

**DIGITAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL CHANGE: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF
YOUTH ONLINE ACTIVISM IN ZIMBABWE**

By

Tawanda Mukurunge

Student Number 19m8270

ORCID: 0000-0003-4604-3201

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DECLARATION

I, Tawanda Mukurunge, declare that **“Digital media and political change: a critical exploration of youth online activism in Zimbabwe”** is my work and that the sources used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Signature.

.....

Date.

ABSTRACT

The study problematizes the dominant narrative of digital media as an opportunity for resistance and democratization. The focus is on young online activists in Zimbabwe, where ZANU PF party has ruled with an iron fist since independence in 1980. The context is characterized by a young population, by an ongoing economic crisis, and by violent political tensions. Online and offline forms of resistance by Zimbabweans in the country and in the diaspora are well documented in the literature. Through content analysis and semi-structured interviews with activists living in Zimbabwe, the study seeks to highlight challenges and new forms of repression in the digital domain. These include intimidation and monitoring of activists, slacktivism and counter-narratives by pro-government actors.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family; my wife Eva, my sons Tendai and Takudzwa, and to all those who put the shoulder to the wheel to sweat for what they truly believe in and not give up no matter the circumstances.

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The quest for knowledge and curiosity led to the exploration of the role of social media in activism in Zimbabwe. The encouragement and guidance by friend, Dr Tawanda Wallace Mataka led to the introduction to the world of academia and Rhodes University and eventually the introduction to Professor Lorenzo Dalvit. Simple conversations with Professor Lorenzo led to the coming together of my thoughts and ideas that were scattered all over into some semblance of order. After a series of discussions, the solid idea for the thesis emerged and the journey started.

The support in the study came from my two boys, Tendai and Takudzwa, who saw me struggling to balance work, parenting and study. The boys understood my frustrations when I would struggle for time, struggle for resources especially after resigning from my job to relocate to the UK to bring the family together, a most disruptive move for my work and study. The children witnessed my agony with the requisite adjustments in a totally alien environment with demands of its own for survival under the circumstances of joblessness and intense study.

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ACRONYMS

AI- Artificial Intelligence

AIPPA- Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act

AU- African Union

CCC- Citizens' Coalition for Change

CDPA- Cyber and Data Protection Act

CIO- Central Intelligence Organisation

CSO- Civil Society Organization

FoIA- Freedom of Information Act

GNU- Government of National Unity

ICT- Information and Communication Technology

LOMA- Law and Order Maintenance Act

MDC- Movement for Democratic Change

MENA- Middle East and North Africa

MIC- Media and Information Commission

MISA- Media Institute of Southern Africa

MOPA- Maintenance of Peace and Order Act

MP- Member of Parliament

NCA- National Constitutional Assembly

NGO- Non-Governmental Organization

PF- ZAPU- Patriotic Front- Zimbabwe African People's Union

POSA- Public Order and Security Act

POTRAZ- Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe

PVOA- Private Voluntary Organizations Act

SABC- South Africa Broadcasting Corporation

SADC- Southern Africa Development Community

SARS- Special Anti-Robbery Squad

SIM- subscriber identity module

SMS- short message service

SNS- social networks services

UNDP- United Nations Development Programme

UNCRC- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNO- United Nations Organization

ZANLA- Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army

ZANU PF- Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front

ZDF- Zimbabwe Defence Force

ZEC- Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

ZIMRA- Zimbabwe Revenue Authority

ZINASU- Zimbabwe National Students Union

ZMC- Zimbabwe Media Commission

ZRP- Zimbabwe Republic Police

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Chapter 1: Introduction and background

1.1 Context

The youth of Africa have a history of mobilising and fighting for social and political justice. Young people from African countries were pivotal in the fight for liberation against European settler colonialism (Bangura, 2022). Post independence, the youth have been central in social and political mobilisation either in support or opposition of their governments (Maringira and Gukurume, 2022). After independence, the main challenges have been unemployment, political instability, conflict and poverty (Fomba Kamga, Talla Fokam, and Ningaye, 2022). This gave rise to feelings of disillusionment, discontent, frustration and anger among the youth (Bangura, 2022). The explosion of pent-up frustrations and desperation among the youth was exemplified by the case of Mohamed Bouazizi a young fruit vendor from Tunisia who self-immolated on 17 December 2010. Bangura (2022) argues that such action ushered in the third wave of youth protest on the continent. The first wave of social movements occurred between 1940 and 1960, during the late phase of colonialism, while the second wave emerged in the 1990s in opposition to post-colonial governments, ultimately leading to democratic transitions (Mueller, 2018). According to Ubachs (2022), "For Asia and Africa, the 1955 Bandung Conference and the All-African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana in 1958, were pivotal events that forged solidarity movements and inspired activism among populations of the global South" (p. 21). The first wave played a crucial role in the overthrow of colonial rule, whereas the second wave focused on dismantling one-party state dictatorships and facilitating the transition to multiparty democracy. The third wave emphasises adherence to the rule of law, respect for human rights, and economic development. Post-2010 social movements are characterised by the increasing use of the internet and social media for information dissemination and mobilization. In their pursuit of social justice, young activists increasingly turn to digital platforms to circumvent government restrictions on communication.

The categorisation of individuals as youth is relative. For instance, the ZANU PF Youth League was led by Absolom Sikhosana, a man in his mid-sixties, from 2000 to 2014. However, Bangura (2022) provides a standard definition of youth across Africa, explaining that "The African Union (AU) in its Youth Charter of 2006 defines youth as those in the age demographic of 15 to 35 years" (p. 2). In the present study, the term "youth" refers to Zimbabweans born after 1980, who grew up under ZANU PF rule and endured the hardships induced by its

governance. This generation, known as the "born-free" generation, is perceived with a degree of resentment by the government. The primary reason for this resentment is the perception that the born-free generation lacks patriotic sentiment and demonstrates a disregard for the ethos of the national liberation struggle (Tendi, 2010). In turn, the youth view the ruling ZANU PF elite as clinging to power to safeguard their ill-gotten wealth through corruption while simultaneously excluding young people from economic opportunities.

The Zimbabwean political system exemplifies repression and intolerance towards political opposition. The primary causes of activism and protests in Zimbabwe stem from corruption, poor governance, and the decline—if not collapse—of the national economy since the 1990s (Alexander & McGregor, 2013). Questions regarding the legitimacy of the 2002, 2008, and, more recently, the 2018 and 2023 elections have raised doubts about the possibility of democratic change through the ballot box. Under Chapter 15, