURE 5:** Tajamuka/Sesjikile hashtag social movement making a clarion call for social and political change on its official Facebook page

However, we need to exercise caution and avoid the romanticisation of digital media activism. Social movements have to do a lot of homework to achieve incremental change in Zimbabwe. Some of them are very porous and belong to different organisational structures, and they lack a clear-cut ideological thrust (Chipato, 2019). To create transformative change, the social movements will need to “sustain their vitality and achieve real social change in the long term” (Chipato, 2019, np).

## 5.5 Popular Media Genre

As alluded to earlier during an interview with one of the respondents (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF20, 02/11/20), digital media activism in Zimbabwe is very complex and deploys different genres to circumvent the country's repressive media environment. While digital media activists like #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka, often use overt messages, other activists, like Magamba and Bustop television stations, often deploy satire and caricature to greater effect to in order communicate their core messages. Willems (2011b) argues that the deployment of "media texts embedded in broader social discourses" illustrates "the way in which Zimbabweans negotiate the social and economic impact on an everyday basis" in a subtle way (Willems, 2011b, p126). This study is interested in the way citizens deploy such genres as 'cultural narratives that reflect – as much as construct – social change" (Willems, 2011b, p130). Mano (2007) supports Willems's (2011b) arguments and argues that genres like satire and caricature can be deployed as counter hegemonic narratives in repressive contexts where citizens are denied a voice in the dominant public sphere.

A former senior manager for a State-owned newspaper in Harare (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM28, 30/09/2020) offered a more nuanced response on the role of digital media activism in the creation of social and political change. The respondent said in the current digital media era, information is omnipresent. But, he added, one needs to be very circumspect, because there are inherent potential dangers:

If we want to talk about activism, we need to seriously think and reflect on the content of social and political change we want to bring about. In the past few years, digital media have played a major role as a tool for social and political change. However, we need to get assurances about what the people really want before they participate in the activism. Digital media allow us to do it in numbers. Without digital media, there is no way we can engage with others in big numbers (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM28, 30/09/2020)

A Zimbabwean media academic based in Namibia (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020), said digital media activism helps subalterns to amplify their calls for social and political change. He added:

The opening up of digital media spaces has given voices to people who are voiceless. Over the past few years, the signs have been very encouraging, especially with the publication of the list of the beneficiaries of the Command Agriculture Mechanization Scheme by Dr Alex Magaisa in his weekly blog, the Big Saturday Read (BSR)

(Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

This respondent raised a very valid point in his argument. The UK-based Zimbabwean academic and lawyer, the late Dr Alex Magaisa's weekly blog, Big Saturday Read (BSR), has gained traction among a broad spectrum of Zimbabweans, both in and outside the country, as an exemplar of effective digital media activism. The blog provides well informed research and analysis on a wide variety of issues in the country. Recently, Dr Magaisa's blog helped to expose corruption within the ranks of the Mnangagwa administration.

## 5.6 Big Saturday Read

Among Dr Magaisa's expose's was the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ)' Farm Mechanisation Scheme scandal, which involved most members of the ruling ZANU PF's political elites. Although some members of the opposition were also implicated in the scandal, a majority of the beneficiaries of the RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scheme were from the ruling party. Magaisa (2020) said:

[. . .] there was a strong interest in the RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scandal because it was one of the several other programmes in which beneficiaries have been kept secret. If this is what happened in the RBZ Farm Mechanisation scandal, what happened in other government programs where large amounts of public funds are used? Who have been the beneficiaries of these other publicly funded schemes? Is it the case that the same people benefit from multiple publicly funded schemes? These are questions that many Zimbabweans were asking. People were aware of the secrecy surrounding the Command Agriculture Programme, another scheme where large amounts of public money were deployed ostensibly to assist farmers. A parliamentary committee scrutinising this expenditure had been told that more than US\$43 billion was

unaccounted for. Therefore, when details of the beneficiaries of the RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scheme were revealed, the public was already primed for and curious to get information regarding the use of public money (Ibid, np)

Magaisa (2020) argues that it is not by coincidence that Politically Exposed Persons (PEPs) are always given top priority when the government distributes scarce resources under its public programmes. This is part of a general political strategy to ensure that the PEPs take advantage of their “proximity to power to draw these benefits” (Ibid.). Magaisa (2020) further points out:

This is also how enablers are created. The benefits from these public schemes are the ‘rents’ they receive in return for enabling authoritarianism (Magaisa, 2020, np)



Alex T Magaisa 🇳🇬  
@Wamagaisa



Secretary @nickmangwana, in 2008, the RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scheme gave lots of tractors & equipment to ZANU PF elites. They never paid back. The RBZ refused to name beneficiaries. The debt was later imposed upon the Zimbabwean taxpayer. Those elites will be first in line again.

[twitter.com/nickmangwana/s...](https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/s...)

The screenshot shows a NewsDay article with the following content:

**HOME NEWS COVID-19 MULTIMEDIA BUSINESS S**

**NEWSDAY**

**HOME NEWS COVID-19 MULTIMEDIA BUSINESS S**

The beneficiaries were initially expected to pay for the machinery and inputs, but later had their debt assumed by the government under the RBZ (Debt Assumption) Act.

Between 2007 and 2008, thousands of Zanu PF-linked farmers received equipment which ranged from tractors, combine harvesters, generators to harrows under the scheme.

Mangudya refused to disclose the beneficiaries' names after prominent lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa had on May 28 requested the RBZ to release the names of the beneficiaries in line with provisions of the Access to Information and

You're unable to view this Tweet because this account owner limits who can view their Tweets. [Learn more](#)

**Figure 6:** UK lawyer and academic Dr Alex Magaisa's expose' of the RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scheme scandal showed the threadbare nature of corruption in Mnangagwa's new dispensation

The RBZ Farm Mechanisation Scheme scandal illustrates how the ruling political elites use neo-patrimonialism to subvert democracy. According to Christopher Clapham (1985), neo-patrimonialism can be defined as:

A form of organisation in which relationships of a broadly patrimonial type pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines. Officials hold positions in bureaucratic organisations with powers which are formally defined, but exercise those powers, so far as they can, as a form not of public service but of private property (p48)

Hopper (2017) argues that neo-patrimonialism underpins corruption “and renders official and formal systems of accountability redundant, except arguably to present a veneer of accountability to gain legitimacy from external parties” (Hopper, 2017, p226). By capturing key State and non-State social actors, ZANU PF is able to maintain its hegemony in the Zimbabwean body politic. Magaisa (2020) adds that as “beneficiaries of controversial and secret gifts, they [the social actors] become beholden to their benefactor” (Magaisa, 2020, np).

Without digital media platforms like Magaisa’s BSR blog, most cases of corrupt practices would go unnoticed outside the public domain. Such social media platforms help to deepen and strengthen the nascent democracy in Zimbabwe.

## 5.7 Social Media Platforms and Democracy

To have a better understanding of the relationship between social media and democracy it is instructive to foreground the role of communication in a democracy (Loader and Vromen, 2016). The role of communication in a democracy is contestable. There are different schools of thought on the subject, but this study will confine itself to the major classical debate between Dewey (1927) and Lippmann (1922) (Loader and Vromen, 2016). According to Dewey (1927), the role of communication is to allow citizens to discuss issues openly and make decisions without undue interference. On the other hand, Lippmann (1922) believed that ordinary citizens lacked the sophistication to discuss highbrow issues like politics. As a result, Lippmann (Ibid.) felt that the realm of politics should be left to experts only, since ordinary citizens lacked the sophistication to make informed decisions and could only rely on the views of their well-informed representatives. From this debate it is apparent that Lippmann (1922) advocated a top-down approach to democracy, leaving citizens with very little space

for democratic engagement beyond casting their vote during general elections. Lippmann (Ibid.) had a dystopian view on the participation of citizens in civic affairs. He contended that “communication is merely the channel to translate the expert views of elites to the electorate” (cited in Loader, et al; 2016, p402). On the other hand, Dewey (1927) had a utopian view on the participation of citizens in politics, further arguing that “strong democratic governance is made possible by the media ‘educating’ the citizen to facilitate discussion, deliberation and informed political choices (cited in Loader, et al; 2016, p402). Dewey (1927)’s viewpoint imposes excessive responsibilities on the citizenry, and this may explain why some citizens end up being complacent and withdrawing from active participation in politics. For instance, Zimbabwean youths constitute the largest proportion of the country’s population, and yet that category remains under-represented in civic affairs. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a noticeable change partly due to the prevailing economic meltdown in the country and the availability of the affordances of new technologies. In a country where nearly 90% of the population in the formal sector, mostly the youths, is unemployed, the clamour for social change is growing louder with each passing day. Hence, this chapter agrees with Dewey’s (1927) position on the wider participation of the citizenry in democratic processes and argues that, despite some constraints posed by the State and the market, digital media empower citizens in the creation of alternative discursive narratives.

A prominent Zimbabwean academic and human rights activist based in South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020), argues that under the current informalisation of the Zimbabwean economy, the digital media have become a powerful organising and mobilising tool. Their major advantage is that they have no structures to go with them. The respondent adds:

Social media voices are critical of State repression. However, the State is still in a stage of increasing denial. The State cannot dialogue. There is increased repression. The State has very little information strategies. Its narrative is also depleting. We can see the increasing use of foul means in social media. Most people can now see that ZANU (PF) is losing the narrative very fast. President Mnangagwa is facing more criticism. Some of it is coming from Zimbabwe’s former friends within the African Union (AU). Hashtag movements, like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter and influencers, like

Hopewell Chin'ono, have contributed to exposing Zimbabwe as a corrupt state (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020)

The respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/20) singled out #ZimbabweanLivesMatter among the hashtag organisations that have managed to raise international awareness about the Zimbabwean political crisis. The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaign came against a backdrop of “widespread and brutal crackdown by State security agents on opposition party members and activists” (Matiashe, 2021, np). The State accused the victims of organising meetings that were in violation of the Covid-19 protocols and regulations. In recent months the State has used the Covid-19 pandemic as a God-sent cloak to repress dissent among citizens. The victims of State repression include the journalist and award-winning filmmaker, Hopewell Chin'ono, the international award-winning author, Tsitsi Dangarembga and the Transform Zimbabwe (TZ) opposition leader, Jacob Ngarivhume (Chingono, 2020). The trio were imprisoned and released on bail and their cases are still pending before the courts.

#### 5.7.1 Zimbabwean Lives Matter Hashtag

As a counterweight to State repression, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter circulated images and texts on its social media platforms on Facebook and Twitter about State-sponsored violence against its citizens. The hashtag movement's campaign on social media received overwhelming support from celebrities and politicians. Prominent South African hip hop musician AKA, whose real name is Kiernan Forbes, was among the first celebrities to endorse #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. The others were “South Africa World Cup winner Tendai ‘Beast’ Mtawarira, who hails from Zimbabwe, pop stars Casper Nyovest and Pearl Thusi, who starred in Africa's first Netflix film, Queen Sono” (Mitra, 2020, np), including South African politicians Mmusi Maimane and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader, Julius Malema, and the former Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The hashtag movement's messages spread like a whirlwind on digital media platforms and attracted endorsements from “British actress Thandiwe Newton and American actor and filmmaker Ice Cube” (Matiashe, 2021, np). The former president of Botswana, Ian Khama, also added his voice to the global onslaught against the repression of Zimbabwean citizens by their government. In a rare display of brutal honesty by an African Statesman, the former Botswana President

criticised the Zimbabwean government for betraying the hopes and aspirations of its citizens, adding that:

During Ian Smith's white minority rule in Rhodesia, the police used to clamp down and oppress the black majority. A successful war of liberation was waged to free that majority from oppression and gain independence. Now forty years later and under majority rule, nothing seems to have changed for the long-suffering people of Zimbabwe other than the name of the country and that of its leaders. Free Zimbabwe! (Former Botswana President Ian Khama's Facebook page)

A retired Zimbabwean Judge, now based in South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM6, 15/09/2020), said there was never freedom of access to information during colonial times and even after independence. The respondent has a wealth of experience in the criminal and justice systems in Southern Africa and has served on the High Court bench in Zimbabwe and South Africa. In addition, he has worked in Botswana and Namibia in various high-ranking professional capacities. He added:

In Zimbabwe there is a blackout of access to information. Myself I am often on social media to access information. This is part of the struggle for access to, as well as transmission of, information. It is extremely critical that we communicate with issues like seeking social and economic justice. Social media is a great utility for informing and educating citizens (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM6, 15/09/2020)

Nevertheless, the battle lines for hashtag activism will not only be drawn in digital spaces. According to the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zimbabwe Chapter's Director, Dr Tabani Moyo, the future of digital activism will be determined at "the intersection of online activism and offline action" (cited in Matiashe, 2021, np). Moyo argues that "online activism cannot be effective if it is unable to intersect with offline campaigns" (cited in Matiashe, 2021, np). Moyo gave an example of one of South Africa's hashtag movements, #FeesMustFall, which led a very successful and effective campaign for educational reforms that resulted in "notable change in South Africa's tertiary education system" (Ibid). Moyo further added:

#FeesMustFall . . . was a strong movement online but offline you could see the protests taking shape in different formats (Ibid.)

However, a Zimbabwean media academic Prof Admire Mare offered a more nuanced perspective (cited in Matiashe, 2021, np). He argued that hashtag activists “in progressive societies are effective in terms of action and consensus mobilisation (cited in Matiashe, 2021, np), while “for these movements to be effective in repressive regimes, they need to tap into elite consensus erosion, and widespread indignation, against the ruling elite. Otherwise, they may end up becoming slacktivist campaigns with no tangible results” (Ibid.).

In the above arguments, Prof Mare raised some very serious and pertinent issues (cited Matiashe, 2021, np). He argued that it is imperative to tap into “elite consensus erosion and widespread indignation against the ruling elite” and also to intersect with on and offline activism to maximise the democratic dividend of digital media activism in Zimbabwe (Ibid.). However, this chapter argues that it is also imperative to factor-in the cultural typology of each case when evaluating the impact of digital media activism. No two countries share the same typology. In this regard, I argue that hashtag movements like ZimbabweanLivesMatter need to be commended for making some modest gains under a very ruthless authoritarian environment.

It is worth noting that #ZimbabweanLivesMatter has helped to raise awareness of the political crisis in the country among the international community. As a result of the hashtag movement’s spirited campaign on various digital media platforms, the South African government later shifted its diplomatic position on Zimbabwe and appointed an envoy to seek a regional solution to the political crisis in the country.

[#ZimbabweansLivesMatter’s] . . . success [. . .] galvanised the country’s social activists, who have increasingly taken to social media to push for reform (Matiashe, 2021, np)

In addition, the momentum of the hashtag movement on its social change agenda also forced the resignation of one of the country’s Vice-Presidents, who was implicated in cases where female subordinates were sexually abused.

In February 2021, Vice-President Kembo Mohadi resigned in the face of growing social media pressure after online site Zimlive published allegations that he had sexually

abused several women, some of whom were state security agents assigned to his office (Ibid.)

This study posits that the theoretical framework of decoloniality helps to show that the current repression and misgovernance in Zimbabwe is not ahistorical; it is part of typical colonial legacy in most former colonies. Decoloniality, as a theoretical framework, “rejects modernity, which is located on the oppressed and exploited side of the colonial difference, in favour of decolonial liberation struggle to achieve a world beyond Eurocentric modernity” (Grosfoguel, 2011, np). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p13) contends that decoloniality “is part of marginalised but persistent movements that emerged from struggles against slavery, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism, and underdevelopment as constitutive negative elements of Euro-North American-centric modernity”.

To have a better grasp of decoloniality it is imperative to distinguish it from postcolonialism. The two terms are related but denote different meanings.

Postcolonialism is concerned with the worlds which colonialism in its multiple manifestations, confused, disfigured and distorted, reconfigured and finally transformed. The effects of colonisation are felt from the moment of the first colonial impact and post-colonialism constitutes as its subject the way colonised societies adjusted and continue to adjust to the colonial presence (Chennells, 1999, p110)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a) argues that decoloniality is rooted in the:

. . . realisation that ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013a, p11)

In this regard, I also find Kaunda’s (2015) scholarship very instructive. Decoloniality is relevant to postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe because it helps to interrogate “the legitimacy and sanity of celebrating postcolonial thinking while the majority of Africans remain mentally colonised” (Kaunda, 2015, p77). Decoloniality thus challenges the “historicist notion of colonialism being a mere event/episode in African history” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p24).

This chapter critically evaluates “the agenda of decoloniality to structures and systems enacted by African governments to buttress coloniality – thereby systematically taking the place of Western oppressors” (Dube, 2020, p16828). Decoloniality, as a theoretical framework, helps to unpack and contest “the hegemonic structures” that sustain a culture of repression in Zimbabwe against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic (ibid.). I argue that decoloniality is ideal for this chapter because it is premised on the need to explore ways of discovering an “alternative for (re-)imagining and building a democratic, just” and tolerant political and social environment in Zimbabwe (Mignolo, 2009, p60). Theorists of decoloniality argue that coloniality did not end with decolonisation. Whilst colonialism retreated after decolonisation, the same did not happen to coloniality; it is still embedded, and it remains part of the body politic of most developing countries. Coloniality affects nearly every facet of life in these countries. It reproduces “symptoms of a deeper injustice and malaise” (Crawford, et al; 2021, p29), that is firmly rooted in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a) calls ‘the myths of decolonisation’ and the traces of ‘colonial matrix of power’ (p16). Hence, there is a need for developing countries like Zimbabwe to create their own futures free of repression and exploitation.

Dube (2020, p16830) further argues that President Mnangagwa’s ‘catch and release’ approach towards corruption “is empty rhetoric” and needs to be backed up by concrete action. The government’s current attitude “contradicts the claims of the regime that it is fighting corruption” (ibid.). Traces of coloniality can be seen in the way the Mnangagwa government reacts to dissent, using the same tools which were deployed by the colonialists in the past.

Against this backdrop, Zimbabwean social media influencers, like Hopewell Chin’ono and the late Dr Alex Magaisa, helped to put the government under scrutiny and make it accountable to the citizenry. Hence, the next section of this chapter explores and discusses how influencers, like Hopewell Chin’ono, are using digital media platforms, like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to expose corruption and human rights abuses in President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government.

Digital communicative spaces like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube provide citizens under authoritarian rule with the latitude to “perform a variety of political activities like posting, tweeting, quoting or replying to tweets about politics, and engaging politicians and political parties, allowing users to participate in political debate” (Bosch, et al., 2020, p350).



facebook.com



**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

28 December 2021 at 18:12 · 🌐

On 20 July 2020 I was arrested after being warned by ZANUPF for exposing corruption.

Again I was accused for something I didn't do. There was no proper charge before the courts.

They took all my broadcast equipment and my home title deeds and passport.

They took \$30,000 bail money.

I spent 45 days in prison without trial.

I spent 15 months reporting to police twice weekly then twice a month.

These are the works of the New Dispensation!



**FIGURE 7:** What price freedom? In most of the African countries that are under authoritarian rule, like Zimbabwe, freedom often doesn't come cheap. Social media influencers, like Hopewell Chin'ono, are on the frontline of the struggle for social and political change, but that often comes at a very high premium

In recent years, a plethora of research has been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa on how citizens and civil society are mediating politics using digital media (Bosch, 2013; Kalyango and Adu-Kumi, 2013; Mare, 2018a; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2013; Nyabola, 2018).

A prominent Zimbabwean academic and political commentator based in the United States (US) said digital media was a game changer and had taken the government by surprise. He says:

Digital media has done what the government never expected. Using group accounts, one can reach over 100,000 people in one way. Take, for instance, The twitter accounts for Dr Alex Magaisa, Hopewell Chin'ono and Prof Jonathan Moyo. These twitterati have a worldwide audience. If you reach one person, it is likely to be shared with 10 people. Remember as Africans, we are an oral society (WhatsApp telephone interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM19, 18/09/2020)

Lazarsfeld, et al's; (1948) two-step flow of communication model resonates with the state of the media in most developing countries, like Zimbabwe, where the majority of the people in the rural areas do not have access to the mass media and still rely on oral tradition. According to Lazarsfeld, et al's; (1948), the two-step flow of communication theory, opinion leaders play a critical role in disseminating mass media to "less active media consumers" (cited in Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p2). Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (2008) argue that the "opinion leaders pick up information from the media, and this information then gets passed on to less active members of the public" (Ibid.). The proponents of the two-step flow of communication model contend that a majority of the people get their "information from opinion leaders through interpersonal communication, rather than directly from mass media, as previously assumed by other theories of communication" (Ibid.). Lazarsfeld, et al; (1948) suggested that most people received information by word-of-mouth and this played a critical role "in the communication process in our society, and mass media have only a limited influence on most individuals" (cited in Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p2).

The two-step flow of communication model was "further developed by Lazarsfeld together with Elihu Katz in the book, *Personal Influence (1955)*" (cited in Kaid and

Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p2). The book suggested that the way people respond to mass media messages was “mediated by interpersonal communication with members of their social environment” (Ibid.). A person’s interaction with relatives and friends thus “has more influence on that person’s decision-making processes and behaviour than does information from mass media” (Ibid.).

However, the two-step flow of communication theory was criticised in the 1970s and 1980s for being overly simplistic (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008). The critics argued that consumers receive information by using more than two steps. The other criticism was that the communication model was developed before television was widely available to mass audiences (Ibid.).

This study argues that the two-step flow of communication model resonates with the state of the media in most developing countries, like Zimbabwe where, only a tiny minority has access to the mass media, while the majority still rely on interpersonal communication. In the current age of digital technologies, orality can be used to complement new media at the intersection of on and offline activism.

With less than two years to go before the next general election in Zimbabwe in 2023, we have recently witnessed a lot of traction in digital media spaces by Zimbabwean citizens, including the award-winning filmmaker and investigative journalist, Hopewell Chin’ono. This study selected Chin’ono’s digital media platforms because he is among those influencers with a large following on the different platforms. For instance, his Facebook page has 135, 149 likes and 159, 529 followers. The study analysed Chin’ono’s posts on Facebook, Twitter, and on his YouTube channel from 31<sup>st</sup> January to 8<sup>th</sup> September 2021. A manual search was deployed to select the posts using purposive sampling. It was easier for me to access Hopewell’s posts because his Twitter and Facebook accounts do not have privacy settings. The themes of his posts are corruption; misgovernance; State repression; voter education and awareness; and the need for unity in the opposition.



**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

Yesterday at 16:15 · 🌐

This is an example of how State funds are looted and abused to control the poorest of the poor!

Agriculture has been used by ZANUPF and their business and religious elites to loot the State.

The rural poor are given trinkets and the rest of the loot goes to farms of the elites!

Yet Zimbabweans won't bother taking an interest in this looting yet when they are sick, they wonder why hospitals don't have medication.



366 Likes · 108 comments

**FIGURE 8:** The prominent social media influencer, Hopewell Chin'ono, has been at the forefront of the fight against corruption and misgovernance in Zimbabwe

On his Facebook page, Chin'ono posts tweets from his Twitter account and videos from his YouTube channel. He also appropriates tweets and posts from other

influencers, like Prof Jonathan Moyo, the former Zimbabwean Minister of Information and Publicity, who went into exile after the 'coup' on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and Nick Mangwana, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Publicity. The most popular hashtags on Chin'ono's Facebook page are #DemLoot; #HowFar#; #RegisterToVote2023; and #ZimbabweanVotesMatter. Hopewell not only agitates for change in Zimbabwe, but also cautions the opposition not to take the citizenry for granted.

On 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021, he posted on his Facebook page an interview with a veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa, Tendai Dumbutshena. The post has 2,200 likes; 176 comments and 36 shares. The post says:

Veteran journalist Tendai Dumbutshena says opposition politicians should not take voters for granted. He says the fact that Mnangagwa is a failure will not necessarily translate into opposition votes unless the opposition works for it. Tendai Dumbutshena's father was Zimbabwe's first local black Chief Justice, the revered late Justice Enoch Dumbutshena (Hopewell Chin'ono Facebook page, 7/09/2021)

Chin'ono created another post on his Facebook page on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2021. Its leitmotif was the need for the opposition to form a broad coalition to challenge the ruling ZANU (PF) Party's hegemony. The post says:

Opposition leaders Nelson Chamisa and Jacob Ngarivhume met today. This is positive news for their parties because ONLY an Alliance will dislodge corrupt rule. Everyone should shelf their egos and put the interests of the citizens ahead of parochial party interests. UNITE! (Hopewell Chin'ono, Facebook page, 08/09/2021)

Chin'ono deploys different genres to reach out to Zimbabwean citizens. For instance, he released a music video on his YouTube channel on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021. It was an instant hit and received 2, 555 likes; 514 retweets; and 48 quote-tweets. The video is entitled #DemLoot and it exposes the rampant corruption in the Mnangagwa government. As a result of the corruption, most key institutions, like hospitals, are ill-equipped to meet the health challenges the country is currently experiencing, like the Covid-19 pandemic. The video went viral on social media platforms and was reappropriated and endorsed by an international anti-corruption non-governmental

organisation Transparency International. In its endorsement, Transparency International says:

After being arrested multiple times because of his reporting, journalist Hopewell Chin'ono is sparking an anti-corruption movement in Zimbabwe using music. Since he published the freestyle song #DemLoot, the track has gone viral and people are doing their own versions and even dancing challenges (Transparency International Facebook page, 16/02/2021)

One of the posts reappropriated on Chin'ono's Facebook page reveal how President Mnangagwa's government deploys State surveillance on social media to silence dissent in the country. Prof Jonathan Moyo, the former Minister of Information and Publicity says:

Then, after HHichilema's [Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema] victory, #CIO launched a #TwitterBots campaign to get its internal, counterintelligence, research branches and varakashi (bots) to scuttle a united anti-Mnangagwa front pre-2023. Among initial targets are @daddyhope, @waltermzembji; @PedzisaiRuhanya and myself! (Prof Jonathan Moyo Facebook page, 7/09/2021)

Another tweet reappropriated on Chin'ono's Twitter account shows how the new dispensation has embraced social media and deploys bots to discredit counter narratives in the digital communicative spaces. Nick Mangwana, the Ministry of Information and Publicity Permanent Secretary, says:

Wherever MURAKASHI (bots) is, be it in Zimbabwe, UK, SA, Namibia, North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, thank you (Nick Mangwana Twitter account, 7/09/2021)

Mangwana posted another tweet with the same running theme and says:

Today I just want to appreciate a group of people who are affectionately known as VARAKASHI (bots). The cadres rock. ED came to power when social media was on the verge of being banned. He embraced. Today ED builds the nation non-stop while Varakashi control the agenda in cyberspace (Nick Mangwana Twitter account, 7/09/2021)



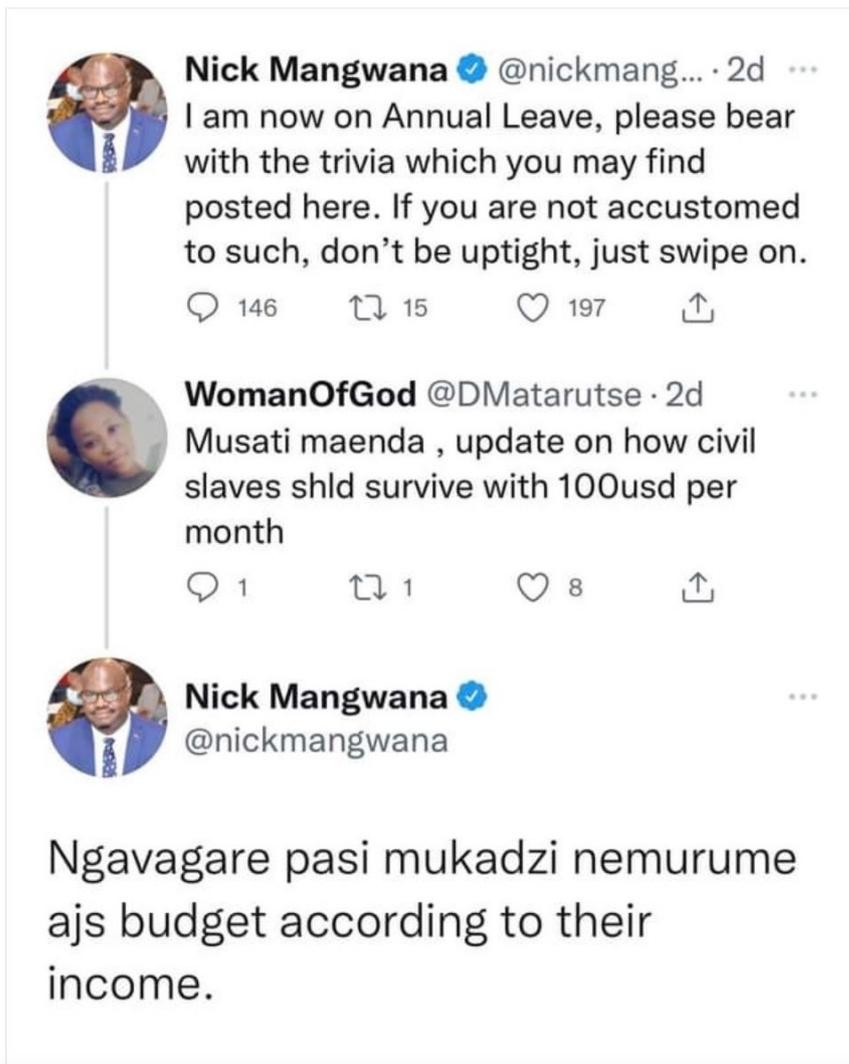
**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

6 hrs · 🌐

This is what they think of civil servants.

Nick Mangwana's inability to communicate and hide the regime's real evil views has been a huge gift for the struggle against corrupt rule.

It helps citizens daily to... [More](#)



**FIGURE 9:** Using the affordances of the new technologies, the social media influencer Hopewell Chin'ono has exposed malfeasance in President Mnangagwa's regime over the past few years

In the preceding section we have explored and discussed how activists are deploying digital media as a site of struggle for social and political change. There is no doubt some gains have been made over the years. A veteran Zimbabwean journalist working for an international news agency (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020) said digital media activism has scored some successes in some areas. The respondent, who is based in South Africa, said:

MaShurugwi [marauding machete gangs from Shurugwi] gangs were running rampage on gold mines. There was a lot of information on social media platforms. The MaShurugwi issue was discussed on Twitter and the authorities were forced to act and the issue fizzled out (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020)

But the future is not yet rosy. There are some challenges along the way and the next section will discuss some of these challenges.

## 5.7 Challenges of Digital Activism

### 5.7.1 Media Polarisation

The history of media polarisation in Zimbabwe dates back to the colonial period. During the colonial era there was a polarisation between the African nationalist press and the white settler-owned media. The polarisation reflected the racialisation that existed in the country at the time. In the post-colonial era, there is polarisation in the mainstream media, and this is between State-owned media and the private press (Mabweazara, 2011). This polarisation is indicative of the highly charged political environment in the country that is characterised by the existence of two major political parties – the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and the main opposition party, the MDC Alliance.

However, Mkandawire (2020) argues that the political polarisation in Zimbabwe over the past few decades cannot be attributed to a single factor; it is complex and multi-faceted. Mkandawire further argues:

Over the past two decades, the study of Zimbabwe has been characterised by extreme polarisation and polemicisation. In the process, understanding of the complexities of Zimbabwe has been hampered. Among a surprisingly large number of scholars, the case of Zimbabwe is so clear, and the failures of the Mugabe government so obvious, that any attempt to understand – let alone explain – the situation, and the political responses to it, is interpreted as supporting dictatorship (Ibid, p18)

Mkandawire (2020) raises some interesting and valid points. However, the complexities of the polarisation in Zimbabwe are beyond the remit of this thesis. The study will confine itself to how the extreme polarisation has affected public space for subaltern voices in the country.

Nyamnjoh's (2005) notion of the constriction of public space resonates with the current state of the mainstream media in Zimbabwe. Mabweazara (2014) argues that the mainstream media represent "a central and vibrant platform for the struggle for the control of public discourse between the opposition and the incumbent elite" (p4). The state-owned media is often deployed to articulate government policies and attack any dissenting voices (Mabweazara, 2011). On the other hand, the private media give a voice to counter hegemonic forces and help to keep government activities under constant scrutiny (Ronning, 2005). Chari (2009) aptly captures the state of the mainstream media in Zimbabwe as follows:

The state media is unapologetic on its support for the ruling ZANU (PF) government while the private press seems to have signed a pact with the opposition to 'hear no evil'; 'speak no evil'; 'see no evil' regarding its affairs" (p10)

Chari's (Ibid.) argument illustrates how media polarisation was initially produced in the mainstream media before being reproduced in the digital communicative spaces.

A retired Zimbabwean Judge based in South Africa (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM6, 15/09/2020), said media polarisation in Zimbabwe was a result of a polarised society. He added:

Dictatorial regimes create divisions. They always want to control the narrative. Look at what is happening in the USA [during President Donald Trump's term]. The media is

polarised, and the people are polarised to entrench the dictatorship. During colonialism in Rhodesia, the Prime Minister, Ian Smith, used to implant his spies in the newsrooms to the issue D-Notices. People need to have an understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is very critical (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM6, 15/09/2020)

A Zimbabwean veteran journalist and newspaper publisher, based in South Africa, said intolerance in the country fuels media polarisation. He added:

A number of people have been arrested under Mnangagwa for posting messages and images in digital media spaces. In fact, people are now angrier now after the coup of November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021. They thought things were going to be better. But under Mnangagwa people are now poorer and the cost of living has gone up. The tragedy emanates from intolerance of alternative views. The politics is toxic. No-one should hold alternative views if you are ZANU (PF). On the other hand, if you are independent and try to discuss issues rationally, neither side will accept you. In other words, people are not free anymore to discuss politics (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM38, 08/10/2020)

A Zimbabwean academic at Women's University in Africa (WUA) in Harare, said politics was behind media polarisation in the country. She said:

If you criticise the opposition in digital media spaces, you are labelled ZANU (PF) by the MDC Alliance supporters, and the same applies if you criticise the ruling ZANU (PF) Party. Under those conditions, what happens then to those who are not affiliated to any of the two major parties? We need to create a better political environment conducive for debate. We also need to look at issues from a broad perspective (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXF14, 09/10/2020)

A Zimbabwean foreign correspondent for a German public broadcasting station based in Harare, agreed that polarisation was deeply rooted in Zimbabwean society. He further said:

Polarisation is deeply rooted in our society. A simple innocent statement can be misconstrued to mean you support one of the two main political parties – ZANU (PF) or MDC Alliance. Such attitudes curtail healthy debate. I believe people should agree to differ to build a new society (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM30, 21/09/2020)

A media advocacy expert based in Harare, also weighed in on the discussion about media polarisation. He said our society is authoritarian, and added:

Our society is not tolerant of dissenting views. It is authoritarian. This creates fear. People are arrested for flimsy reasons. A lot of people have migrated from Facebook to Twitter. The microblogging site is safer and discusses more serious issues, while people on Facebook discuss mundane social issues. On WhatsApp, the numbers are great. WhatsApp allows interaction with a much broader audience. It offers the latitude to connect with groups. However, despite its end-to-end encryption, it is not the safest platform. People can be infiltrated in WhatsApp groups. In the past some people have been arrested for posting stuff on a WhatsApp platform (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

One of the major challenges facing digital media activism in Zimbabwe is the lack of trust between the government and the citizenry. The problem is worsened by the perennial issue of the ruling party's legitimacy crisis. The new dispensation has not yet recovered from the legitimacy crisis triggered by the contested General Elections outcome in 2018. That may explain why, in recent years, ZANU (PF) has restructured its propaganda model and migrated to digital media spaces as part of its "soft legitimisation strategies to influence public opinion and shape political narratives" (Mare, 2020b, p2). Mare (2020b) argues that these strategies include "restricting space for private media outlets, policing the internet, sponsoring nominally independent newspapers, circulating 'fake news' (content that is false or misleading, as well as intentionally sensationalised, to drive up the volume of 'clicks' and 'shares') and awarding lucrative government advertising contracts to State-friendly media outlets" (Mare, 2020b, p2). However, it is not clear whether these strategies will produce the desired outcomes without addressing the deep-rooted source of the legitimacy crisis.

### 5.7.2 Trust Deficit

The source of this legitimacy crisis is multifaceted and includes the institutionalisation of corruption among the ruling elites due to State capture. Over the past few decades, the Zimbabwean state has morphed into what Mandaza (2016) calls a 'securocrat state', Kingsbury (2016) calls it a 'party-State', while Reno (1996, np) calls it a 'shadow State'. The origins of the securocrat State started when the State was captured by the ruling elite and became an appendage of the ruling ZANU (PF) Party. In practical

terms, that meant the State came to “operate under the tacit management of the party” (Chitiyo, 2009, p8). This state of affairs gave birth to the ‘securocrat State’ (Mandaza, 2016), which Bratton and Masunungure describe as a “militarised form of electoral authoritarianism” (Bratton and Masunungure, 2008, p42) – a conceptualisation borrowed from Levitsky and Way (2002) and Schedler’s (2000) scholarship (cited in Raftopoulos, 2020).



**Hopewell Chin'ono** ✓

12 hrs · 🌐

This is tragic but we knew ZEC is crooked  
Walpe Academy registered 175 women in Mutasa district of Manicaland alone in 2021  
Yet ZEC says only 117 women register in the whole Manicaland province in 2021  
This... [More](#)



**Women's Academy for Leadership** ...  
[@WalpeAcademy](#)

[@WalpeAcademy](#) through its 2.2 million Votes for Women from Women Election campaign registered 175 women in Mutasa, Manicaland province alone between August and October 2021.  
[#ElectAndBeElected](#) [#SheRises](#)  
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**FIGURE 10:** Trust deficit? The social media post on one of Hopewell Chin'ono's Facebook pages clearly demonstrates how some key State institutions, like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), have lost public confidence in recent years

According to Kingsbury, under a 'party-State', "the army and the party are akin to conjoined twins" (2016, p32). On the other hand, Reno (1996) defines an archetypal 'shadow State' as follows:

A shadow state is effectively a system of governance in which a form of parallel government is established by a coalition of the president, militias, security agencies, local intermediaries, and foreign companies. In extreme versions such as Sierra Leone real power no longer lies in official institutions of government such as the legislature (Reno, 1996, np)

Cheeseman (2021) argues that a 'shadow state' is normally created "with the capture and subversion of democratic institutions" and poses the greatest existential threat to "civil liberties and inclusive development in Africa " (Cheeseman, 2021, p7).

In recent years the phenomenon of a 'shadow State' has been gaining traction in some African countries like Zimbabwe and the current Zimbabwean State bears some of the key characteristics of 'a shadow State'. Apart from capturing the key State institutions, like the electoral commission, judiciary, legislature, media and some sections of the civil society (Cheeseman, 2021), the ruling elite in Zimbabwe has been feeding off the country's resources (Raftopolous, 2020). For example, Saunders (2016) eloquently illustrates how the elites gained "privileged access to Marange diamonds" as part of a "shadow axis of power" comprising "State security forces and factions of the ZANU (PF) elite" (Saunders, 2016, p35; Raftopoulos, 2020, p15). Under a shadow State, sovereignty thus no longer resides in the citizens and their representatives; it is embedded in the different constituencies of the 'shadow State'.

A Zimbabwean investment banking specialist based in Dubai, agreed that one of the major challenges facing digital media activism in the country was lack of mutual trust between the government and its citizens. The respondent who holds a postgraduate degree in Finance and Investment Banking has worked for financial services software companies in Zimbabwe before relocating to Dubai where she is currently based. The respondent says:

There is no trust between the government and the people. People are not free to express themselves. There is so much victimisation of political activists. As a result, people tend to avoid speaking out at times. They fear for their security. Security is a huge hindrance. Political activism is for the hard-hearted. Most people retreat when we discuss politics (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 29/01/2021)

The relationship between the government and its citizens is very complex. A report on *Cartel Power Dynamics in Zimbabwe*, prepared by the South African publication, *Maverick Citizen* (2021), attributed part of the problem to issues of misgovernance. *Maverick Citizen* added:

Zimbabwe's governance is characterised by rule by law, whereby law is used as a tool of political power to control citizens, rather than rule of law, whereby law is used to control the state and people in power. This is the case in Zimbabwe, for example, where anti-corruption laws are used selectively against political opposition, while those in power and their associates enjoy impunity from accountability, avoiding prosecution for human rights violations, corruption and other crimes (Maverick Citizen, 2021, p12)

Some respondents interviewed for this study believe that the country's politics is deeply entrenched in intolerance of dissent, and this was the root cause of polarisation in Zimbabwean society.

### 5.7.3 Intolerance

A Zimbabwean working for an international development agency in Eastern Africa, said the other major challenge facing digital activism was identity politics. He added:

Ours is not a technical problem; it's a cultural problem. We need to change the way we practise our politics. Politics is a preserve of one party – ZANU (PF). The space for exchange of ideas is constrained. We have too much identity politics and this tends to be replicated across society. We tend to dwell too much on scoring points in any political discussion. There is no space for rigorous debate. I hope that noise and apathy can be sorted out (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021).

A veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa, agreed that there was too much polarisation in the country. He said the source of the polarisation seemed to be the toxic politics, adding that:

The situation in Zimbabwe presents many challenges. We have a very entrenched and ruthless government that is not restrained by any scruples. Activists have no option but to use digital technology. However, there can never be a substitute for face-to-face interaction. It is still necessary to have well organised structures on the ground. Digital media need to be used creatively. Those who are adept at using the technology have

to guide the process (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021)

The above respondent's sentiments underpin Nyamnjoh's (2005) argument that new technologies should be deployed creatively and convivially within the African contexts in order to create transformative change. Perhaps, this approach can help to solve some of the challenges to digital media activism such as hate speech.

#### 5.7.4 Hate Speech

A senior media executive working for a private multimedia company in Harare, regretted that there was a lot of hate language in digital media spaces. He said:

The use of social media stokes emotions. The views are extremist in nature. Some posts on digital media spaces are calculated to be used as a catalyst to whip up people's emotions so that there is a spontaneous uprising against the government. Inflammatory language is used. In this regard, we can draw lessons from the Rwandan Genocide experience in 1994. A privately owned radio station, *Radio Rwanda*, and the vernacular newspaper, *Kangura*, were used to incite citizens during the genocide. The results are clear for everyone to see.

We need to realise that we are in a charged environment. I think civil society and government must play a role in educating people on how to use social media. Adolescents and minors end up facing all sorts of challenges. Their behaviours are a result of what they consume on social media. These are some of the dangers of hate language in a politically charged environment (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM18, 07/10/2020)

A Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia, agreed with the above respondent's arguments, adding that:

We have witnessed a resurgence of far-right extremism. It has manifested itself in terms of ethnic politics. Some of the exchanges are very worrying, especially ethnicized discourses. Such types of discourses amplify differences rather than commonalities. This type of extremism is associated with digital media because some platforms do not have filters and moderators. People are informed by their prejudices (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

A former managing director for a state-owned media group based in Harare said we need to be aware of the inherent risks of using digital media. He argued:

The fight for democracy is a fight for self-determination. There are risks, though. One of them is the quality of information and the unfiltered nature. Some of the debates in these spaces border on hate speech. The level of intolerance can be inciteful. What we need is a sense of civic duty. Are we examining our consciences? Without that, we are not going anywhere (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020)

The respondent raises some pertinent issues that need to be interrogated from a historical perspective. This study agrees that some of the material posted on digital media platforms is vile and it looks like the fight for democracy in those spaces will continue to get messy for some time before the situation improves. The colonial regime did not bequeath at independence in 1980, a democratic legacy in which all citizens “could thrive regardless of their race, class, ethnicity and gender” (Gaidzanwa, 2020, p45). The status quo was maintained after independence, when the erstwhile liberators inherited the colonial State and its structures but “failed to foster economic, ethnic, gender and political democratization, resulting in a ‘soft’ coup against Mugabe by his comrades in arms from the liberation struggle” (Ibid.).

#### 5.7.5 Misogyny

Since the Mnangagwa administration came to power there are no signs that the lot of Zimbabwean women is likely to improve, especially in the way they are portrayed in digital media spaces. Judging from experience, this looks very unlikely. Misogynism seems to be entrenched in our Zimbabwean patriarchal society. During the factional fighting in both the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and the main opposition party, the MDC-T, female politicians like the former Vice-President, Joyce Mujuru, the former First Lady, Grace Mugabe, and the MDC-T Vice-President, Dr Thokozani Khupe, were vilified and called ‘prostitutes’ on some digital media platforms (Hove, 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019; Mudiwa, 2020). Mudiwa (2020) argues that the portrayal of some female politicians as prostitutes – “women who monetise their sexual labour – reveals the extent to which the control of women’s bodies, sexuality, and labour, remains a key focus of the post-independence state” (Ibid, p1). Mudiwa (Ibid.) adds:

As thousands of Zimbabweans poured into Harare’s streets on 19 November 2017 to celebrate Robert Mugabe’s departure after a thirty-seven-year rule, a provocative chant rang out: *‘Hatitongwe nehure!’* We won’t be ruled by a prostitute! The prostitute

in question was Grace Mugabe, the First Lady whose multiyear intervention in the party's succession politics was halted by a coup staged by the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) on 15 November 2017 (Mudiwa, 2020, p1)

Musilo (2009, p41) further argues that the terms 'phallus' and 'sex' constitute "the core grammars of power in postcolonial Africa". The term 'prostitute' is part of the discourse that "compromises the phallographic grammars of state power" (Musilo, 2009, p40).

A former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) senior reporter now based in the United States, said there is a lot of misogyny in some of the digital media spaces. She added:

I wish the digital media platforms could improve the lot of women. Women are always presented as victims. People like Amai Mujuru [the former Vice-President, Joyce Mujuru] and others, are victimised and vilified. We need to look at the quality of women. Women will influence the quality of the children that are raised. We should avoid neglecting the active participation of women in digital spaces. Digital media platforms should be harnessed to promote women's rights (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF10, 30/09/2020)

There might be some element of truth in the above claims of misogyny. The sentiments were supported by other female respondents. A Zimbabwean academic at Women's University in Africa (WUA) in Harare, argued that the practice of misogyny in digital media spaces was a well calculated way to silence women in the political public sphere. She added:

We need to create a better political environment conducive for debate. For instance, we have the problem of misogynism in these digital spaces. It is meant to silence women in the political public sphere. We saw this during the succession factional rivalry in both the MDC-T and ZANU (PF). In the case of the MDC-T, people did not look at processes. Instead, their focus was on personalities. Some women were given unsavoury labels like 'slut'. Thus, women became a problem, and their voices were suppressed. There has to be a balance by allowing people to speak and encouraging others to be responsible (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 09/10/2020)

Gaidzanwa argues that the term 'prostitute' is deliberately deployed to frame female politicians in order "to limit women's participation and ascendance within political institutions" (Gaidzanwa, 1985, p72). This portrayal of women is a hangover from the

colonial legacy (Mudiwa, 2020). During the colonial era, “prostitutes signified crisis and moral decay, symbols of societies buckling under the weight of urbanisation and its attendant social ills” (cited in Mudiwa, 2020, p3).

Apart from misogyny, most respondents agreed that there was a lot of fake news on some of the digital media platforms.

#### 5.7.6 Fake News

Makinen and Kuiru (2008) suggest that the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ is not something new; it predates the current era of digital media. Fake news has always been around and that may explain why media professionals always view “journalism as a contested area” (Madrid-Morales, et al; 2021, p1202), “vulnerable to manipulation by governments and those in positions of power” (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019, p147).

Ireton and Posetti (2018) create a distinction between “intentional acts of news fraud” and “accidental items of misinformation created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent” (p7). The first alludes to the “intentional expression of falsity” and is termed disinformation, while the second definition refers to misinformation (Reed, et al, 2020; p41). According to Ireton and Posetti (2018) both misinformation and disinformation pose serious problems to audiences but “disinformation is especially dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology” (p7).

Chuma and Ndou (2019) said that during the early stages of the military-assisted transition in Zimbabwe there was very little information from the mainstream media on the cataclysmic event. The little information that was readily available to the public was carefully curated by the authorities (Ibid.). On the other hand, social media platforms offered the public the latitude to engage in unfettered debate, “speculation, falsehoods and truths all combined” (Ibid, p4).

A former foreign news agency correspondent in Harare, said WhatsApp was the most popular digital media platform among Zimbabweans. The respondent, who is now working as an editor of a local news agency which specialises in business news, said:

Most people use WhatsApp. It is user friendly and does not consume too much data. But it is also the most common digital platform in spreading fake news. Data costs for WhatsApp are cheaper. But generally, data costs are very expensive (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM3, 09/09/2020)

Other respondents have contended that digital media spaces were open to abuse and that some activists did not use the media responsibly. A veteran Zimbabwean journalist and former editor of a financial newspaper in Harare, said some people had a perverted sense of democracy. He further argued that:

The role of promoting democratisation is not being used responsibly. The posts are too partisan, and the facts are blurred. There is no sense of professionalism. There is need for factual information to inform serious debate in these media spaces (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM7, 09/09/2020)

This study agrees with the above respondent's argument. Fake news can cause irreparable damage to democracy. Mare (2018, np) argues that fake news "travels like wildfire on the internet". He further adds that "any interaction on social media is likely to cause algorithmic responses which will increase its visibility to other users on the platform" (Ibid.). Madowo (2018) further argues that digital media is a double-edged sword. It can also be used to subvert democracy. In his analysis, Madowo (Ibid.) cites as an example the British company, Cambridge Analytica, which was used to subvert democracy in Kenya by "manipulating voters and apocalyptic attack ads and smeared Kenyatta's opponent Raila Odinga as violent, corrupt and dangerous" (Ndlela, 2020, p24).

However, this study argues that part of the price of democracy is giving all citizens a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging "results from having unchallenged access to the rights and privileges that are given to members of a certain community, and democracy is in part about giving people space to make those demands" (Nyanjola, 2018, p80). In that regard, digital media platforms create democratic space for counter hegemonic narratives that are often suppressed in the traditional media.

### 5.7.7 Disconnect Between Online and Offline Intersection

Willems (2019) argues that there is a need to problematise the circulation of information at the intersection of on and offline communicative spaces. By “problematizing common dualisms between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ as well as ‘public sphere’ and ‘public space’,” Willems (2019, p1) posits the need for “an exploration of publicness and processes of circulation across digital and physical spaces”. Bonilla and Rosa (2015, p8) argue that some people believe that digital media can never replace face-to-face activism; and that social media activism is ephemeral and can only create fleeting moments with very little impact. Bonilla and Rosa (2015, p8) further argued:

Many have disparaged hashtag activism as a poor substitute for ‘real’ activism, and, indeed, some suggest that the virality and ephemerality of social media can only ever produce fleeting ‘nanostories’ (Wasik, 2009) with little lasting impact (Ibid)

It is imperative to note that the publics in these spaces are not independent of each other, but are mutually inclusive of each other (Willems, 2019; Matsilele and Ruhanya, 2020). Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue that, while digital media platforms, like Twitter, have become an essential component of political activists’ toolkits, opinion is still divided on Twitter’s effectiveness in long-term digital activism campaigns. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) note:

For some, these acts represent fleeting moments, quickly replaced by the customary innocuousness of social media pleasantries. For others, however, participation in forms of digital activism prove transformative in unpredictable ways. For although Twitter activism is said to be fleeting by nature, it is also inherently aggregative” (pp9-10)

A Zimbabwean post-doctoral research fellow at a South African university, said that one of the critical challenges facing counter hegemonic digital media activism in Zimbabwe was the existing disconnect between online activism and offline action. He says:

There is a mismatch between online and offline activism. The issue is that activism in digital spaces does not always translate into effective activism on the ground. Counter hegemonic activists need to acknowledge this missing link. For instance, I observed

the ZANU (PF) anti-sanctions campaign during its run-up. ZANU (PF) activists moved to digital spaces. The narrative was consistent. The activists organised themselves. We saw the opposite with #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. It ran only for a few days. After three days, it fell away (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM21, 19/10/2020)

The above respondent's account shows how digital media activism can produce positive results as an outreach tool when it is efficaciously blended with offline action. However, in the Zimbabwean context, this is no mean task – especially for activists holding dissenting views. The Zimbabwean government is well known for its intolerance of dissenting views and its selective application of the rule of law. On and offline activism which do not pose a threat to the ruling party's hegemony are often authorised without following the Kafkaesque rules and regulations on organising public demonstrations. It is likely that the anti-sanctions campaign was a huge success because it did not pose any threat to ZANU (PF)'s hegemony and consequently received tacit support from the government authorities. The ruling party has always blamed the targeted sanctions imposed by the United States and its Western allies, United Kingdom and the European Union, on some individuals and companies linked to the ruling elites, for the country's current economic woes. As a result, it is likely that the anti-sanctions campaign was viewed as a Godsend weapon by the State to add to its panoply of propaganda. The situation is likely to be different for a hashtag movement like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, whose counter hegemonic narrative was to expose the State repression of its citizens to the outside world.

A Zimbabwean foreign correspondent for a United States (US) news agency in Harare, offered a more nuanced perspective. The respondent said digital media activism under the current political environment in Zimbabwe, was a high stakes game. He says:

It's riskier now than during Mugabe's era to participate in digital media activism. Hopewell Chin'ono is a good example. Look at what happened to him. In a country with formal unemployment of nearly 90% there is no big difference between sleeping hungry and death. Who sits in the street for days on the end? How do you pressure a government on WhatsApp? The only thing that will move the authorities is citizens on the streets. The tools of digital media are not effective on the regime you are confronting. #ZimbabweanLivesMatter [campaign] did not result in reforms. In fact,

President Mnangagwa later described them as terrorists who should be flushed out (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM9, 26/10/2020)

The political environment in authoritarian contexts is very complex in many ways. For instance, it is not easy to speak to power in a political environment that is highly regulated. In Zimbabwe there are a raft of laws which inhibit free speech and democracy, and these include the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and Public Order and Security Act (POSA). According to Dumisani Moyo (2007), in authoritarian countries like Zimbabwe, digital media act as the alternative democratic space to subvert hegemonic narratives.

### 5.7.8 State and Market Constraints

#### 5.7.8.1 Regulation

A prominent Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia, said that with the gazetting of the Cyber Crime and Security Bill into law, we are likely to see activism being outlawed or criminalised. He further said:

The regime is on the ropes and willing to use any tools in its toolkit. The authorities are likely to criminalise it to deal with fake news. Cyber troops will be recruited to push a certain narrative, using the authoritarian toolbox normally associated with countries like Russia and China (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM1, 14/10/2020)

Other respondents have argued for the need to introduce some state regulation in digital media spaces. A former editor of a state-owned newspaper (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020) said there was a need for the State to regulate digital media. He added:

We do not want to go to the extremes. For example, in the interests of privacy and national security, there is a need for State regulation. We do not also want to interfere with freedom of expression. We need to strike a fine balance. Abuse of digital spaces should be avoided. That is why those spaces need to be regulated. It's a good thing (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020)

The respondent above raises a very valid point. Most people certainly agree on the need to tame the digital jungle. There is a common agreement among critics that some of the material posted in these spaces is akin to what Mano terms “vigilante journalism” (2010, p57). Mano describes ‘vigilante journalism’ as “similar to necklacing that was common in South Africa in the 1980s” (Ibid.) and it is “a vindictive form of journalism driven by a mob-justice philosophy that is inimical to democracy” (Ibid, p58). Most critics of this type of vigilantism on some of the digital media platforms agree that there is a need for regulation in those spaces. However, the critics do not agree on the form that regulation should take: statutory or self-regulatory? The issue of regulation is more complex and debatable. However, the State has other ways of constraining digital media activism, like using shutdowns.

#### 5.7.8.2 Shutdowns

This study understands that there are different types of shutdowns, and its focus will be on shutdowns directed by the State. According to Madenga (2021), the shutdowns normally occur during times of political turmoil. In Zimbabwe, telecommunications companies (telcos) are obliged to comply with government statutory requirements for shutdowns. The “compliance of private telcos in an authoritarian context must be contextualised” (Mare, 2020b, p4246) from “the point of view of their inherent nature to pursue and maximise profits sometimes at the expense of promoting public good” (Murdock and Golding, 1973, p205).

According to the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report (2021), governments shut down internet access for various reasons. Some of the reasons are as follows:

Some governments shut down internet access to control the flow of information and public discourse within and outside their borders, or specifically to exclude foreign-based platforms (WEF Report, 2021, p30)

Over the past few years, Zimbabwe has “experienced two major state-ordered internet shutdowns, which were accompanied by gross human rights violations and a spike in the circulation of misinformation and disinformation” (Mare, 2020b, p4247). The first shutdown occurred in 2016 and the second shutdown was in January 2019, and this resulted in an internet blackout for almost a week. The second shutdown came at a

time when the ZANU (PF) Party was “going through some of the most brutal internal fights in its history” (Mare, 2020b, p4247). The shutdown also came against a backdrop of declining economic performance in the country, which was accompanied by an upsurge of digital media activism (Mpofu and Mare, 2020).

According to a veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa, most African leaders use shutdowns when they are under siege. He said that we had seen it happening in Zimbabwe under the new dispensation and added that:

We have also witnessed the same thing happening in other African countries, like Uganda, that are also under authoritarian rule. During the general election in Uganda, there was an internet shutdown for 5 days. The shutdown cost the country nearly US\$10 million, and business was mostly affected. In trying to stop the young man [the Ugandan opposition leader, Bob Wine] Museveni [the Ugandan President, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni] damaged his economy. There has to be some acceptance among our African leaders that being repressive in the digital age is self-defeating (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021)

A former editor of a Zimbabwean national daily in Harare, said that Mnangagwa’s new dispensation had taken a radical shift on shutdowns, if compared to the Mugabe regime. The former editor added:

The new dispensation has made a radical shift from the Mugabe era in terms of using digital media. Mugabe was a little bit laid back on social media. The Mnangagwa administration wants to control their narrative. That may explain why the regime uses shutdowns when it is under siege. The new dispensation clamps down on dissent. They appreciate that they are losing the propaganda war in digital media spaces. Now their tack has changed. They are trying to control the narrative, using laws (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM45, 14/09/2020)

Srinivasan and Diepeveen argue that digital media technologies “are also introducing distinct uncertainties and ambivalences into how power is contested and negotiated” (Srinivasan and Diepeveen, 2019, p18).

#### 5.7.8.3 Surveillance

Contrary to the initial euphoria, which viewed new technologies as ‘liberation technologies’ (Diamond, 2010), with the potential to ‘leapfrog’ some African countries

into modernity, some scholars now view digital media as a double-edged sword (Srinivasan and Diepeveen, 2019). These scholars argue that it is both a boon and a curse. It is a curse when it is in the hands of undemocratic forces. Mare (2019) argues that Zimbabwean authorities normally deploy what is termed as 'communication surveillance' and that it:

[ . . . ] encapsulates a broad range of activity that implicates the privacy and expressive value inherent in communications networks . . . the full range of monitoring, interception, collection, analysis, use, preservation and retention of interference with, or access to information that includes, reflects, or arises from a person's communication in the past, present and future (Ibid, p2)

For instance, in Zimbabwe the ruling ZANU (PF) Party is known for using surveillance equipment to spy on its citizens. In 2007, the government established the Monitoring of Interception of Communications Centre (MICC) and passed an enabling law "which gave powers to officials from the security sector and revenue authority to spy on citizens' mobile phones and emails" (Mare, 2020a, p9). Some scholars suggest that ZANU (PF) also deployed surveillance technologies during the "succession and factional battles that rocked ZANU (PF) in the run-up to the party's 2014 National Congress" (Mare, 2020a, p9; Tendi, 2016; Mare, 2018).

According to a Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia, State surveillance on citizens is still widely prevalent under the new dispensation in Zimbabwe. He added:

Surveillance is done by both State and commercial entities. In the Zimbabwean context, State surveillance is conducted especially in instances involving government criticism. People have been abducted in the past for criticising the government. For example, the journalist and political activist, Itayi Dzamara, was abducted in broad day light during the Mugabe era, never to be seen again. In the post-Mugabe era, the situation has not improved. In fact, it has worsened. There is no sense of restraint in the way the State exerts its hegemony (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

However, a former senior manager for a state-owned media group based in Harare, disagreed. He argued that the opposite was the case. Since its ascension to power, the new dispensation had opened communicative spaces. He said:

Let's give credit where it is due. After Mugabe's departure, people were more relaxed in terms of the freedom of speech, especially in digital media spaces. Now some people abuse that freedom and use derogatory language in those spaces. They make sure that they cover their digital footprints to avoid being caught. I think the new dispensation seems to have relaxed a bit, and people no longer fear surveillance from the CIO [Central Intelligence Organisation], like in the past. The CIOs are synonymous with the Mugabe era. A lot of that fear was dispensed (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM28, 30/09/2020)

As researchers we always need to be cautious and avoid the risk of putting undue emphasis on "individuals, functionalism and pluralism" (Mansell, 2003, p2) without analysing "[. . .] the social processes through which they are constructed and interpreted and the contexts and pressures which shape and constrain those constructions" (Golding and Murdock, 1978, p72).

#### 5.7.8.4 Internet Infrastructure

In this regard, it is imperative that we critically evaluate the political economy architecture of the new technologies that are deployed in digital communicative spaces. Such an informed analysis provides us with the latitude to have a "deeper understanding of the way articulations of power are shaping the new media landscape" (Mansell, 2003, p3). Mansell notes:

There is a very substantial tendency in studies of new media to emphasise the abundance and variety of new media products and services and to concentrate on promoting access with little regard for the associated structures and processes of power that are embedded in them. There are undeniably major changes in the scope and scale of new media supply and in the ways that our lives are mediated by digital technologies and services. There is, however, continuing evidence of scarcity in relation to new media production and consumption. This condition of scarcity is being reproduced as a result of various articulations of power. These articulations are not inconsequential, and they contribute to the maintenance of deeply rooted inequalities in today's so-called 'information' or 'knowledge' societies (Ibid.)

Hence, studies of the political economy of digital media need to explore and interrogate "symbolic form, meaning and action as it is with structures of power and institutions" (Mansell, 2003, p4). It is imperative to critically evaluate the political

economy of the new media and analyse how the hierarchies of economic and social inequalities are reproduced in societies.

A veteran journalist and prominent business executive based in Harare, said the major challenge facing the country was the yawning digital divide. The businessman, who owns an agro-processing company said:

Maybe we need to look at ways of improving internet connectivity among rural people. How do we develop digital media so that everybody has access to it? In terms of access, only a few have access to it – only 1.5 million. How does that work? We need every corner of Zimbabwe to have access. In addition, data is expensive, and connectivity is not easy. Only a very privileged few have access (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020)

This respondent raises some interesting salient points. The digital divide, generally in Africa, and in Zimbabwe, in particular, remains very pronounced when compared to other continents and countries. According to Internet World Stats (2021), the internet penetration in Africa was very low compared to other continents. The rate of internet penetration in Africa in 2021 was pegged at 43.1 % (Internet World Stats, 2021), while the rate for Zimbabwe has shown a noticeable change over the past few years and stood at around 50% in 2016 (POTRAZ, 2016). Mare and Matsilele (2020, p154) suggested that the steep rise in Zimbabwe's internet penetration could be attributed mostly to "mobile internet uptake". Another key development in Zimbabwe has been the introduction of "data bundles and zero-rated services for social media platforms" by the internet service providers (ISPs) (Ibid.). The usage of data bundles is termed 'social media internet' (Willems, 2016) and has resulted in the phenomenal rise of internet connectivity in the country.

However, Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020) critiqued the methodology used for compiling the statistics, saying the statistics are thin on detail and do not provide more information on the different types of internet usage in Africa. Despite these challenges, digital media remain lucrative business in Africa generally, and in Zimbabwe in particular, especially for private telecommunication networks. These networks are mostly responsible for internet connectivity, while African governments are

responsible for licensing and the allocation of broadband spectrums to new entrants to the sector. Internet service providers (ISPs) are thus mostly privately owned, and their motivation is profit maximisation, and the African governments act as regulatory authorities and ensure that the internet charges levied by private networks are justified, in line with best business practices.

In Zimbabwe the government plays the role of both player and referee in the digital media sector. It is one of the major players through its shareholding in Net One, one of the ISPs. The other dominant ISP networks in Zimbabwe are Econet Wireless and Telecel, both which are wholly owned by Zimbabwean shareholders.

A Zimbabwean journalist working for an international non-governmental organisation based in South Africa, weighed in the discussion and said the major challenge is how to empower people in rural areas. On the digital divide in Zimbabwe, she said:

The main challenge is the digital media hardware like smart phones. How many people in the rural areas understand how to navigate the digital spaces? For Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, this is a major challenge (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF4, 05/10/2020)

The respondent above was supported by a former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio presenter based in Harare. The former broadcaster said that although digital media empower citizens, they were not accessible to most of the people in the rural areas. He said:

Yes, digital media give people a voice. On the President's [Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa's] Facebook and Twitter accounts, people speak out. But very few people have access to the internet. Very few people can also afford to buy smart phones. Another challenge is electricity. The electricity supply is not reliable. Due to load shedding, people often experience electricity outages. In addition, there is the issue of connectivity. The data bundles are expensive (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM27, 16/09/2020)

However, a senior executive officer for an advocacy organisation in Zimbabwe offered a more nuanced perspective, saying:

To a certain extent we still have a digital divide. But a mobile phone for most people has become a survival tool. Digital media has revolutionised the way people communicate. Of course, costs are still an issue but there are cheap phones from Dubai and China. These are readily available on the local market and people use them. The phones work even in rural areas. People use them to take and share photos, videos and voice notes. A [mobile phone] cell phone is no longer a status symbol. It is a survival tool (Online interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

This study agrees with the previous respondent that for most Zimbabweans, a mobile phone is now a survival tool, especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Most people are now working from home and digital media assist them in communicating with their colleagues and friends.

#### 5.7.8.5 Covid-19

Zimbabwe was affected by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The country reported its first case on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021). The government responded to the pandemic by imposing strict lockdown regulations and these included curfews in urban areas. These measures constricted democratic space in the country, and some citizens ended up using digital media as an alternative public space “for alternative discourses that challenge ZANU (PF)’s authoritarianism” (D. Moyo, 2007, p82). Moyo argues that citizens in repressive political environments like Zimbabwe often use digital media platforms “as an arena for dissent voices” (Ibid.).

A former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio presenter based in Harare, said the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic affected digital media activism (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM27, 16/09/2020).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic showed the dark side of digital media activism. There was a “surge of misleading and false information” on some social media platforms and to curb the spread and circulation of fake news, the government criminalised the publication of falsehoods about Covid-19 (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021, p15). Ndlovu and Sibanda (Ibid.) added:

The Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 categorises the publication and circulation of fake news concerning the national lockdowns as a Level 4 offence which attracts a jail sentence of up to 20 years

Some activists have argued that the government used Covid-19 as a cloak with which to repress dissent. In view of the existing draconian media laws in Zimbabwe like “the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the criminalisation of fake news was interpreted by journalists as another ploy used by the government to curtail free speech” (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021, p15). These concerns “over how the government was weaponizing Covid-19 lockdown measures to stifle free speech and democracy” were shared by most activists in pro-democracy movements (Ibid.). There may be a fair amount of truth in these accusations. For instance, the statutory instrument which criminalised fake news was a little bit vague. It did not make a clear distinction between the deliberate spread and circulation of fake news (disinformation), and the unintentional spread and circulation of fake news (misinformation). This chapter argues that it is imperative to make this distinction very clear. It is also important to recognise that the media, like any of the other institutions of society, is not infallible; it is vital that when mistakes are made unintentionally, retractions should be made without any criminalisation.

## 5.8 Digital Platforms and Political Activism

The role of the media in a liberal democracy is to make governments accountable to citizens. The media, thus, “are expected to act as watchdogs guarding against possible abuses of power by governments” (Willems, 2011a, p49). This “liberal-democratic model of media-state relations” is used as the normative ideal in most African countries. Ogbondah (1997) posits that the role of the press in the African context is that of a watchdog, “to investigate and report the misconduct, corruption, illicit spoils, embezzlement, bribery, inefficiency and lack of accountability that have characterised post-independence African governments” (Ibid, p291). Ogbondah’s (1997) brief for the press extends to other forms of media, including digital media platforms. According to the Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere, the media are an arena in which citizens engage in rational debate “that, according to him, would ultimately give rise to a consensus on public affairs” (Willems, 2011a, p48). However,

it should be noted that Habermas's public sphere was not inclusive; it was exclusive and only catered to the wealthy white middle class men and excluded women and the working class (Fraser, 1992).

The Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere in a liberal democracy is often juxtaposed against Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) radical conceptualisation of democracy views democracy as "dissensus and conflict", unlike the Habermasian concept which views it as consensus. Laclau and Mouffe state that:

The problem with 'actually existing' liberal democracies is not their constitutive values crystallized in the principles of liberty and equality for all, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of those values. That is why our project of 'radical and plural democracy' was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the 'democratic revolution', as the extension of the democratic struggle, for the equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations (1985, pxv)

The notion of radical democracy has been used by Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) as an analytical tool with which to evaluate the potential of digital media as a catalyst for democratisation. In this regard, digital media platforms can be viewed as a public sphere for counter hegemonic discourses by subaltern groups, like political activists. D. Moyo (2007) argues that:

Zimbabwe's restricted democratic space has spawned a multiplicity of alternative public spheres that enable groups and individuals to continue to participate and engage in the wider debate on the mutating crisis gripping the country since the turn of the century (p81)

During the military-assisted transition, there was a noticeable upsurge in activity on some digital media platforms by Zimbabweans, both abroad and inside the country. They used the platforms to keep themselves informed about what was happening in the country, since there was an information blackout in the mainstream media. A prominent Zimbabwean media scholar in Namibia, said that after the military-assisted transition on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the dominant ZANU (PF) faction, Lacoste, took control of the State media, and also migrated to digital media to push its hegemonic narrative. He said:

After the military coup on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, we saw the continuation of the use of digital media. Platforms like Twitter were used to recruit cyber troops. G40 [faction within ZANU (PF)] retreated to Twitter. It used Twitter to speak to power. On the other hand, Lacoste [ruling ZANU (PF) faction] used both state-owned media and Twitter. Lacoste have people resident on Twitter to push their narrative. However, we need digital media activism and face-to-face interactions. Digital media activism should be complemented by offline content (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re; XXM1, 14/10/2020)

A veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster based in the United Kingdom (UK), said despite its limitations, digital media make a difference in people's lives. She says:

Digital media give a rare and uncensored opportunity. The momentum can make a difference. However, they are not like magic; it is a process. I think we all have to be patient when using digital media. There is no magical solution. But every little helps (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020)

Despite the constraints imposed by the State and the market, the digital media have the potential to empower citizens in generating social and political change. The next section of this study will explore and discuss the implications of digital media activism in Zimbabwe.

## 5.9 Implications of Digital Media Activism

Some recent research studies suggest that in the past few decades there has been an insidious rollback of democracy in some African countries like Zimbabwe. However, the rollback has not been “uniform across all democratic rights and institutions” (Rakner, 2019, np). Although multipartyism seems to have taken root in most of these African countries, the independence of key institutions like the judiciary, legislature, media and civil society that are expected to exercise oversight over the executive often find themselves compromised and unable to perform their functions judiciously (Rakner, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the future of digital media activism does not look very rosy. The challenges ahead are enormous and demand honest answers. Under these circumstances, Rakner poses some important questions:

How do activists come together to advocate for particular rights? When are activists more effective in generating mass citizen support for their campaigns? (Rakner, 2019, np)

A Zimbabwean media scholar and PhD Candidate based in Australia, said that there is a need to be cautious and to avoid romanticising digital media activism. The respondent added:

We need to be honest about its limitations. For instance, the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter went viral on some social media platforms, but we could not sustain the hashtag. It's a leaderless movement and lost momentum (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF12, 09/11/2020)

A senior executive officer working for an advocacy organisation based in Harare, said that digital media help to open the lines of communication between government and its citizens and help to keep those in power under scrutiny. He further said:

These platforms allow those in power to connect with the citizens. The time is up. African governments will not shy away from constant scrutiny. Violations of citizens' human rights will no longer be a secret (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

The above sentiments were reinforced by a veteran Zimbabwean journalist working as a senior foreign correspondent in South Africa. She said that digital media are here to stay, adding that:

There is no going back. But I can't say the future is bright. I fear about the new laws being crafted now. However, digital media space is evolving every day. It is a space that cannot be shut completely. It is the only opportunity for citizens to hold their rulers accountable. The authorities have no choice but to accept this state of affairs. They will have to live with it. They might try to close the spaces. In 2016 Minister Patrick Chinamasa tried to promulgate the Cyber and Security Bill. Now I understand there are plans to resuscitate the Bill. It's difficult to see any change. The attitude is still the same I think (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020)

A Zimbabwean foreign correspondent for a German public broadcasting service in Harare, said that digital media platforms were both a blessing and a boon. He cautioned that citizens needed to be very circumspect about how they use those spaces, adding that:

Digital media spaces can make or break societies. In those spaces it is possible to share a falsehood and cause irreparable damage. That is the danger. On the other hand, digital media can be a force for good as a communicative space to engage in honest debate. We are able to work from any location at any time. That way, the digital media can break the barriers of time and space (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM30, 21/09/2020)

A former editor of one of Zimbabwe's national dailies in Harare, said that the future for digital media platforms in Zimbabwe looks bright. He added:

Digital media are taking off. They started slowly. They are beginning to outstrip mainstream media. Gradually, the big giants have recognised the importance of digital media. Look at Hopewell Chin'ono, Tichaona Zindoga and Mduduzi Mathuthu. They are pushing the envelope. The space is vibrant. The overheads are very low. Digital media are revolutionising the media. This is good for democracy. To foster democracy in Zimbabwe, the authorities should ensure that people have access to the internet. Digital media sit at the heart of any democratic process (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM45, 14/09/2020)

However, a veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster based in the United Kingdom, who has worked for several years for both public and private radio stations in Harare said she was not optimistic about the future of digital media activism in Zimbabwe, adding that:

There are similarities between the Mugabe era and the new dispensation. ED [the President, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa] is just the same as Bob [the former President, Robert Mugabe]. Nothing has changed. There is the same veneer (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020)

On the other hand, a Zimbabwean economist in international development based in Rome, Italy, working for a development agency, said the influence of digital media in promoting democracy cannot be understated. She said:

We cannot deny the influence of digital media in promoting democratic processes. They are a big tool. They are still a new phenomenon. But we also need to ask critical questions. Who manipulates them? We are not sure. However, digital media are not going away, and they will have a huge influence on us (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF37, 23/09/2020)

For Moyo, the advent of digital technologies has “ushered in a new era of political communication” and such a development has far-reaching implications for Zimbabwe’s democracy, for instance, these new tools are:

. . . fast eroding the monopoly of incumbent politicians over the communications landscape, undercutting the liberation discourse that has had a stranglehold on election processes, and signalling the possibility of more open political spaces where divergent views can co-exist (Moyo, 2010, p71).

The study shows not only some of the dividends but also the numerous emerging challenges of digital media activism.

## 5.10 Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has explored and critically evaluated how digital media activists in Zimbabwe are deploying social media networking platforms as sites of struggle for social and political change. The study has noted from its findings, that there was a broad consensus among the respondents that the digital media have a potential role to play in the creation of social and political change, especially in countries under authoritarian rule like Zimbabwe. Digital media platforms provide communicative spaces for citizens to speak to power by articulating their counter hegemonic narratives. The research explored and discussed the role of Zimbabwean hashtag movements like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka, in employing the digital media as sites of struggle for social and political change. The study also noted and discussed how social media influencers, like the award-winning documentary maker, Hopewell Chin’ono, and the United Kingdom (UK)-based lawyer and academic, the late Dr Alex Magaisa, have deployed the digital media to greater effect in exposing corruption and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, especially during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Digital media activism keeps the ruling elites under scrutiny and empowers people to exercise their fundamental rights of citizenship.

However, the study noted that digital media activism in Zimbabwe is still in its nascent stages and needs to overcome several challenges for it to create transformative social

and political change in the country. Among the major challenges are the State and market constraints, and the disconnect between on and offline activism. In addition, the infrastructure for digital media is skewed in favour of citizens in peri-urban and urban areas. This current set-up disadvantages citizens in rural areas where most of the population lives.

Nevertheless, against this backdrop, the digital media have made modest gains in promoting social and political change in the last few years. The major challenge is for digital media activism to maintain its momentum. To foster transformative and permanent change, the digital media need to tap into elite consensus erosion and indignation among the citizens (Matiashe, 2021).

## CHAPTER 6: Discussion of the Findings

### 6.0 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the findings of the study as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 and discusses how Zimbabwean citizens are deploying digital media platforms as sites of struggle for democratisation, political and social change. There is a broad consensus among the respondents that digital media have the potential to act as catalysts for social and political change in Zimbabwe. However, there are some differences of opinion on the strategies that should be deployed in digital media activism.

This chapter will discuss some of the major highlights of the study's findings. It is structured as follows:

The chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will explore and discuss the tension between Zimbabweans in the diaspora and those inside the country, while the second section will assess and discuss the potential of digital media activism as a site of struggle for democratisation, social and political change, against the backdrop of the State and market constraints in the country. The third section will discuss the implications of digital media activism for Zimbabwe and other African countries that share similar contexts, while the fourth section will form the conclusion and highlight the key points.

### 6.1 Tension Between the Diaspora and the Locals

This chapter begins by discussing the findings of Chapter 4 with regard to the tension between the Zimbabwean diaspora and the locals shown in that chapter. The chapter gave empirical evidence to show how Zimbabwean citizens are deploying digital media to contest hegemonic narratives. However, there were noticeable differences in how Zimbabweans in the diaspora and the locals were deploying digital media as part of their communicative ecologies in order to create social and political change. For instance, the study noted that most Zimbabwean citizens in the diaspora were keen

and enthusiastic to participate in this research, while locals tended to be ambivalent about the study. It is most likely that Zimbabweans in the diaspora were able to participate in the study freely because of the freedoms they enjoy in their host countries, freedoms which are not normally taken for granted in their country of origin. In addition, it is also likely that for most Zimbabweans in the diaspora, internet costs are not an inhibiting issue. For the locals in Zimbabwe, the costs of connectivity are likely to be prohibitive, and that probably explains why some respondents pulled out of the research study at the last minute. However, some locals who had access to free Wi-Fi at their places of work or study were able to participate in the study without any problems.

### 6.1.1 Diasporic Community

It is interesting to note, that in recent years, the diaspora has been gaining a lot of influence in Zimbabwe. Last Moyo (2009) argues that the upsurge of digital media activism in Zimbabwe can be partly attributed “to the number of Zimbabweans living abroad, especially in Europe, and the United States” (p59). Last Moyo adds:

A significant number of these people are professionals such as doctors, nurses, and teachers, who are likely to rely on the internet as an information resource tool. These various diaspora communities have developed a myriad of cyber public spaces and spheres where citizens can discuss politics or read and listen to the news (2009, p59)

However, while Moyo (2009) has a positive view on the diaspora, Dendere (2020) gives a more nuanced view on how the diaspora has helped to reinforce the ruling elites’ hegemony in Zimbabwe. Dendere (2020) believes that the ruling ZANU (PF) Party, has benefitted tremendously from the emigration of some Zimbabweans into the diaspora. She argues that the political elites are able to “sustain their rule when opposition supporters are forced to emigrate because of deteriorating economic or political conditions” (Dendere, 2020, p1). Dendere (Ibid.) further suggests that the “exit of voters both weakened the opposition movement and relieved pressures on the incumbent party”.

There is some truth in Dendere’s (2020) views. Most Zimbabweans who have left the country in the past two decades were highly skilled professionals, and some of them

held prominent positions in civil society and in the main opposition party, MDC-T. However, in recent years the Zimbabwean diasporic community has coalesced into a formidable political constituency. It has contributed to the country's economic development by sending regular remittances of foreign currency to families and relatives in Zimbabwe.

In recent years, the diasporic community has been trying to convert its economic clout into a political dividend by seeking voting rights in their country of origin. The citizens want to be granted the right to participate in general elections from their countries of residence and settlement. Currently, Zimbabwe "does not allow citizens abroad to vote, thus disenfranchising an estimated two to four million Zimbabweans living abroad" (Ibid, p2).

The ruling ZANU (PF) Party is well aware of the political capital of the diaspora as one of the key constituencies in the country's body politic. Although the party, like the main opposition party, the MDC Alliance, has active branches in the United Kingdom and the United States, it is still wary of the political allegiances of most of the Zimbabwean people in the diaspora. As an authoritarian State, the ruling political elites in Zimbabwe view most of the citizens in the diaspora as a serious threat to their hegemony. In this regard, Guy Berger (1998, p317) posits that to have a more nuanced understanding of theoretical perspectives on media and democracy in the global South countries, like Zimbabwe, there is a need to contextualise the discussion in the "global context of the transnational public sphere".

Levitsky and Way (2002) categorise Zimbabwe as an archetypal authoritarian State. According to Levitsky and Way (Ibid.), the key characteristics of an authoritarian State include the manipulation of "formal democratic institutions" "as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority" (p2). In addition, authoritarian states, like Zimbabwe, are known for holding sham elections which are manipulated in favour of the incumbent government. The elections are often held to give a semblance of legitimacy to regional and international peers (Zamchiya, 2020). Cheeseman and

Klaas (2018) further argue that authoritarian leaders are well aware of the inherent risks of not conducting some of the rituals of democracy, like holding general elections. Schedler argues this point clearly by adding that authoritarian governments choose to:

. . . neither practice democracy nor resort regularly to naked repression. By organising periodic elections, they try to embrace at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors. At the same time, by placing the election under tight authoritative controls they try to cement their hold on power (Schedler, 2002, p36)

Zimbabwe is still steeped in its first democratic transition, which was ushered in at independence in 1980. For nearly 40 years the country has not moved to the next democratic transition, and its general election outcomes since have tended to be contestable, leading to a chronic political legitimacy crisis.

#### 6.1.2 Local Citizens

Helliker and Murisa argue that Zimbabwe is currently “in some way ‘in transition’” (Helliker and Murisa, 2020, p6). The country is in a leadership transition “involving a lengthy process of fundamental reconstruction of Zimbabwean economy and society” (ibid.), since the demise of its founding father Robert Mugabe, who was deposed in a ‘soft’ coup on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

Since his ascension to power, President Emmerson Mnangagwa has cast himself as different from his predecessor Robert Mugabe. At first, he presented himself as an ardent proponent of neo-liberalism, using the mantra: ‘Zimbabwe is Open for Business’. This narrative hoodwinked civilians, opposition leaders and key regional organisations, like the Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC) and the African Union (AU). Raftopoulos adds:

The thousands that turned out for the march celebrated in a carnival of cathartic joy and unified release, manifested in a temporary romance between the armed forces and the citizenry. This was a case of presenting a coercive force in the guise of popular consent to build a temporary hegemonic frame (2019, p6)

However, a few months into his first term, Mnangagwa showed his true colours by reverting to type. Helliker and Murisa aptly captured the current state of affairs in Mnangagwa's era, which is also known as 'the Second Republic' or the 'new dispensation':

Over one year later, soon after the military coup and the unceremonious departure of Mugabe (in late November 2017), an air of excitement, expectation and hopefulness seemed to prevail across many parts of Zimbabwe. However, this was quickly dashed. Any optimism that characterised the Zimbabwean story in the months after November 2017 seems to have faded into the sunset and, in its place, there is a renewed sense of despair, disappointment and confusion. Certainly, the current Zimbabwean government, under President Emmerson Mnangagwa's ZANU (PF), suffers from serious legitimacy challenges and it has not been able to take advantage of the goodwill that emerged soon after the coup (Helliker and Murisa, 2020, p7)

Against this political backdrop, the challenges currently facing Zimbabwe are immense. The country's economy is virtually comatose, with most industries shut down due to mismanagement of the economy and corruption. The situation has been worsened by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most companies were affected by the lockdown regulations introduced by the State, in an attempt to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, unemployment is rising in Zimbabwe and among the hardest hit are young people; they are out of formal employment and they have to rely on the informal sector.

## 6.2 Demographic Youth Dividend

According to the United Nations report (2019), sub-Saharan Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world. Sixty-two percent of the population in the region is under the age of 25 (United Nations Report, 2019). Ayittey (2010) argues that the future for Africa lies with the youth, those he calls the 'Cheetah Generation'. Ayittey defines the 'Cheetah Generation' thus:

The 'Cheetah Generation' refers to the new and angry generation of young African graduates and professionals, who look at African issues and problems from a totally different and unique perspective. They are dynamic, intellectually agile and pragmatic. They may be the 'restless generation' but they are Africa's new hope. They brook no nonsense about corruption, inefficiency, ineptitude, incompetence, or buffoonery.

They understand and stress transparency, accountability, human rights, and good governance. They also know that many of their current leaders are hopelessly corrupt and that their governments are contumaciously dysfunctional and commit flagitious human rights violations (Ayittey, 2010, np)

On the other hand, Ayittey (Ibid.) refers to the postcolonial generation of nationalist leaders as the 'Hippo Generation'. This group is the antithesis of the 'Cheetah Generation'. He adds:

They lack vision – hippos are near-sighted - - and sit tight in their air-conditioned government offices, comfortable in their belief that the state can solve all of Africa's problems. All the state needs is more power and more foreign aid. And they would ferociously defend their territory since that is what provides them with their wealth. (Hippos kill more people in Africa than any other animal.) (Ibid.)

In the Zimbabwean context, the Hippo Generation refers to the older generation of African nationalists, who contributed to the country's liberation from colonial rule. The older generation tend to blame colonialism for the country's shortcomings (Mano, 2010). On the other hand, the Cheetah Generation represents Zimbabwean youths, and they symbolise hope for the country's future. Unlike their forebears, the Cheetah Generation:

. . . brook no nonsense about corruption, inefficiency, ineptitude, incompetence, or buffoonery. They understand and stress transparency, accountability, human rights, and good governance . . . they can analyse issues with remarkable clarity and objectivity (Ayittey, 2005, pp. xviii-xx).

The plight of youths in Zimbabwe is thus no better than in other African countries. The youth include anyone below the age of 35, and they constitute half of the entire population and face several challenges, which include unemployment and corruption. According to a research study entitled *Next Generation Zimbabwe*, funded by the British Council (2020), most youths in Zimbabwe view their future as very bleak. The Report says:

Despite the recent change in government and introduction of the tagline 'Zimbabwe is Open for Business', Zimbabwe continues to perform poorly economically, and the youth remain the biggest victims. Most have lost hope and, as seen in this report, believe that their future may be more secure if they migrate to other countries. The

severe economic hardship, coupled with a terrifyingly high youth unemployment rate, is not only a cause for concern but a national emergency (British Council, 2020, p7)

Kanyenze, et al; (2017, p1) argue that Zimbabwe's economic and political woes are worsened by "political goals taking precedence over inclusive economic prosperity". In addition, the mismanagement of the economy has resulted in "high levels of political instability and corruption" (Ibid.). According to the Transparency-International Corruption Perception Index (2016), Zimbabwe ranks 154 out of 176 countries, with a high score indicating perceived higher levels of corruption in the country's public entities (Transparency-International, 2016, p10). Kanyenze, et al; (2017) suggest a new paradigm shift in Zimbabwe's national trajectory as the panacea for the country's current economic and political woes. They add:

Clearly, therefore, what is required in Zimbabwe going forward is not just a change of political leadership but a whole paradigm shift that includes a new set of foundational factors based on national ethos, values and principles that promote humane, people-centred development. An example from South Africa in this regard is most relevant, where up to now, the Freedom Charter is the reference point for policies (Kanyenze, et al; 2017, p17)

However, it is worth noting that the current political and economic typology in Zimbabwe is very complex and multifaceted and very distinct from other African countries like South Africa. Over the past few decades, the Zimbabwean State has mutated into what Mandaza (2016) calls the securocratic State. In his recent book, *Excelgate*, Prof Jonathan Moyo (2019) explores and critically examines the role of the securocrats in Zimbabwean politics. Moyo (2019) argues that the security sector is part of what Batsani-Ncube (2021) calls the 'deep state' and is "euphemistically called 'the system' in Zimbabwe" (cited in Batsani-Ncube, 2021, p1). Moyo (2019) demonstrates how the ruling ZANU (PF) Party "has evolved, institutionalised and entrenched itself not only as a political party, but an extension of the State" (p30). Moyo (2019) further critically examines the role of the securocrats as being that of "a historic veto player" (cited in Batsani-Ncube, 2021, p3).

The military sector, known as the Joint Operations Command (JOC), lies at the heart of Zimbabwean politics and comprises all the chiefs of the security sector, including

the military, intelligence services, police and, the prison and correctional services. JOC's structures are streamlined at district, provincial and national levels (Batsani-Ncube, 2021). Moyo sums up JOC's brief thus:

JOC is not accountable to Cabinet because it is in fact above Cabinet since its deliberations are confidential, and it is not accountable to Zimbabwe's elected representatives in Parliament. Yet JOC makes fundamental decisions in its own right and acts on those decisions, but it cannot be sued, nor can it sue, because it is not a legal person and hides behind its key parental ministries. None of which take any responsibility for its operational activities, and some of which involve gross violations of human rights such as killings, torture, rape and abductions. There is no single case of atrocities in Zimbabwe since independence that does not involve JOC or a component thereof (Moyo, 2019, p57)

The civilian-military axis of power is very pervasive in the Zimbabwean body politic and manifests itself in multiple ways including "the control and running of the diamond fields [in Chiadzwa, Manicaland], the fast-track land reform programme, and the militarisation of institutions, as well as the running of elections" (Kanyenze, et al; 2017, p16). Lumumba further argues that the major problem in most African countries, like Zimbabwe, is not a lack of resources; but, rather, "a leadership or governance and policy implementation problem" (2022, p9). Corruption thus lies at the core of Zimbabwe's economic woes, with the ruling political elites unable to "structurally differentiate the State from the ruling party" (S. Moyo, 2014, p306). The elites tend to conflate the State and the party, "treating the State as a private resource, a source of wealth accumulation" (Ibid.).

To make matters worse, the current malaise has not only affected the ruling ZANU (PF) political elites; it has spread and infected the entire body politic, including the main opposition organisations, like the Movement for Democratic Party (MDC) Alliance and its other formations. The main opposition is currently divided and does not speak with one voice. On the other hand, the wider civil society is at its weakest after:

. . . the wrenching structural changes that have taken place in the economy have shifted the social base, decimating the traditionally organised working class and replacing it with an unorganised informal economy embedded in survivalist activities (Kanyenze, et al; 2017, p18)

Nevertheless, despite the underlying economic challenges, all hope is not lost for most youths, especially those based in urban and peri-urban areas. The youth have embraced new technologies and “use the internet to access information and network on social media” (British Council, 2020, p9). For Kataneksza (2018), the youths use digital media to engage in critical debate. Kataneksza adds:

A lot of debate in Zimbabwe takes place on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, which may suggest that youth go to non-traditional platforms for political engagement (Ibid, p37)

Chitagu (2018) suggests that there are several reasons why citizens migrate to digital media spaces. One of the reasons is that the mainstream media are a highly polarised terrain that is fiercely contested among the ruling political elites, the opposition and citizens. Adegbola and Gearhart further argue that there is a correlation between online media consumption and political participation. The scholars suggest that the media offer the latitude for citizens to make well informed decisions in any given political context (Adegbola and Gearhart, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a noticeable upsurge of activity in digital communicative spaces by the Zimbabwean youth. Most of the youths use these digital media platforms because they are free from State control and provide communicative spaces in which to engage in “robust political discussions among citizens within and outside the country” (British Council, 2020, p38). In the next section, this chapter discusses how Zimbabwean citizens have been deploying digital media as a site of struggle for democratisation and social change.

### 6.3 Digital Media as Catalyst for Social Change

In Section Two, the study explored and analysed the findings discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 on how Zimbabweans are employing digital media as catalysts for social and political change. From its findings, the study suggests that, despite State and market constraints, there is potential for using digital media activism as a site of struggle for contesting the hegemonic discourses in Zimbabwe.

However, before we discuss how Zimbabwean citizens are deploying digital media activism to create political and social change, it is imperative to mention at the outset that this study is not rooted in either the utopian or dystopian perspectives of digital media. Morozov (2011, p179) refers to “cyber utopianism” like Shirky’s (2011, p36) “digital activism” as “slacktivism” – a feel good type of “Facebook politics” for what he terms a “lazy generation”. However, despite their different theoretical perspectives, utopians and dystopians share a common thread in understanding the potential of digital media to promote participatory democracy (Chuma, 2006). Norris (2001, p97) contends that new media “may broaden involvement in public life by eroding some of the barriers to political participation and civic engagement, especially for many groups currently marginalised from mainstream politics”. This study is situated within the theoretical framework of the social constructivist approach. The approach is the antithesis of techno-determinism (Mabweazara, 2014). The social constructivist approach foregrounds the “cultural and relational milieu” when analysing and discussing the use of new technologies within specific contexts (Hays, 1994, p66). Hays adds:

If one wants to understand the resilient patterns that shape the behaviour of any individual or group of individuals, both the cultural and the relational milieu must be taken into account (Ibid.)

The social constructivist approach thus helps to critically evaluate the environmental factors in which new technologies are deployed and these factors include cultural, political and social ones. When discussing the impact of new technologies in creating political and social change, we need to look beyond the technology itself. Rather, we need to analyse and discuss how citizens are deploying their agency by using the affordances of new technologies to create social change. In this regard, Manji (2008) argues that there is a need to frame ordinary citizens at the heart of any discourse of social change. Manji adds:

Social change is actually driven not by technology but by ordinary people being able to exert an authority over their own experiences and, through common actions, developing the courage to determine their own destiny (Ibid, p5)

Mabweazara further argues that to have a better grasp of “the impact of digital technologies within the African context”, we need to critically examine “its culture, institutions and the broader communication environment” (2014, p5).

There is a plethora of extant literature on the nexus between digital media and politics in some African countries, and these include Zimbabwe (Mutsvairo, 2018), Kenya (Tully, 2011), South Africa (Bosch, et al; 2018) and Cameroon (De Bruijn, 2014). De Bruijn (2014) offered insights into how people in remote areas in Cameroon had embraced new technologies and deployed mobile phones as agents of change in their communities. Empirical evidence from this study has shown that digital media offer communicative spaces for counter hegemonic narratives that are aimed at promoting democratisation and social change. This section starts by discussing how citizens are deploying digital media activism to promote democratisation, before assessing its impact on creating social change.

This research used a broad definition of digital media. It defines digital media as “fixed and mobile devices that can access the internet”, while social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) refer to the interactive “infrastructure and tools used to produce and disseminate digital information” (Specht and Ros-Tonen, 2016, p1923). One of the key observations from this study’s findings was that most Zimbabwean citizens use social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, the microblogging site, Twitter, and the instant messaging application, WhatsApp, to engage in political activism. In addition, they also use “user-generated content”, like YouTube video channels and blogs (Maweu and Mare, 2021, p9). Hence, to all intents and purposes, the terms ‘digital media’ were used interchangeably in this study with other related terms like ‘new technologies’, ‘social media’ or ‘new media’. Digital media offer citizens the latitude to “express ourselves while interacting with others” (Mutsvairo, 2020, p319). In addition, digital media allow citizens to reach out to large audiences without any interference from the gatekeepers (Bosch, et al; 2020). Ndlela adds:

Social media is becoming a dominant factor in electoral processes, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp having a tremendous influence in the creation, dissemination and consumption of political content. For example, during the post-election violence in Zimbabwe (2018), people were taking videos and pictures of post-election-related violence and posting/sharing them as current occurrences (2020, p25)

The general election in 2018 was dubbed the “social media election”, because it was characterised by “the heavy usage of Facebook live broadcasts, Twitter and WhatsApp” (Mare and Matsilele, 2020, p160). Most political rallies were screened in real time and streamed on Facebook. Among the most popular “Facebook live platforms included Sly Media Production, 263 Chat, Open Parly ZW, Kukurigo, Zimbolive TV, ZimEye, The FeedZW, Zimpapers TV and VOA America” (Ibid.). Ndlela adds:

The relentlessly critical civil society, opposition parties, and other pro-democracy movements not happy with the suppression of their voices and the restricted access to the public sphere, are increasingly turning to the alternative communicative spaces (2020, p87)

For Atton, alternative communicative spaces can be viewed as “a radical challenge to the professionalised and institutionalised practices of the mainstream media” (2003, p267). He added:

Alternative media privileges a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices” (Ibid.)

In Chapter 4 we discussed how Zimbabwean citizens were using digital media activism to create democratic spaces for counter hegemonic discourse. We also explored and assessed how ordinary citizens were deploying digital media to engage creatively with dominant national discourses (Nyamnjoh, 2005). In this regard, alternative media have thus helped in the creation of democratic spaces for subaltern voices to speak truth to power (Tettey, 2001; Moyo, 2010). In addition, these digital media spaces also offer “many-to-many and one-to-one horizontal communication channels that bypass political or business control of communication” (Castells, et al; 2007, p209), thereby creating “new possibilities for citizens to produce more reliable and credible information” within their own national contexts (Moyo, 2010, p76). In this study we discussed how the government granted a mining concession in Hwange National Park to a Chinese company, without following due process. The government was later forced to revoke the mining license following a public outcry, with the hashtag #SaveHwangenationalpark going viral on Twitter. Digital media activism was also implicated in the post-election demonstrations on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Six civilians were shot during the demonstrations that occurred following the historic election of July 31<sup>st</sup>,

2018. Some of the video footage and photographs were posted on social networking sites (SNS) by activists, and they were later submitted as admissible evidence during the public hearings of the Motlanthe Commission. The Commission was appointed to make an inquiry into the post-election violence. We also noted how the MDC Alliance and civil society were using different digital media platforms to counter ZANU (PF)'s dominant narratives in the State-owned media. Digital media were also deployed during the inter-generational contestation for power within both ZANU (PF) and the different MDC formations. In this regard, digital media activism has played a significant role in promoting democratisation by giving a voice to the voiceless. The advent of new technologies has created “new hope for democratization but also become a thorn in the flesh for those in power” (Mano, 2020, p61).

Against this backdrop, is digital media activism the new frontier and the site of struggle for social and political change in Zimbabwe? In what ways has it contributed to social and political change in Zimbabwe in recent years? These questions formed the basis of Chapter 5 in this study.

The advent of new technologies has “encouraged ordinary Africans to begin to theorise in new ways about both new and old media” (Mano, 2010, p59). Mano further argues that “the notion of ‘victimhood’ which often presents Africans as powerless victims of officialdom now deserves to be reconsidered in the context that however powerful and repressive some African governments or global conditions are” (Ibid.), “there is always room – sometimes through radical or alternative media – for initiative and agency to challenge domination, exploitation and the globalisation of poverty” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p204).

Extant literature suggests that digital media can contribute to some form of cyberdemocracy which is more inclusive (Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007). According to Gadzikwa (2015, p67), digital media can act as an arena “to broaden the public sphere and deepen democracy”. In Chapter 5, we explored and assessed how digital media activism has been deployed in Zimbabwe as a site of

struggle for social and political change. This study argues that the potential for using digital media activism exists in Zimbabwe but has not been fully utilised. One of the respondents, a prominent Zimbabwean academic who is based in the United States (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM19, 18/09/2020), said digital media activism had made some significant impact on civic participation in Zimbabwe. He cited as examples the successes achieved by hashtag movements like #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter under very repressive conditions. The hashtag movements have deployed digital media activism by exposing corruption in President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration. Social movements like #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter have helped to demonstrate the potential of digital media activism in creating transformative change in African countries under authoritarian rule, like Zimbabwe.

The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter's campaign against renewed state repression in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 lockdowns, achieved phenomenal success. The victims of State repression included the award-winning author, Tsitsi Dangarembga, veteran journalist and award-winning documentary film maker Hopewell Chin'ono and the Transform Zimbabwe (TZ) opposition leader, Jacob Ngarivhume (Chingono, 2020). The trio were imprisoned and released on bail and their cases are still pending before the courts.



**FIGURE 11:** Zimbabwean Lives Matter hashtag social movement texts went viral on several digital media platforms in response to State repression

As a result of the Zimbabwean government's crackdown on any form of dissent, more citizens were abducted and tortured by State security agents, before being released into police custody. The international human rights watchdog non-governmental organisation, Human Rights Watch reported;

During 2020, unresolved cases of abductions and abuses, including torture, of government critics escalated without the abductors being brought to justice. In the last

year, over 70 government critics were abducted and later released by unidentified men suspected to be State security agents (2021, p757)

Among the victims of State-sponsored violence were three MDC Alliance activists: Cecilia Chimhiri, Netsai Marova and a Member of Parliament, Joanna Mamombe. The trio were abducted from police custody by “suspected state agents after taking part in a peaceful protest in Harare” (Ibid.). The protest was precipitated by the government’s failure to provide social security support to vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 lockdown (Ibid.).

As a counterweight to state repression, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter circulated images and texts on its social media platforms on Facebook and Twitter about State-sponsored violence against its citizens. The hashtag movement’s campaign received overwhelming support from celebrities and former Heads of State and Government. The prominent South African hip hop musician AKA, whose real name is Kiernan Forbes, was among the first celebrities to endorse #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. The others were “South African World Rugby Cup winner Tendai ‘Beast’ Mtawarira, who hails from Zimbabwe, pop star Casper Nyovest and Pearl Thusi, who starred in Africa’s first Netflix film, Queen Sono” (Mitra, 2020), and including the South African politician Mmusi Maimane, and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader, Julius Malema, and the former Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

#ZimbabweanLivesMatter’s messages went viral on its digital platforms and attracted endorsements from the Zimbabwean-born “British actress Thandiwe Newton and American actor and filmmaker Ice Cube” (Matiashe, 2021). The former President of Botswana, Ian Khama, also added his voice to the global onslaught against the repression of Zimbabwean citizenry by its government.

In recent years, we have seen the global phenomenon of celebrities using “their own social media accounts to draw attention to causes” that are close to their hearts (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2018, p391). Duvall and Heckemeyer (Ibid.) argue that “celebrity activists have the power to destabilise authority”. Thus, celebrities have an innate

ability to deploy their power into “a perceived authority of their own with an ability to reach large audiences” (Ibid.).

As a result of a social media blitz on State repression in Zimbabwe, the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, sent two special envoys to Zimbabwe to resolve the political crisis engulfing the country, in August 2020. In the same month, the chairperson of the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, Solomon Dersso, commented on the political crisis in Zimbabwe using his official Twitter handle. He warned:

As we follow [the] situation in Zimbabwe, critical to reiterate the African Commission on Human Rights view that actions of states even in fighting Covid-19 should comply with principles of legality, necessity and proportionality, thus no basis for arbitrary deprivation of liberty or life, inhuman treatment or torture (Human Rights Watch Report on Zimbabwe, 2021, p760)

The government’s repression on dissent was also condemned by the African Union, European Union, United Kingdom, United States and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (Human Rights Watch Report on Zimbabwe, 2021).

A prominent Zimbabwean academic based in the United States, said digital media have done what the government never expected. He further added:

Using group accounts, one can reach over 100,000 people in one way. Take for instance, the Twitter accounts of Dr Alex Magaisa, Hopewell Chin’ono and Prof Jonathan Moyo. These twitterati have a worldwide audience. If you reach one person, it is likely to be shared with 10 people. Remember as Africans, we are an oral society (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM19, 18/09/2020)

This respondent raises a valid point. Digital media activism has made significant impact on civic participation and political activism in Zimbabwe. For instance, #ZimbabweLivesMatter achieved phenomenal success within a very short time, and received endorsements from celebrities and former Heads of State.

One of the respondents, a renowned Zimbabwean academic and human rights activist based in South Africa, said the ruling ZANU (PF) Party was losing the narrative very fast. He added:

The President [Mnangagwa] is facing more criticism. Some of it is coming from Zimbabwe's former key allies in the African Union. Hashtag movements, like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, and influencers, like Hopewell Chin'ono, have contributed to this exposure of Zimbabwe as a corrupt State (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020)

Similar sentiments were also shared by the former Minister of Tertiary and Higher Education and former ZANU (PF) strategist and information tsar, Prof Jonathan Moyo, who went into political exile after the November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 coup and collapse of the Mugabe dictatorship. Professor Moyo, who was part of the G40 faction in ZANU (PF), said social media had changed the media landscape in Zimbabwe (Mhlanga, 2020). He added that most people in Zimbabwe get their information from digital media. Zimbabwe is ranked among African countries with a relatively well developed "internet connectivity and digital connectivity" (Bosch, et al; 2020, p349).

Philip Lee (1995) argues that a free and open political environment empowers citizens to play a critical role in participatory democracy. He further argues that a true democracy:

. . . demands a system of constant interaction with all the people, accessibility at all levels, a public ethos which allows conflicting ideas to contend, and which provides for full participation in reaching consensus on socio-cultural, economic and political goals (Lee, 1995, p2).

Mano and Mukhongo (2010, p27) argue that digital media have "enhanced and reshaped alternative media". The new media have helped to create the hashtag movements which have played a key role in generating change from below (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

In recent months, ahead of the general elections scheduled for 2023, we have also witnessed more hashtag movements occupying digital spaces, and these include

#DemLoot, #Corruption and #Registertovotenow. These hashtag movements are fronted by one of the social media influencers, the veteran journalist and award-winning documentary film maker, Hopewell Chin'ono. The other social media influencer was the renowned Zimbabwean constitutional lawyer and academic, who was based in the UK, the late Dr Alex Magaisa.

In the blogosphere and on social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, “there are usually a number of actors who can be considered as more influential or popular than most other users” (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012, p8). These actors are called influencers, and they are believed “to have the power to influence (online) opinion-making processes” (Ibid, p8).

Farrell and Drezner (2008) argue that blogs provide discursive space for political contestation and play a critical role in agenda-setting. This point may explain why journalists normally find some of these blogs newsworthy and appropriate them in the mainstream media.

This study included Dr Magaisa's weekly blog, the Big Saturday Read, among its social media data. This blog achieved phenomenal success in exposing corruption within the ranks of the Mnangagwa administration. Dr Magaisa exposed the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) Farm Mechanisation Scheme scandal, which involved most of the members of the ruling political elites. Some key members of the opposition were also implicated in the scandal. The scandal showed how the ruling political elites use neo-patrimonialism to subvert democracy. By capturing key State and non-State actors, ZANU (PF) is able to maintain its hegemony in the Zimbabwean body politic.

From the discussions above, it is very clear that digital media activism has made some significant impact on civic participation and political action in Zimbabwe. For instance, the successful campaigns organised by #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter achieved phenomenal success. The

#ZimbabweanLivesMatter went viral and attracted endorsements from celebrities and former Heads of State. However, the hashtag movements have their downside too. The campaigns lost steam and momentum, indicating their limited sustainability.

The collapse might be attributed to several factors, including lack of strategic leadership among the hashtag movements. For instance, most hashtag movements are non-hierarchical, without a clear leadership structure on the ground. As a result, there is a disconnect between online activism and offline embodied civic participation. Aouragh and Alexander (2011, p1345) argue that there is a “dialectical relationship between online and offline action”. The two communicative spaces are interdependent and “without one, the other cannot have meaning” (Ibid.). Willems (2019) supports this point, arguing that on and offline spaces “interrelate and mutually shape each other” (p1193). Willems (2019) further argues that social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, cannot be used as substitutes for offline communication. Instead, the digital media platforms should be deployed to complement face-to-face communication.

The other factor that has adversely affected the performance of hashtag movements in Zimbabwe may be the generally repressive political environment in the country. While digital media have opened democratic space in which citizens speak to power, the risks of such an undertaking still remain very high, especially for citizens inside the country. The political situation in Zimbabwe is currently very volatile and unpredictable. One of the respondents, a veteran journalist and owner of an agro-processing company in Harare, admitted that digital media activism was a game changer, but the political environment in the country was hostile to any forms of activism mediated through new technologies. He said the political environment was asphyxiating for digital media activism. The respondent added:

The government is scared of a free media. The more you engage in digital media activism the more you become vulnerable (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020)

Sen (2010) argues that new technologies can assist citizens in creating sites of struggle against all forms of oppression. He adds:

The mobile phone can be an instrument of liberation even against heavy odds, and this is a subject on which the authorities are, understandably, scared. Communication is snapped in order to keep the population in a state of voice-less and communication-less submission (Sen, 2010, p2)

At the time of writing this study, the government had passed the Cyber Security and Data Protection Bill and the Bill was enacted into law following the President's assent. The law has far-reaching implications, especially among digital media activists. Some members of civil society have criticised the Bill for infringing the fundamental rights of citizens to privacy, free speech and access to information. The law has some major flaws, and one of them is that it does not make a clear distinction between disinformation (intentional fake news) and misinformation (unintentional fake news). In addition, the law prescribes a 10-year sentence for hate-speech offences (Newsday, 2021). In the past, some Zimbabweans have been "arraigned before the courts for denigrating the President" on digital media platforms (Newsday, 2021, np).

This study agrees that the use of hate speech seems to be widely seen on some of the digital media platforms in Zimbabwe. The study noted that women and minority ethnic groups are often abused on some hashtag digital platforms and chat groups. For instance, one of the respondents, an academic and lecturer at the Women's University in Africa based in Harare, argued that there was a lot of misogyny in some digital communicative spaces. She cited the way the former Vice-President, Joyce Mujuru, the former First Lady, Grace Mugabe, and the MDC Vice-President, Dr Thokozani Khupe, were vilified on digital media platforms during the intergenerational contestation for power within the ZANU (PF) Party and the MDC-T party. The female politicians were labelled 'prostitutes' (Hove, 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019; Mudiwa, 2020). According to Mudiwa (2020, p1), the notion of labelling some female politicians aspiring for higher offices within patriarchal structures, as prostitutes, "reveals the extent to which the control of women's bodies, sexuality, and labour remains a key focus of the post-independence state". The term prostitute is often deployed to "limit women's participation and ascendance within political institutions" (Gaidzanwa, 1985,

p72). Gaidzanwa (2020, p45) further argues that the colonial regime had “failed to democratise Zimbabwe and create a nation in which people could thrive regardless of their race, class, ethnicity and gender”. The post-independent State also encountered the same pitfall, “resulting in a ‘soft coup’ against Mugabe by his comrades in arms from the liberation struggle” (Ibid.).

Another interesting finding that emerged from the study was that discussions on some digital media platforms often degenerated into ethnicized discourses. This point is supported by Mpofu (2021), who argues that digital media can pose a serious threat to social cohesion and integration. Mpofu’s (Ibid.) research was based on the South African case study, and how most conversations in digital media spaces often degenerated into racial tirades between some whites and blacks. These views were corroborated by a Zimbabwean media scholar and academic based in Namibia. The respondent said that, in recent years, there has been a noticeable resurgence of far-right extremism on some of the digital platforms in Zimbabwe. He added:

We have witnessed a resurgence of far-right extremism. It has manifested itself in terms of ethnic politics. Some of the exchanges are very worrying, especially ethnicized discourses. Such types of discourses amplify differences rather than commonalities. This type of extremism is associated with digital media because some platforms do not have filters and moderators. People are informed by their prejudices (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

The above respondent cited the example of the Gukurahundi Genocide, which occurred in the Midlands and Matebeleland provinces in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s, after independence. The Shona term, ‘Gukurahundi’, refers to “the first rains of a new season that wash away the chaff, a pleasant image of renewal” (Alexander, 2021, p5). Some scholars have suggested that Gukurahundi can be viewed “as a ‘policy’ or ‘strategy’ that entailed ‘annihilating’ those who opposed ZANU” (Ibid.). The genocide still remains a blight on the national psyche, amid calls from some members of civil society for an honest and mature debate about the country’s dark past in order to ensure that there is national healing and closure. This study agrees that any forms of bigotry have no place in any democratic society. People should be free to exercise their rights to free speech without fear, and those who run foul of the law should face the consequences. However, this study suggests that criminalising hate speech is not

the best solution to use in order to tame the digital media jungle. Criminalisation of hate speech is an assault on the fundamental human right to free speech. Digital media platforms need to regulate themselves using moderators and filters.

However, in recent years there has been “a considerable and growing body of evidence pointing to a substantial gap between the great expectations held out for the internet and the realities of people’s experiences” (Livingstone, 2009, pp3-4). In this regard, Mano contends that it is debatable “whether the emerging new spaces for political communication on the internet do indeed offer opportunities and pose threats to democracy” (2010, p60).

Despite these developments, digital media activism in Zimbabwe has made significant gains, but not very huge ones, in the country’s contentious politics. This study argues that there is a need to build strong and inclusive coalitions among digital media activists to erode elite political dissensus and indignation from some of the citizens (Matiashe, 2021). The implications of these developments will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

## 6.4 Implications of Digital Activism

Section 4 discusses the implications of digital media activism in Zimbabwe and in other African countries. The advent of new technologies has far-reaching implications, especially for citizens living under authoritarian rule in countries, like Zimbabwe. The new media create alternative communicative spaces for counter hegemonic narratives.

Digital media technologies assist citizens in exercising their agency to organise and mobilise political participation from below. Mano (2020) argues that the digital media are a game changer in African politics. They offer a new paradigm for engaging in “civic participation and agency in electoral politics, before, during or after elections” (Mano, 2020, p61). Mano further notes:

Twitter is allowing long suppressed Africans a voice and power to challenge authoritarianism. The users are among groups without access to mainstream forms of distribution (2020, p66)

In addition, Dzisah contends that digital media help to promote “democratic participation, inclusion and expression” (2020, p98). In African countries, like Ghana, digital media platforms, like Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram, have created “new possibilities for politicians to engage with citizens” (Dzisah, 2020, p98). Dzisah adds:

The democratization of communication using the interactive power of social media and unmediated feedback allows for greater participation of the citizenry in the democratic process. One does not need to be physically mobilized to the village square, community centre and the town hall to be engaged and for him/her to participate in a democracy (2020, p102)

However, we need to be cautious and avoid the risk of fetishizing digital media activism. It has its limits. De Bruijn, et al; (2015), offer a cautionary tale by arguing that we need to guard against romanticising the contributions of digital media activism to the democratisation processes. To create more effective transformative change, digital media activism should be accompanied by embodied civic participation and political action. There is a symbiotic relationship between online action and offline activism. The two are interconnected and one is meaningless without the other (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011).

However, the use of digital media activism comes with inherent security risks. One of the risks is the spread of fake news. During the 2018 general elections in Zimbabwe, a lot of fake news was posted on some of the digital media platforms, and this resulted in demonstrations which rocked Harare during the post-election period. The demonstrations resulted in loss of life on Harare’s streets. Dzisah adds:

The resort to illegal declarations and fake results posted by politicians, political activists and other partisan elements culminated in the Harare protests with protesters marching on the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The outcome of such irresponsible deployment of social media to whip up sentiments and emotions produced unwelcome results of deaths and maiming on the streets of Harare in Zimbabwe. All these could have been avoided if the protagonists had allowed the constitutionally mandated body

to do its work while the political candidates, the political parties and partisan followers on social media adhered to the rules of engagement (2020, p114)

Despite their potency as a tool for creating alternative communicative spaces for citizens under repressive regimes, digital media are a double-edged sword. This study argues that digital media are both a boon and a curse, or what Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020, p319) term the 'Janus face' of social media. Digital media are a boon in that they help to create an alternative communicative space in which to challenge asymmetrical powers within society (Bosch, et al; 2020). They are also a curse, in that they can be deployed by authoritarian governments as a tool to monitor and maintain surveillance on dissent. Fuchs (2015) posits that it is imperative to interrogate the social power structures within the cultural and political environments in which the digital media operate when discussing their contributions to democracy and social change. The new technologies tools "are not in themselves technologies for resistance and democratic action, they also contribute to limiting critique" (Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020, p319).

Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) raise a valid point in their argument. The new technologies are not in themselves a liberation technology. Rather, they are tools which rely on human agency to create alternative spaces for social and political change.

To sum up, this chapter argues that despite the asymmetrical power structures within society, digital media activism has the potential to assist ordinary citizens to create alternative communicative spaces for counter-hegemonic narratives. Section 5 highlights the major points of the findings.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the key research findings of this study and specifically answers the research questions. The research allowed us to observe that, despite State and

market constraints, digital media activism has scored some significant gains in Zimbabwe in recent years. They have opened democratic spaces for counter-hegemonic voices that were muffled in the dominant hegemonic media. In addition, digital media activism has provided more impetus for social and political change in Zimbabwe by exposing misgovernance and malfeasance in Mnangagwa's administration. Undoubtedly, in this regard, digital media activism has achieved phenomenal successes, especially in exposing corruption and human rights abuses to the outside world. For example, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter hashtag social movement ran a successful campaign against State repression and received endorsements from celebrities and former Heads of State.

However, digital media activism still has a long way to go before it can effect radical transformative change in Zimbabwe. This state of affairs might be attributed to two critical factors. Firstly, the hashtag movements lack a coherent and sustainable leadership strategy. For instance, there is a disconnect between online activism and embodied civic participation. In addition, there is no inclusivity among some of the digital media activist movements, as an example, women and minority ethnic groups are often underrepresented and side-lined.

To sum up, digital media activism has made significant gains over the years in Zimbabwe. As a way forward, the hashtag movement needs to regroup and re-strategize in order to promote transformative change in Zimbabwe. Otherwise, it risks degenerating into another form of 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism'.

## CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

### 7.0 Introduction

This study engaged with the notion of the public sphere and the social constructivist approach to technology, discussing exactly how citizens under repressive governments in African countries, like Zimbabwe, are deploying digital media activism to create sites of struggle for democratisation and social change. Contrary to techno-deterministic claims, citizens use their agency to engage in civic participation and political activism by using the new media tools. The study has discussed how citizens in Zimbabwe have been using digital media activism for democratisation and social change, and the challenges and implications of using these new technologies for political activism within repressive environments. The research also discussed the limitations of the study before assessing future areas of research in digital media activism.

Ten major themes related to the theoretical framework and the research objectives emerged from the data. The themes were germane to the study objectives and were used to answer the following research questions:

- (a) What is the relationship between digital media activism and democratic transition in Zimbabwe?
- (b) To what extent has digital media activism influenced social change in Zimbabwe?
- (c) What are the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and in other similar African contexts?

The themes which emerged from the analysis were underpinned by the research's theoretical framework and the Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere. Habermas' (1989) theoretical framework on democracy conceptualises the media as a public sphere (Garnham, 1986; Dahlgren, 1995). The study is also situated within the social constructivist approach. The conceptual approach is the antithesis of

techno-determinism and it privileges citizens in the way they deploy new technologies to create communicative spaces for promoting participatory democracy in different cultural contexts. The social constructivist approach presupposes that new technologies are, on their own, not liberating; they are only liberating tools given the support of human agency.

This chapter explored and assessed the key findings of the research, before discussing the study's empirical contributions to research, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

## 7.1 Overview of Key Findings

### 7.1.1 Digital Activism and Democratisation

The study found that during the period from 2016 to date, variously described as the new dispensation or Second Republic era, there was an upsurge in digital media activism on several social networking sites (SNS) from both local Zimbabwean citizens and those based outside the country.

Chapter 4 briefly discussed the methodology and the ethical issues encountered during the data collection exercise, before exploring and assessing the relationships between digital media activism and democratic transition in Zimbabwe. Most respondents interviewed in the study agreed that digital media activism had a major role to play in promoting democracy in the current democratic transition in Zimbabwe. They cited recent examples where tech-savvy activists and hashtag movements had deployed digital media activism to greater effect.

### 7.1.2 Digital Activism

Three social movements - #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter – played a critical role in digital media activism during the period under review. The

hashtag movements used digital media as a site of struggle for democratisation. In this regard, the social movements deployed digital media to expose human rights abuses and corruption within the Mnangagwa administration. The granting of a mining concession to a Chinese mining company without the following of due process was cited as an example. The government was later forced to revoke the concession following a public outcry on various digital media platforms. This example clearly illustrated how citizens under authoritarian rule use digital media creatively and convivially to exercise their agency (Nyamnjoh, 2005). The digital media challenge citizens in some African countries, like Zimbabwe, is “to begin to theorise in new ways about both new and old media” (Mano, 2010, p59). With the advent of new technologies, media scholars need to interrogate and reconsider the “notion of victimhood, which often presents Africans as powerless victims of officialdom” under repressive and authoritarian rule (Ibid.). With the help of new media, some citizens are becoming more creative and aware that “there is always room – sometimes through radical or alternative media – for initiative and agency to challenge domination, exploitation and the globalisation of poverty” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p204).

Digital media activism was also implicated during the inter-generational contestation for power within the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and in the main opposition party, MDC-T. The counter-hegemonic factions in both parties used digital media platforms to articulate and amplify their narratives. After losing the political hegemony and the ideological state apparatus to the Lacoste faction within ZANU (PF), the rival G40 faction retreated to digital media platforms on Facebook and Twitter in order to circulate its counter narratives. On the other hand, the different MDC-T formations also used digital media to greater effect in the protracted struggle for the soul of the party. According to Castells, et al; (2007, p209), digital media offer citizens the latitude to create “many-to-many and one-to-one horizontal communication channels that bypass political or business control of communication”, thereby assisting in circumventing the repressive political systems in most authoritarian countries. Mare (2020a) also underscores this point, arguing that “pro-democracy forces have used alternative media spaces like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter to circumvent the gatekeeping and filtering practices of the state media [ . . . ]” (p1)

The study also explored and discussed how citizens deployed digital media activism after the November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 'soft' coup which deposed Zimbabwe's strongman, Robert Mugabe. After the 'soft' coup, the military authorities imposed an information blackout on the State-owned media. As a result, social networking sites, like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, provided alternative communicative spaces for "unfettered debate, speculation, falsehoods and truths all combined" (Chuma and Ndou, 2019, p4). In addition, microblogging sites like Twitter "fed into legacy media such as radio, newspapers and television" (Ibid.).

These findings help to reinforce theoretical perspectives relating to how some citizens exercise their agency under authoritarian rule by using digital media as a tool to create arenas for subverting hegemonic narratives. A respondent working for an international development agency in Eastern Africa underscores this point, arguing that:

Digital media is important in our national politics. The political landscape has changed in recent years. The state-owned media's monopoly has been eroded. In addition, the demographics of our population has shifted over the years. Youths now constitute the majority and are politically active in digital media spaces. These spaces are important for democracy and have rekindled our politics (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021)

This study finds the informed analysis on the radical shift of Zimbabwe's demographics from a Zimbabwean professional based in Eastern Africa very instructive (Ibid.). He said the demographics showed that youths were mostly politically active on social networking sites, and this was a good indicator for democracy, adding that social media have influenced sea change and opened up spaces for citizen engagement (Ibid.).

A noticeable observation from the research findings was the increasing population of youths in the sub-Saharan African region, in general, and in Zimbabwe, in particular. A United Nations report (2019) suggests that the region has one of the youngest

populations in the world, on average. The youth population in the sub-Saharan African region currently stands at 62% (United Nations Report, 2019).

According to the late Ghanaian economist, George Ayittey (2010), the future of the African continent lies with the youth, whom he calls the 'Cheetah Generation'. He argues that the youth are visionaries and open to new ideas, unlike their antithesis – the 'Hippo Generation' – the old generation of post-colonial African leaders “which is intellectually astigmatised and stuck in their colonialist pedagogical patch” (Ayittey, 2005, pxx). Ayittey's (2010) analysis is very appropriate, especially within the current Zimbabwean political context. The old generation of erstwhile liberators is now old, and it is bereft of innovative ideas to move the country forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead of seeking lasting solutions for the myriad of challenges facing the country, Zimbabwe's ruling elites blame the colonial legacy for all the country's woes (Mano, 2010).

The current mismanagement of the economy by the ruling elites has adversely affected the youth more than it has any other demographic groups. According to the United Nations Common Analysis Zimbabwe Report (2021), the country “has a relatively young population of 62.9% (31.7% females and 31.2% males) of an estimated total population of 14.8 million, being under the age of 24 years” (p55). However, it should be noted that, according to the Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013, “anyone between the ages of 16 and 35 years is considered a youth”.

In addition, these above statistics should be used with extreme caution, because they do not paint the overall picture of the Zimbabwean youth. The statistics belie “the magnitude of the current challenges faced by Zimbabwe's youth who constitute the bulk of the population” (United Nations Common Analysis Zimbabwe, 2021, p55). The youth “face multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities including high unemployment rates, limited access to health care, limited civic engagement opportunities, high HIV prevalent rates, violence, drug use, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and

parenthood” (Ibid.). Kanyenze, et al; (2017) argue that Zimbabwe’s economic crisis is mostly due to “high levels of political instability and corruption” (p1).

However, despite these economic challenges, Zimbabwean youth, especially those living in urban and peri-urban areas are active on various digital media platforms “to access information and network” (British Council, 2020, p9). The youth use the digital media platforms as communicative spaces in which to engage in discursive political activism (Kataneksza, 2018).

Another Zimbabwean respondent, based in Ireland, supported the previous anonymous respondent’s argument. The respondent worked for a private communications company in Harare as a radio station manager before relocating to Ireland. She argues that there are several factors that explained why some Zimbabwean citizens were migrating to the digital media spaces. The respondent further argues that:

Zimbabweans are fatigued by the hunger for authentic news in real time. The digital spaces also offer counter-narratives which are not readily available in the mainstream media (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF35, 06/11/2020)

A public relations manager for a State-owned enterprise (SOE) in Harare, offered a more nuanced response. She said the digital media had transformed the communicative ecosystem in the country. She added that:

Digital media give citizens a voice. As a result of digital media, people have gained a lot of confidence in articulating what they want. However, the current media environment in Zimbabwe is polarised and skewed. That scenario leaves the rural majority without a voice. For most people in the rural areas, digital media is a luxury. Under the current economic challenges, the people are more concerned with putting food on their tables (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF36, 12/10/2020)

This study echoes this in its main findings: that digital media activism is skewed in favour of citizens who mostly live in urban and peri-urban areas. Most of the population in the rural areas are still marginalised and this “permeates and influences the levels

of participation on social media platforms” (Bosch, et al; 2020, p361). In this scenario, a tiny minority of the citizens have access to new media and are able to deploy the new technologies “at the expense of the disconnected and poor citizens” (Ibid.).

However, to a large extent, the connections between different forms of communication enable citizens to participate in debates that are relevant to public affairs.

### 7.1.3 Democratisation

Against this backdrop, how effective is digital media activism as a tool for democratisation in Zimbabwe? The current political typology in Zimbabwe is very complex. Over the past few decades, the Zimbabwean State has morphed into what Mandaza (2021) calls a ‘securocratic State’. A securocratic State can be defined as “antithesis of democratic governance” (Mandaza, 2021, p1). Mandaza further argues that:

It underscores the reality of the military-security state apparatus: the antithesis of democratic governance; the abrogation of the principle of the separation of powers; and therefore, the blatant reliance on the military-security apparatus for the maintenance of law and order (2021, p1)

This is connected with what Levitsky and Way (2002) regard as a hybrid regime. For Levitsky and Way (2002), Zimbabwe may be a hybrid regime, as it has some elements of both authoritarianism and competitive electoral democracy. Hybrid regimes often maintain their stranglehold on power by manipulating “formal democratic institutions” (Levitsky and Way, 2002, p2). However, against this stark reality, one thing remains certain: digital media have made a difference to people’s lives. With the help of digital media citizens are now able to exercise their agency by speaking truth to power. Most respondents have concurred with this suggestion, and they have said that, during the past few years, digital media activism had exposed corruption and human rights abuses in the Mnangagwa administration and put the political crisis in Zimbabwe under international spotlight.

The political crisis in Zimbabwe has arguably been put under the international spotlight by hashtag movements like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. According to a Zimbabwean media scholar and academic based in Namibia, the digital media publicity brought more international visibility to the Zimbabwe crisis. #ZimbabweanLivesMatter posted images of victims of State-sponsored violence on some of its digital media platforms, and this prompted wide-ranging reactions. Some of the viral images resulted in the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, sending envoys to Zimbabwe to seek a lasting solution to the political crisis.

The important role played by the digital media in the crisis is noted by most of the respondents. For example, a prominent Zimbabwean academic and political commentator based in South Africa, agreed that the digital media had achieved enormous success as a mobilising tool in the country, adding:

There are no structures to go with it, as we have witnessed from veteran journalist and award-winning film-maker Hopewell Chin'ono's social media campaigns recently. The State is losing the narrative very fast. It now relies less on consent and more on coercion. Mnangagwa's administration is facing criticism not only from internal opposition in the country, but also from its own traditional African Union allies. I believe hashtag Zimbabwean Lives Matter has partly contributed to this exposure of Zimbabwe as a corrupt and repressive State (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM5, 01/09/2020)

Further to this, the respondent also raised some other valid points, including how social media influencers like Hopewell Chin'ono have taken to digital media activism with greater impact. The posts on social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook and Twitter, have attracted thousands of followers, and the running themes are corruption and human rights abuses by the ruling political elites in Mnangagwa's government. However, it is worth noting that some of Chin'ono's posts are partisan. The posts expose corruption mostly within the ranks of the ruling ZANU (PF) Party, but turn a blind eye to massive corruption and poor service delivery within urban councils, most of which are controlled by the MDC Alliance party.

Nevertheless, the study found there was no consensus among the respondents on the role of digital media activism in the promotion of democratisation in Zimbabwe. Opinion

was divided on the issue, with some respondents arguing that democratic space had shrunk under Mnangagwa's new dispensation. The respondents argued that under the new dispensation most citizens inside the country had retreated from digital media spaces. A Zimbabwean academic at the Women's University in Africa (WUA) in Harare, said that, in the past few months, most local citizens had withdrawn from social networking sites (SNS). She argued that:

Digital media created spaces not only for journalists, but also for ordinary citizens to air their views. After the demise of the Mugabe regime, democratic space opened up and some people felt they were free to say what they wanted. But after the arrest of some journalists following the foiled July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, demonstrations, most people realised that you could be prosecuted for posting political stuff in digital media spaces. As a result, we have been seeing less use of digital media among those living within Zimbabwe. Most people are withdrawing (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 09/10/2020)

A veteran Zimbabwean journalist and prominent businessman who owns an agro-processing company in Harare, offered a more nuanced perspective on the potential of digital media activism as a site of struggle for promoting democratisation in Zimbabwe. The respondent said that while digital media had made a lot of impact in Zimbabwe, the stakes were too high for citizens to use the social networking sites (SNS). He argued that:

Digital media have made lots of impact in Zimbabwe. People now know what is happening. People are now more enlightened. But, in terms of democratisation, digital media activism is not effective in Zimbabwe. The government is scared of a free media. People are stifled. There are more arrests now. The more you use digital media activism, the more you become vulnerable (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020)

The above respondent's views resonate with Sen's (2010) theoretical perspective on the potency of digital media in countries under authoritarian rule. According to Sen (2010) digital media empowers citizens by creating communicative spaces in which to challenge State repression. He further argued:

The mobile phone can be an instrument of liberation even against heavy odds, and this is a subject on which the authorities are, understandably, scared. Communication

is snapped in order to keep the population in a state of voice-less and communication-less submission (Sen, 2010, p2)

The State is aware of these drastic changes in the political dynamics and, in recent years, it has responded to digital media activism by using the repressive State apparatus to crush dissent and has appropriated and deployed trolls and bots in those communicative spaces. This point was highlighted by a senior member of the ruling ZANU (PF) Party who declined to be identified for fear of reprisals. The official, who is based in Harare, Zimbabwe, said the State was aware of the potency of new technologies. During the military-assisted transition in November 2017, the military deployed digital media to mobilise citizens against Mugabe's despotic rule. He added:

The appropriation of digital media during the ousting of the former President, Robert Mugabe, from power in November 2017, was well timed and deliberate. It was part of the overall military coup strategy. Some activists were used as proxies to help in mass mobilisation and to give the coup a 'civilian face'. In recent times, we have seen the political elites deploying bots and trolls to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, to manufacture legitimacy for the ruling party (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM44, 12/09/2020)

The above statement is supported by Zamchiya (2020), who argues that some apparatchiks within the ruling ZANU (PF) Party were aware of the waning political fortunes of the Zimbabwean strongman before the demise of his rule. The ruling party elites mobilised cross-party support and, in return for the support, promised the opposition party, MDC-T, "an internationally supervised free and fair election or a transitional government involving both MDC-T and ZANU (PF)" (Zamchiya, 2020, p4). This point reinforces Nyamnjoh's (2005) argument in relation to how new technologies can be deployed creatively and convivially within African contexts to undergird the African core values of "solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence" (p16). Nyamnjoh's (2005) argument helps to explain the potency of digital media activism in African countries in democratic transition like Zimbabwe where the ruling party ZANU (PF) often deploys new technologies to legitimate its hegemony, while the main opposition, MDC Alliance, uses it as a site for manufacturing resistance (Mare, 2020a).

Another interesting observation from the research findings was that some respondents argued that digital media platforms are a contested arena. The respondents further argued that the government controlled the digital spaces using both overt and covert strategies. For instance, by using internet shutdowns and manipulating the regulatory framework for Internet Service Providers to suit its political agendas. However, other participants disagreed. An executive director of an advocacy organisation in Zimbabwe, said that subalterns were tech savvy and they know how to circumvent State control of the digital media spaces. He added:

They [subalterns] have found digital spaces which are not under the control of government. In addition, a lot of digital media activism is fuelled by Zimbabweans in the diaspora (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

In its findings, this study has observed a tension between local Zimbabwean citizens and those based in the diaspora. Last Moyo (2009) suggests that the noticeable upsurge in digital media activism in recent years is partly a result of “Zimbabweans living abroad, especially in Europe and the United States” (p59). Most of the Zimbabwean communities in the diaspora are highly skilled professionals in critical areas, such as medicine, nursing and teaching, and they “are likely to rely on the internet as an information resource tool” (L. Moyo, 2009, p59). Last Moyo further argues that “these various diaspora communities have developed a myriad of cyber public spaces and spheres where citizens can discuss politics [ . . . ]” (Ibid.). This explains why most respondents in the diaspora were willing to participate in the study, while those living in Zimbabwe exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards the research project. It is likely that the diasporans were willing to participate in the study due to the newly found freedoms they enjoy in their host countries, while local citizens in Zimbabwe were most likely constrained by the repressive political environment in the country and the prohibitive costs of internet connectivity. However, the study also observed that some citizens in Zimbabwe were tech savvy as suggested by the previous respondent (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020) and they used the Virtual Private Network (VPN) to circumvent internet shutdowns by the government authorities.

This study noted, in its findings, that there was a window of opportunity for countries in democratic transition, like Zimbabwe, to deploy digital media activism as a tool with which to drive the democratisation agenda in the country. The country is still in the nascent stages of democratisation, and digital media could help to kick start the process. Gadzikwa (2015) reinforces this point by suggesting that the digital media create communicative ecologies “to broaden the public sphere and deepen democracy” (p67). Nzongola-Ntalaja (1998) argues that “the internal environment is the primary arena and determinant of the democratisation process” (p1). That is why it is critical for Zimbabwe to reform its postcolonial State, which bears the hallmarks of its colonial predecessor. In this regard, this study suggests that there is a need for the separation of powers among the key arms of the State, like the judiciary, the legislature and the executive. Under these conditions, digital media activism could play a critical role as a catalyst in the promotion of the democratisation process. A public relations manager for a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in Harare, has argued that digital media activism can promote democratisation by creating arenas for counter hegemonic narratives and helping the electorate to engage in civic participation and political activities. She singled out civil society organisations (CSOs) like the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), that have deployed digital media activism to greater effect by using social networking sites for voter education and awareness. The CSOs also conduct outreach programmes that are aimed at educating the electorate about their rights and obligations as citizens during general elections.

However, the study observed some worrying insights in the polarised nature of Zimbabwean society, which might pose a serious threat to national integration and cohesion and derail the country’s democratisation project, if left unchecked. Most respondents agreed that the political environment in the country was highly charged. However, there was no consensus on the source of the polarisation. Some respondents believed the polarisation was deeply entrenched in Zimbabwe due to politics, while others blamed the patriarchal structures in Zimbabwean society.

Added to polarisation was the problem of hate speech in some of the emerging digital media spaces. This point was made by a Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia.

He said that in the past few years, there had been a resurgence of far-right extremism on some social media platforms. He added:

Some of the exchanges are very worrying, especially ethnicized discourses. Such types of discourses amplify differences, rather than commonalities. This type of extremism is associated with digital media because some platforms do not have filters and moderators. People are informed by their prejudices (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

As stated above, the respondent also observed how some of the ethnicized discourses were centred around the “Gukurahundi Genocide” that occurred in the Midlands and Matebeleland Provinces in the early 1980s. The Shona word ‘gukurahundi’ is a metaphor for “the first rains of a new season that wash away the chaff, a pleasant image of renewal” (Alexander, 2021, p5). Alexander suggests that the deployment of the metaphor ‘gukurahundi’ by the Zimbabwean political elites in the 1980s was deliberate and part of a broader political agenda aimed at “‘annihilating’ those who opposed ZANU” (Ibid.). The ‘Gukurahundi’ narrative looms large in the current efforts to democratise the country, as some of the key players in the *ancien regime*, who were implicated in the genocide, are now part of Mnangagwa’s new dispensation. Hence, this study argues that it is vital for Zimbabweans to face their demons from the past and to engage in a robust and honest debate in order to seek closure and build an open and sustainable democracy.

Under the current political circumstances in Zimbabwe, President Mnangagwa seems to be in no hurry to change the old system that he inherited from his erstwhile mentor, Robert Mugabe, after the demise of his rule in a ‘soft coup’ in November 2017. Vestiges of the *ancien regime*, including misogyny still remain deeply entrenched in the patriarchal system. A Zimbabwean academic at the Women’s University in Africa (WUA) in Harare, said it is imperative to democratise the political public sphere to ensure effective engagement with all stakeholders irrespective of their gender, race, ethnicity, or class. She added that:

We need to create a better political environment conducive for debate. For instance, we have the problem of misogyny in these digital spaces. It is meant to silence women in the political public sphere. We saw this during the succession factional rivalry in both

the MDC-T and ZANU (PF). In the case of the MDC-T, people did not look at the processes. Instead, their focus was on personalities. Some women were given unsavoury labels like 'slut'. Thus, women became a problem, and their voices were suppressed (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 09/10/2020)

Mudiwa (2020) said the use of the term 'prostitute' to describe ambitious female politicians is a relic of the colonial era. For Balhatchet (1980), the term 'prostitute' "signified crisis and decay, symbols of urbanisation and its attendant social ills" (cited in Mudiwa, 2020, p3) and was it often used "to limit women's participation and ascendance within political institutions" (Gaidzanwa, 1985, p72).

From the discussion above, it is apparent that, despite the State and market constraints, digital media provide communicative spaces for citizens under authoritarian rule, enabling them to create potential sites of struggle for democratisation. In addition, the new technologies also provide opportunities for citizens to create platforms for counter hegemonic narratives and social change.

#### 7.1.4 Digital Activism and Social Change

Chapter 5 explored and assessed how ordinary citizens were using the affordances of new technologies as sites of struggle for social change. It was evident from the findings that digital media activism was playing a critical watchdog role in promoting social change in Zimbabwe.

In a liberal democracy, digital media have the potential to create communicative spaces for citizens to "express themselves while interacting with others" (Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020, p319). The media are expected to play a watchdog role and "guard against possible abuses of power by governments" (Willems, 2011a, p49). This normative role, whose historical origins are Eurocentric, is also used as a guideline for most media in African countries. Within the African context, the media are expected "to investigate and report the misconduct, corruption, illicit spoils, embezzlement, bribery, inefficiency and lack of accountability which have characterised post-independence African governments" (Ogbondah, 1997, p291). Ogbondah (1997)'s

brief is not confined only to the print media; it embraces all the various types of media, including the digital media.

This study found the Habermasian (1989) concept of the public sphere instructive as a theoretical framework for exploring and discussing the role of digital media activism in African countries in democratic transition. According to Habermas (1989), the media is an arena in which citizens can engage in rational debate in order to reach a consensus on issues of mutual interest. However, Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere has some inherent flaws. It was exclusive to white upper and middle classes men, and excluded lower class men and women (Fraser, 1992). As a result, this study decided to use Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of radical democracy alongside the Habermasian (1989) notion of the public sphere. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of radical democracy is the antithesis of Habermas's (1989) public sphere.

Habermas (1989) viewed the public sphere as an arena for consensus-building, while for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) radical democracy is not underpinned by consensus; instead, it is about "dissensus and conflict" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pxv). Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) argue that Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of radical democracy can be used to critically examine the potential of digital media as a tool for creating social change. To this end, Dumisani Moyo (2007) agrees that digital media can be used as an alternative public sphere to "Zimbabwe's restricted democratic space" (p81).

In this study, opinion was divided on the effectiveness of digital media as alternative communicative spaces in which to influence social change. However, most respondents agreed that digital media activism had the potential to influence social change. During the military-assisted transition in November 2017, citizens were kept in the dark about the power transfer negotiations that were conducted in secrecy between Zimbabwe's former strongman, Robert Mugabe, and his erstwhile military allies. As a result of this information blackout in the mainstream media, most

Zimbabwean citizens in and outside the country migrated to digital media spaces to keep abreast of the unfolding political drama.

A prominent Zimbabwean media scholar and academic based in Namibia, said that after the putsch, the two rival ZANU (PF) factions, Lacoste and G40, swapped places. Mnangagwa's Lacoste faction became the dominant group and took control of State-owned media and some digital platforms to push their hegemonic narrative. On the other hand, the other ZANU (PF) faction, G40, retreated to some social networking sites to push its counter-narrative. The respondent added:

After the military coup on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, we saw the continuation of the use of digital media. Platforms like Twitter were used to recruit cyber troops. G40 [faction within ZANU (PF)] retreated to Twitter. It used Twitter to speak to power. On the other hand, Lacoste [ruling ZANU (PF) faction] used both State-owned media and Twitter. Lacoste have people resident on Twitter to push their narrative (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM1, 14/10/2020)

A veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster based in the United Kingdom (UK), agreed that digital media activism had the potential to influence social change. She added:

Digital media give a rare and uncensored opportunity. Their momentum can make a difference. However, it is not like magic; it is a process. I think we all have to be patient when using digital media. There is no magical solution (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020)

A former editor of a State-owned newspaper in Harare, offered a more nuanced perspective on the role of digital media as a site of struggle for social change. He conceded that digital media activism had been successful in a few instances. The respondent added:

We saw this during the shootings of civilians on the streets of Harare on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. It is effective as long as it is true. We also saw the government revoking the granting of the mining concession in the Hwange Conservancy to the Chinese, without following the due process. Digital media activism also played a positive role in exposing the Covid-19 [medical supplies] procurement scandal. The scandal resulted in the arrest and resignation of the Minister of Health and Child Care, Obediah Moyo (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020)

Mnangagwa's new dispensation administration has been rocked by allegations of corruption within its higher ranks. Moyo's case which was mentioned during the interview with the respondent above, later collapsed in court due to lack of supporting evidence. Moyo was the second Cabinet Minister to be fired by President Mnangagwa since assuming power with the tacit support of the military. Earlier, the former Minister of Tourism, Prisca Mupfumira, was fired and arrested for criminal abuse of office (Chingono, 2020). Mupfumira's case is still pending before the courts and she is facing charges of "misappropriating US\$95 million from the national pension fund" (Ibid, np).

The findings also showed some insights into how digital media activism had played a pivotal role in exposing lawlessness among artisanal miners [MaShurugwi] in the Midlands Province. The marauding artisanal miners had degenerated into a law unto themselves, and they were wreaking havoc in the Province. A veteran Zimbabwean senior foreign correspondent based in South Africa, agreed that digital media activism achieved phenomenal success in influencing social change in certain instances. The respondent has worked for several years in different African countries as a foreign correspondent before relocating to Johannesburg in South Africa where she now occupies a very senior position. She said:

MaShurugwi [marauding machete wielding gangs of artisanal miners] were running rampage on gold mines. There was a lot of information on social media platforms. The MaShurugwi issue was discussed on Twitter and the authorities were forced to act and the issue fizzled out (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020)

The other interesting finding that emerged from the study was on how citizens deployed digital media activism to create and curate video footage and photos during the post-election demonstration on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. This example clearly illustrated how social media platforms can be deployed as communicative sites to counter state propaganda under authoritarian rule (D. Moyo, 2007). Dumisani Moyo argues that the deployment of new technologies by citizens "is suggestive both of agency and subaltern transformative power" (2010, p77). The images captured in graphic detail the shootings of civilians by the military and were later submitted as admissible evidence during the public hearings of the Motlanthe Commission. The proceedings

of the Motlanthe Commission were also streamed live on various social networking sites (SNS) and this “enabled people to be actively involved through social media discussion” (Mungwari, 2019, pp20 402-20 403).

In its report, the Motlanthe Commission (2018) said the military and the police had used disproportionate and indiscriminate force in quelling the post-election protest. The state-sponsored violence resulted in the deaths of six civilians and several others received serious injuries (Motlanthe Commission Report, 2018).

However, the study also noted in its findings that not all the stuff posted in digital media spaces bore a true reflection of the realities on the ground. Some of the images are decontextualised and manipulated using photoshopping techniques. In this regard, one of the respondents argued that it was imperative for activists to exercise extreme caution when posting stuff in digital media spaces. The activists should rely on solid facts; not conjecture. The respondent, who is a former editor of a state-owned newspaper, added:

Political digital activism relies mostly on emotions, not facts. There are times when artifacts are just uploaded into those digital media spaces without providing the context. A lot of stuff is not accurate. A photo of a woman carrying a bucket of water went viral on social media and it later turned out that the woman was not Zimbabwean; she was from Sudan. Why not get real images from Zimbabwe? (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020)

However, despite these infractions of fake news, the study observed that digital media can play a great role in assisting citizens under authoritarian rule to exercise their agency in the struggle for social change. Atton argues that the alternative media create spaces for counter-hegemonic narratives, adding:

Alternative media privileges a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices” (Atton, 2003, p267)

The study noted that social media influencers like the UK-based Zimbabwean lawyer and academic, the late Dr Alex Magaisa, deployed different digital media formats to

greater effect in advocating for social change. The University of Kent Law School academic was active on social networking sites (SNS) like Twitter and Facebook. In addition, he ran a popular weekly blog known as the Big Saturday Read (BSR).

Blogs offer an arena for the discursive contestation of hegemonic narratives (Farell and Drezner, 2008). Since its inception, the BSR weekly blog has exposed a lot of corruption and human rights abuses within the Mnangagwa government. Among Dr Magaisa's scoops was an expose of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) Farm Mechanisation Scheme scandal. The scandal implicated most of the high-ranking members of the ruling political elite and some prominent members of the main opposition party, MDC-T. Magaisa (2020) said:

[ . . . ] there was a strong interest in the RBZ Farm Mechanisation scandal because it was one of the several other programmes in which beneficiaries have been kept secret. If this is what happened in the RBZ Farm Mechanisation scandal, what happened in other government programmes where large amounts of public funds are used? (Magaisa, 2020, np)

A Zimbabwean media scholar and academic based in Namibia, said digital media communicative spaces give voices to people who are voiceless. He added:

Over the past few years, the signs have been very encouraging, especially with the publication of the list of the beneficiaries of the Command Agriculture Mechanisation Scheme by [the UK-based Zimbabwean academic and lawyer] Dr Alex Magaisa in his weekly blog, the Big Saturday Read (BSR) (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020)

In recent years we have seen several social media influencers gaining a lot of traction on various digital media platforms. Like the UK-based Zimbabwean academic and lawyer, Dr Magaisa, the veteran Zimbabwean investigative journalist and award-winning film-maker Hopewell Chin'ono, uses a repertoire of digital media formats to influence social change in Zimbabwe. Chin'ono's posts are mostly available on social networking sites (SNS) like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The running themes of his posts are corruption and human rights abuses within the Mnangagwa administration. Some of Chin'ono's posts are aimed at mobilising citizens to register

on the common voters' roll ahead of the general election that is scheduled for 2023 in order to achieve political and social change in Zimbabwe.



**FIGURE 12:** The advent of Mnangagwa's new dispensation ushered in a cathartic moment for Zimbabweans and raised hopes for national healing and economic recovery. However, a few years on, it looks as if these elusive hopes have been dashed. Photo Credit: **Al Jazeera News**

In its findings, the study also noted that some respondents had cited the repressive political environment in Zimbabwe as the major stumbling block for social change. A Zimbabwean working for an international development agency in Eastern Africa, said the current political environment in Zimbabwe was inimical to any form of digital media activism. He added:

The ruling elites feel threatened in Zimbabwe. For instance, how is it possible that an African city like Nairobi has more radio stations than the whole of Zimbabwe? Our leaders do not want the ordinary people to organise. They feel very threatened (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM41, 26/01/2021)

Most respondents argued that the political environment in Zimbabwe had not improved since the ‘soft’ coup in November 2017. A veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa, said Mnangagwa’s new dispensation was more repressive than Mugabe’s *ancien regime*. He further argued:

We now have a regime less tolerant of dissent than Mugabe. The situation has deteriorated, and we see the determination of the State to monitor citizens through surveillance. However, it’s a battle the government cannot win. It can hack laptops. But digital technology is too entrenched to be nipped in the bud. Digital media empower the small man. People have the tools themselves (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021)

The respondent above has raised some interesting points on the rising tide of digital media activism in Zimbabwe and the State’s response to it. The Zimbabwean State has a history of weaponizing the law to fight its own political battles against any forms of dissent. For instance, the government recently gazetted the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill which is likely to constrict democratic space for activism by civil society organisations (CSOs) (Zamchiya, 2021). Zamchiya argues that:

If the Bill is enacted as it is, the increasingly authoritarian state is likely to use it to ban CSOs from associating with any political party or even to support party policies that are in synch with their goals, vision and objectives. These can be state efforts to prevent civic education about politics and elections” (Ibid, p3)

Other respondents have argued that the hostile political environment was worsened by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The government used the outbreak of the global pandemic as a cloak under which to repress dissent in the country, and introduced strict lockdown measures. The restrictive measures included the introduction of a curfew and business hours in the country and constricted democratic space. As a result, some citizens resorted to social networking sites (SNS) to engage in “alternative discourses that challenge ZANU (PF)’s authoritarianism” (D. Moyo, 2007, p82).

A former Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio presenter, who now runs an evangelical ministry in Harare, said the outbreak of the global pandemic had an adversely affected digital media activism in the country. He added:

No-one saw it coming. Covid-19 protocols restrict people's movements. The government introduced a curfew and business hours (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM27, 16/09/2020)

However, the outbreak of the global pandemic also helped to unmask the dark side of digital media activism. There was a "surge of misleading and false information" on some social networking sites (SNS) and the government responded by criminalising the publication of falsehoods about Covid-19 (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021, p15). The government enacted Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, which "categorises the publication and circulation of fake news concerning the national lockdowns as a Level 4 offence which attracts a jail sentence of up to 20 years" (Ibid.). Some activists viewed the criminalisation of fake news by the State as another ploy aimed at stifling political dissension and shrinking democratic space (Ibid.).

This study observed that the political environment in Zimbabwe is inimical to effective digital media activism, a fact often understated by some of the scholars in their research. However, the study observed that, despite the hostile political environment, digital media activism was getting more innovative to circumvent state repression. A Zimbabwean journalist and media consultant based in Harare, summed up the complexities of digital media in the country:

Digital media activism is very difficult to define within the Zimbabwean context. The genres come in different forms. A lot of it is coming out from artists, comedians and satirists as popular culture. The activists make commentaries on social and political issues. Bustop TV and Magamba TV are some of the activists' digital platforms (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF20, 02/11/2020)

The above echoes Willems (2011b), when she argues that the use of satirical genres demonstrates "the way in which Zimbabweans negotiate the social and economic impact on an everyday basis" in a more nuanced way (p126). This study explored and critically assessed how digital media activists deploy "cultural narratives that reflect – as much as, construct – social change" (Willems, 2011b, p130). Mano (2007) supports

Willems's (2011b) point by arguing that satirical genres can be used as counter dominant narratives to subvert dominant discourses in countries under authoritarian rule.

Chapter 6 formed the Discussion of the Findings Chapter. The chapter discussed the findings of the research as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. A major outcome of the study was that, despite State and market constraints, digital media activism had a critical role to play in promoting democratisation and social change in Zimbabwe. The study observed that the digital media had made significant strides in achieving that objective. However, the gains were not huge enough or transformative, due to State repression and the lack of strategic leadership among the hashtag movements. Against this backdrop, this study explored and discussed, in the next section the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe.

#### 7.1.5 Implications of Digital Activism on Democratic Transition

Despite some modest gains being made during the introduction of multipartyism in African in the early 1990s, the future of democracy has not looked very rosy recently. This is due to the rollback of democratic practices in some African countries, like Zimbabwe, where the independence of key institutions like the judiciary, legislature and media have come under constant assault from the State, inhibiting them from exercising oversight over the executive without due influence (Rakner, 2019). Against this background, what does the future hold for digital media activism in African countries in democratic transition, like Zimbabwe, and similar contexts?

A Zimbabwean media scholar and PhD Candidate studying in Australia, said we need to be cautious and avoid fetishizing digital media. She said new media has its limitations, adding:

We need to be honest about its limitations. For instance, the hashtag Zimbabwean Lives Matter went viral on some social media platforms, but we could not sustain the hashtag. It is a leaderless movement and lost momentum (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF12, 09/11/2020)

A veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster based in the United Kingdom (UK), shared dystopian views on the potential of digital media activism in influencing political and social change in the country. She added:

There are similarities between the Mugabe era and the new dispensation. ED [President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa] is just the same as Bob [former President Robert Mugabe]. Nothing has changed. There is the same veneer (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020)

However, other respondents in the study felt digital media had a great potential to influence social change in Zimbabwe. An executive director of an advocacy organisation in Zimbabwe, argued that new technologies help to create sites of struggle for contestation of power. He said digital media helped to keep the political elites under spotlight, adding that:

These platforms allow those in power to connect with the citizens. The time is up. African governments will not shy away from constant scrutiny. Violations of citizens' human rights will no longer be a secret (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020)

The advent of new media has “enhanced and reshaped alternative media” (Mano and Mukhongo, 2010, p27) and this has created great opportunities for horizontal change (Nyamnjoh, 2016). A veteran Zimbabwean journalist and senior foreign correspondent based in South Africa, weighed in on the discussion and said that digital media was the future and opened a new world of possibilities. She said:

There is no going back. I can't say the future is bright. I fear about the new laws being crafted now. However, digital media space is evolving every day. It is a space that cannot be shut completely. It is the only opportunity for citizens to hold their rulers accountable. The authorities have no choice but to accept this state of affairs. They will have to live with it. They might try to close the spaces. In 2016, the Cabinet Minister, Patrick Chinamasa, tried to promulgate the Cyber and Security Bill. Now I understand there are plans to resuscitate the Bill. It's difficult to see any change. The attitude is still the same I think (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020)

A former editor of one of Zimbabwe's national dailies said he was optimistic about the future of digital media in the country. He said the future of new technologies was rosy, adding that:

Digital media are taking off. They are beginning to outstrip mainstream media. Gradually, the big giants have recognised the importance of digital media. Look at Hopewell Chin'ono, Tichaona Zindoga and Mduduzi Mathuthu. They are pushing the envelope. The space is vibrant. The overheads are very low. Digital media are revolutionising the media. This is good for democracy. To foster democracy in Zimbabwe, the authorities should ensure that people have access to the internet. Digital media sit at the heart of any democratic process (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXM45, 14/09/2020)

A Zimbabwean economist in international development, based in Rome, Italy, said that the digital media offered hope for developing countries in democratic transition. She said we cannot deny the influence of digital media in promoting democratic processes and social change. However, she cautioned that:

Digital media are a big tool. It's still a new phenomenon. But we also need to ask critical questions. Who manipulates digital media? We are not sure. However, digital media are not going away, and they will have a huge influence on our lives (Online Interview with Anonymous Respondent re: XXF37, 23/09/2020)

Moyo (2010) argues that digital media has created “a new era of political communication and such a development has far-reaching implications for Zimbabwe’s democracy” (p71). The communicative ecologies created by new technologies are “fast eroding the monopoly of incumbent politicians over the communications landscape, undercutting the liberation discourse that has had a stranglehold on election processes, and signalling the possibility of more open political spaces where divergent views can co-exist (Ibid.).

The study shows not only some digital media activism dividends but also the numerous emerging challenges.

## 7.2 Summary of Findings

Five themes were identified in order to discuss the findings of the study. These were: digital media activism; democratisation; digital media activism and democratisation; digital media activism and social change; and the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition. The themes were used as matrices to critically evaluate the

role of digital media activism as a site of contestation for democratisation and social change in Zimbabwe. The findings of this study covered the period from 2016 to the current new Mnangagwa era, variously known as the new dispensation or Second Republic era. The choice was deliberate. During that period there was a noticeable upsurge of digital media activism by Zimbabweans, both in and outside the country, on different social networking platforms. The following critical observations emerged from the study:

1. The study was situated within the constructivist approach. It is the antithesis of techno-determinism. The approach transcends utopian and dystopian perspectives on the use of new technologies in different cultural contexts. Instead of focusing on what technology does for society, it examines how citizens in different cultural contexts exercise their agency in using technology creatively to suit their circumstances. In its findings, the study has critically examined how Zimbabweans, both in and outside the country, have deployed digital media to call for democracy and social change.
2. The respondents were drawn from a broad cross section of local Zimbabweans and those based in the diaspora. The tapestry of respondents came from different professional backgrounds, like academia, journalism, gender activism, media consultancy, judiciary services and media management. The respondents were also diverse in terms of demographics, gender, political persuasions, ethnicity and race. This was a deliberate strategy to ensure inclusivity,
3. There was tension between local Zimbabweans and those scattered in the diaspora, notably Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States and Canada. The study noted that an overwhelming of respondents on the digital media platforms were based in the diaspora. This might be due to the newly found freedoms that these citizens enjoy in their host countries and the comparatively lower costs of accessing internet connectivity. On the other hand, most respondents based in Zimbabwe exhibited an ambivalence towards digital media activism and this may be due to the hostile political environment in the country and prohibitive costs of accessing internet connectivity.

4. The study observed that the youths were at the heart of the clamour for democratic and social change in Zimbabwe, and in similar political contexts in Africa. The continent has one of the youngest populations in the world and the youth constitute 60% of the total African population.
5. Despite the State and market constraints, there was a consensus among the respondents that digital media activism had the potential to influence the democratisation process and social change in Zimbabwe. Respondents cited the recent inter-generational contestation for power within the ruling ZANU (PF) Party and in the main opposition party, MDC Alliance, as examples of how digital media were deployed to greater effect as a site of struggle for democratisation. The study also used case studies of hashtag movements like #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, to discuss how Zimbabweans deployed digital media activism to create social change. In recent years, the phenomenon of social media influencers has gained traction among Zimbabwean digital media activists. The respondents singled out the UK-based lawyer and academic, the late Dr Alex Magaisa, and the veteran journalist and award-winning film-maker, Hopewell Chin'ono, as some of the popular social media influencers in Zimbabwe.



This is what happens when a country is run by a political party which is corrupt, incompetent and clueless.

Nothing will work at all as daily they are busy trying to figure out what to STEAL!

They have made us a global laughing stock!



**FIGURE 13:** The social media influencer Hopewell Chin'ono reappropriates, on one of his social networking sites (SNSs), a Zimbabwean Lives Matter Facebook page post exposing how the Mnangagwa administration has brought the State-owned national railway company to its knees through corruption

6. The study also noted that most Zimbabweans, especially the youth, used digital media very creatively to circumvent State repression. For example, some activists used satirical genres to contest the dominant narratives. Digital media platforms like Magamba TV and Bustop TV were cited as some of the sites of struggle for democratisation and social change in Zimbabwe.
7. However, although the findings of the study showed that significant gains had been made over the past few years by using digital media as a tool for political participation, there were some State and market constraints which inhibit the effective use of new technologies in the country. The constraints include the general repressive political environment in Zimbabwe and the high costs of accessing digital media technologies.
8. The findings showed the Janus face of digital media activism: that it can be a force for good, and a curse at the same time, especially in contexts that are under authoritarian rule, like Zimbabwe. The study noted the use of covert and overt strategies by the State to control digital media activism. In Zimbabwe, the State can use the legal framework to control the activities of ISPs. It can also deploy direct strategies, like internet shutdowns, to clamp down on digital media activism.
9. In its findings the study noted that some social media platforms were like 'digital jungles' and needed to be tamed, as some respondents suggested. The respondents noted that there was a lot of fake news, misogyny and hate language on some of the digital media platforms. However, there was no consensus on how the 'digital jungle' should be tamed. Some respondents suggested self-regulation among the users, while others supported the notion of statutory regulation. Those who advocated for self-regulation suggested that civil society organisations (CSOs) should assist in running online courses on media literacy so that people can use the internet responsibly. On the other hand, those who supported statutory regulation suggested that the State should pass a legal framework to control the excesses of digital media activism.
10. Another interesting finding was on the digital divide in Zimbabwe. It was noted that only a tiny minority of a population of 12 million people had access to new technologies. New media were mostly the preserve of people living in urban

and peri-urban areas. It was noted that most of the population living in the rural areas did not have access to new technologies. However, some respondents said that many African countries, like Zimbabwe, were by their very nature, oral societies, and argued that digital media activism should not be examined in isolation. There is a need to consider the intersection between on and offline media activism.

11. In its findings, the study noted that there was no consensus on the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and countries in similar contexts. While some people saw hope, others felt the future was very bleak, because of the hostile political environment in the country. The respondents said the ascension of Mnangagwa initially brought a lot of hope, but within a short time people have realised that their hope was misplaced. Contrary to earlier perceptions, Mnangagwa's new dispensation was worse than Mugabe's despotic rule. In fact, some respondents suggested it was a poor imitation of Mugabe's authoritarianism.

### 7.3 Conclusion

There was a general consensus among respondents on the potential of digital media activism in Zimbabwe as a communicative site of struggle for democratisation and social change. Most respondents noted that significant gains had been made in recent years by using digital media activism in mobilising and organising citizens by hashtag movements like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, and social media influencers, like the late UK-based lawyer and academic, the late Dr Alex Magaisa, and the veteran journalist and award-winning film-maker, Hopewell Chin'ono. In addition, digital media activism has been embraced in a big way by both ZANU (PF) factions – Lacoste and G40 – and by the main opposition party, MDC Alliance, and civil society organisations (CSO), as a communicative space in which to contest hegemonic narratives.

However, the study found that although digital media activism in Zimbabwe has made some significant headway in recent years, the gains were not big enough. This drawback was attributed to several inhibiting factors. Most respondents agreed that

the general political environment in the country was not conducive to democratic change. It was asphyxiating and was the major inhibiting factor against digital media activism. In addition, there was a yawning gap between Zimbabweans in the diaspora and those inside the country, in terms of access to digital media. Most respondents argued that the majority of digital media activists were based outside the country, where they enjoyed unabridged basic freedoms and cheaper internet tariffs in their host countries. On the other hand, the digital media still remain a preserve of a few urban and peri-urban citizens in Zimbabwe. Most Zimbabweans in the rural areas did not have access to digital technologies, due to poverty. Generally, the findings show that while digital media activism might have been more effective for Zimbabwean activists based in the diaspora, its impact, in some cases, was seriously constrained due to the absence of face-to-face activism.

## 7.4 Contributions to Knowledge

### 7.4.1 Conceptual Contribution

The study makes a significant conceptual contribution to the theory of political participation. It attempts to shed more insights into how citizens under authoritarian rule exercise their agency by using digital media activism as a site of struggle for democratisation and social change. Nyabola argues that digital media platforms provide communicative spaces “where the extent of people’s agency and creativity is on full display beyond electoral politics – in their humour, melancholy, anger and confusion” (2018, p212). There is a paucity of scholarship in this area. Among the few studies available is Mabweazara’s (2011) research on how Zimbabwean journalists appropriate new technologies in their news-making practices in the newsrooms. This study attempted to fill in the lacuna in communication and media studies by using the social constructivist conceptual approach to critically examine how digital media activists exercise their agency by deploying new technologies as a site of struggle for democratisation and social change. Contrary to technological deterministic perspectives that situate technology at the centre of social change, this study posits that citizens are the drivers of social change, and it critically evaluates how they deployed digital media to create communicative spaces to contest the dominant

narratives. Wasserman (2005) argues that digital media help to “enlarge and accelerate processes already in place in societies and organisations rather than create entirely new forces” (p165).

#### 7.4.2 Empirical Contribution

This research has adopted a triangulated approach for data collection and analysis. It used qualitative interviews and secondary data sources, like social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, blogs for social media influencers, websites for civil society organisations (CSOs) and online news platforms. The study has made empirical contributions to the theorisation of political communication by conducting 45 qualitative interviews using Zoom video conferencing software. The respondents for the study were drawn from diverse backgrounds and offered interesting and useful insights into how citizens under authoritarian rule create communicative spaces in order to negotiate for democratic and social change. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis (TA) were used for analysing the data. In its empirical findings the study observed that new technologies have helped to empower citizens in creating communicative spaces for “voices that would otherwise be unheard” (Nyabola, 2018, p213). The empirical findings will make a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of how hashtag movements and social media influencers in African countries in democratic transition use new media as an arena for counter-narratives against State propaganda. Civil society organisations (CSOs), policy makers, media scholars and journalists are among the target audiences and beneficiaries of this research.

#### 7.5 Limitations and Potential Areas for Further Research

This study has made some significant contributions to the study of the role of digital media activism in promoting democratisation and social change in African countries in democratic transition, like Zimbabwe. There are a lot of potential possibilities for future research on the subject. The study was conducted in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and due to lockdown travel restrictions, I was unable to travel to Zimbabwe for fieldwork, Hence, I had to make some last-minute changes to my methodology. Initially, I intended to visit Zimbabwe for fieldwork so as to conduct face-

to-face interviews for the research project. However, that was not to be. My plans were scuppered by the unforeseen outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019. As a result, I ended up conducting the qualitative interviews for the study using Zoom video conferencing software. Like any other method, Zoom has its advantages and disadvantages. The major advantage of Zoom is that, to some extent, it breaks down geographical mobility barriers. Zoom offered me the latitude to interview Zimbabweans in and outside the country. In addition, Zoom also offers the opportunity to use participant observation although the method is slightly diminished compared to face-to-face interviewing. However, I was not able to interview some respondents in the rural areas, where a majority of Zimbabwe's population resides, due to lack of internet connectivity. Therein, lies the major shortcoming of this study. Zimbabwe's economy is currently in meltdown and, under these conditions, digital media are considered a luxury by most people who are living below the poverty datum line (PDL).

Recent research studies show that the economic crisis in Zimbabwe has resulted in "an exponential rise in inflation and the cost of living, plunging many Zimbabweans below the poverty datum line" (Zamchiya, 2021, p5). The current economic woes have "created a systemic crisis of livelihoods for the general citizens who increasingly cannot afford adequate food and essentials" (Ibid.). In addition, the costs of mobile smartphones and internet connectivity are prohibitive and, as a result, citizens are more concerned about the bread-and-butter issues. Against this backdrop, I think there is a need to conduct further research in the rural areas using face-to-face qualitative interviews in order to critically assess the impact of digital media activism in rural areas in promoting democratisation and social change.

Digital media activism is a very fertile area, with a lot of potential and possibilities for further research, especially in the contexts of the global South, such as Zimbabwe. The study has noted that there are other areas which were beyond the scope of this research, but which might merit further investigation in the future. One of the areas is the pervasive power of big tech companies such as Facebook and Google and how they deploy Artificial Intelligence (AI) and algorithms to extract big data from social media platforms. In what Zuboff (2015) aptly calls 'surveillance capitalism', the big tech

companies use the data to predict and manipulate human behaviour on social media platforms “as a means to produce revenue and market control” (p75). This new phenomenon that Couldry and Mejias (2019) call ‘data colonialism’, normalises “the exploitation of human beings through data, just as historic colonialism appropriated territory and resources and ruled subjects for profit” (p336). Zuboff (2019) argues that such actions are a serious assault on the tenets of democracy and human rights to privacy and freedom of choice. A British company, Cambridge Analytica, is a classic example of this abuse of technology to subvert democracy. The company was implicated in the manipulation of electoral systems in Kenya and Nigeria between 2013 and 2018, using AI and algorithms (Dowling, 2022). Cambridge Analytica constructed ‘echo chambers’ on social media platforms that “algorithmically segregated and exploited existing socio-political fissures” in those countries (Ibid, p8). Such behaviour by big tech companies on social media platforms has huge implications in the creation of digital communicative spaces for counter-hegemonic narratives.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet (PIS) Sample

#### **PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET (PIS)**

**Title of project:**           **The use of digital media activism in countries in democratic transition in Africa: A Zimbabwean case study**

**Researcher(s):**           **Reward Mushayabasa**

**Supervisor:**           **Dr Winston Mano**

You are being invited to take part in a research study on: **The use of digital media activism in countries in democratic transition in Africa: A Zimbabwean case study**. The aim of the research is **to critically evaluate the use of digital media activism during Mugabe’s last days in power in 2017 and the current post-Mugabe era**. This research is being undertaken as part of the researcher’s studies for a **PhD (Media Studies) programme at the University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom**.

The study will involve you:

- 1) **Other Prominent Zimbabwean Academicians**
- 2) **Zimbabwean State Actors (Senior civil servants, Journalists, ZANU PF Politicians, etc)**
- 3) **Zimbabwean None-State Actors (Civil society activists, Opposition parties, Journalists, etc)**

#### **Please note:**

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
- You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- You have the right to ask for your data to be withdrawn as long as this is practical, and for personal information to be destroyed.
- You do not have to answer particular questions either on questionnaires or in interviews if you do not wish to do so.
- Your responses will normally be made anonymous, unless you have indicated to the contrary above, and they will be kept confidentially, unless you provide explicit consent to do otherwise, for example, the use of your image from photographs and/or video recordings. [NOTE: it may not be possible to maintain confidentiality in certain circumstances, e.g. where issues of child safety have been identified. You should seek clarification from the researcher and/or their supervisor if you are concerned about this].
- No individuals should be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the research, or any publications arising from it. [Unless they have explicitly given permission]
- All computer data files will be encrypted and password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**.

- All hard copy documents, e.g. consent forms, completed questionnaires, etc. will be kept securely and in a locked cupboard, wherever possible on University premises. Documents may be scanned and stored electronically. This may be done to enable secure transmission of data to the university's secure computer systems.
- If you wish you, can receive information on the results of the research. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive this information.
- The researcher can be contacted during and after participation by email [R.Mushayabasa@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:R.Mushayabasa@westminster.ac.uk).

If you have a complaint about this research project, you can contact the project supervisor, **Dr Winston Mano** by e-mail [W.Mano@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:W.Mano@westminster.ac.uk) or by telephone (0044 207 911 5000).

## Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form (ICF) Sample

### CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** Digital media activism in countries in democratic transition in Africa: A Zimbabwean case study

**Lead researcher:** Reward Mushayabasa

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- I have been given the Participation Information Sheet and/or had its contents explained to me. Yes  No
- I have had an opportunity to ask any questions and I am satisfied with the answers given. Yes  No
- I understand I have a right to withdraw from the research at any time and I do not have to provide a reason. Yes  No
- I understand that if I withdraw from the research any data included in the results will be removed if that is practicable (I understand that once anonymised data has been collated into other datasets it may not be possible to remove that data). Yes  No
- I would like to receive information relating to the results from this study. Yes  No
- I wish to receive a copy of this Consent form. Yes  No
- I confirm I am willing to be a participant in the above research study. Yes  No
- I note the data collected may be retained in an archive and I am happy for my data to be reused as part of future research activities. I note my data will be fully anonymised (if applicable). Yes  No

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

This consent form will be stored separately from any data you provide so that your responses remain anonymous.

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I confirm I have provided a copy of the Participant Information Sheet approved by the Research Ethics Committee to the participant and fully explained its contents. I have given the participant an opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered.

**Researcher's Name:** Reward Mushayabasa

**Signature:** *R Mushayabasa* \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** 24/08/2020

## Appendix 3: Interview Guide Sample

**Name:** Reward Mushayabasa

**Supervisor:** Dr Winston Mano

**Institution:** University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom (UK)

**TITLE:** Digital media activism in countries in democratic transition in Africa: A Zimbabwean case study

**AIM:** The aim of the research is to critically evaluate the use of digital media activism in Zimbabwe from 2016 to the current Second Republic era.

### QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterise the current state of digital media activism in Zimbabwe?
2. Which are the main digital media tools used in Zimbabwe today? Why?
3. Do you think digital media are making a difference to people's lives? If yes, how? If no, why?
4. Do you think digital media have a role to play in Zimbabwe's democratisation process? If yes, how? If no, why?
5. How do you see the future of digital media in Zimbabwe?
6. Are there any differences and similarities in the use of digital media activism in the Mugabe era and post-Mugabe era? What are the differences? Similarities?
7. What are the challenges of using digital media activism in Zimbabwe? What do you see as the solutions to these challenges?
8. How has democratic transition in Zimbabwe been influenced by digital media activism?

9. To what extent has digital media activism, for example using Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and online news platforms contributed to social change in Zimbabwe?
10. What are the implications of digital media activism for democratic transition in Zimbabwe and other similar contexts?
11. What are the reasons people use digital media for political activism?
12. Do you think its effective? If yes, how? If no, why?
13. What about the downside of digital media activism? For instance, the use of fake news, disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, misrepresentation by using photoshopped images. What are your comments to calls from some quarters on the need to “tame the jungle of digital media activism” through statutory regulation?
14. Are there any other relevant comments you would like to make?

Thanks for your time.

**This research is being conducted in line with the University of Westminster’s Ethics and Standards Committee research guidelines. As a participant, I am fully aware and understand my rights and obligations in this study. I have been given copies of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Informed Consent Form (ICF).**

**Participant:**

**Participant’s signature:**

**Date:**

## Appendix 4: List of Interviewees

1. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM1, 14/10/2020 (Prominent Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia)
2. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM2, 18/10/2020 (Zimbabwean media scholar based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
3. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM3, 09/09/2020 (Former foreign correspondent in Harare, Zimbabwe)
4. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF4, 05/10/2020 (Zimbabwean public relations manager based in South Africa)
5. Anonymous Respondent re; XXM5, 01/09/2020 (Prominent Zimbabwean academic and human rights activist based in South Africa)
6. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM6, 15/09/2020 (Retired Zimbabwean High Court Judge based in South Africa)
7. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM7, 09/09/2020 (Former editor of a financial weekly newspaper in Harare, Zimbabwe)
8. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM8, 22/11/2020 (Veteran Zimbabwean journalist and prominent businessman based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
9. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM9, 21/09/2020 (Zimbabwean foreign correspondent based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
10. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF10, 30/09/2020 (Former Senior Reporter for the national broadcaster based in the United States of America)
11. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM11, 11/10/2020 (Former Senior Business Reporter for a financial weekly newspaper in Harare, Zimbabwe)
12. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF12, 09/11/2020 (Zimbabwean media scholar based in Australia)
13. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF13, 05/10/2020 (Veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster based in the United Kingdom)
14. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF14, 09/10/2020 (Zimbabwean academic at Women's University in Africa based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
15. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF15, 16/09/2020 (Former Zimbabwean Reporter for a national daily in Harare, Zimbabwe)

16. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF16, 29/01/2021 (Zimbabwean investment banking software specialist based in the United Arab Emirates)
17. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM17, 09/10/2020 (Veteran Zimbabwean broadcaster and Executive Director of a radio station in Harare)
18. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM18, 07/10/2020 (Head of news and current affairs of a private media group based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
19. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM19, 18/09/2020 (Prominent Zimbabwean academic and analyst based in the United States of America)
20. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF20, 02/11/2020 (Zimbabwean media consultant based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
21. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM21, 19/10/2020 (Zimbabwean post-doctoral scholar based in South Africa)
22. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM22, 07/10/2020 (Executive Director of a media advocacy organisation based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
23. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM23, 19/09/2020 (Former Managing Director of a State-owned media organisation based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
24. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM24, 07/10/2020 (Publisher and Editor of a Zimbabwean online news platform based in the United Kingdom)
25. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM25, 28/08/2020 (Former Features Editor of a research centre in Harare, Zimbabwe)
26. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM26, 28/09/2020 (Former Editor of a Zimbabwean online news platform based in the United Kingdom)
27. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM27, 16/09/2020 (Former Radio Presenter for the national broadcaster and founder of an evangelical ministry in Harare, Zimbabwe)
28. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM28, 30/09/2020 (Former Branch Manager of a State-owned media organisation based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
29. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM29, 01/09/2020 (Zimbabwean academic based in Namibia)
30. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM30, 21/09/2020 (Zimbabwean Foreign Correspondent based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
31. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM31, 11/10/2020 (Former Editor of a farming magazine based in Harare, Zimbabwe)

32. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF32, 13/11/2020 (Zimbabwean Senior Foreign Correspondent of an international news agency in South Africa)
33. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM33, 30/09/2020 (Former Zimbabwean Radio Presenter for the national broadcaster based in the United States of America)
34. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM34, 23/01/2021 (Veteran Zimbabwean journalist based in South Africa)
35. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF35, 06/11/2020 (Former Manager for a national radio station based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
36. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF36, 12/10/2020 (Public Relations Manager of a State-owned enterprise based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
37. Anonymous Respondent re: XXF37, 23/09/2020 (Zimbabwean Economist in international development based in Rome, Italy)
38. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM38, 08/10/2020 (Zimbabwean Publisher and Editor of an online newspaper based in South Africa)
39. Anonymous Respondent re: XXM39, 20/11/2020 (Former Editor of a State-owned newspaper based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
40. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXM40, 31/08/2020 (Zimbabwean Correspondent for a newspaper based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe)
41. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXM41, 26/01/2021 (Zimbabwean working for an international development agency based in East Africa)
42. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXF42, 16/10/2020 (Zimbabwean working for an international development agency based in West Africa)
43. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXM43, 28/09/2020 (Zimbabwean Senior Reporter based in Washington, DC, USA)
44. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXM44, 12/09/2020 (Prominent ruling ZANU (PF) Party politician based in Harare, Zimbabwe)
45. Anonymous Respondent Re: XXM45, 14/09/2020 (Former Editor of a Zimbabwean national daily based in Harare, Zimbabwe)

\*Please note that alphanumeric codes have been used to identify anonymous respondents. The first two letters were supposed to denote the respondent's initials (First name and Surname). However, to safeguard the respondents' identities, generic initials (XX) were used instead. The third letter in the alphanumeric code refers to the respondents' gender (Male/Female), while the number alludes to their

position on the list of interviewees. However, reasonable steps were taken in order to ensure that the respondents' expertise and experience were briefly included to underpin the respondents' relevance to the study without unwittingly disclosing their identities.

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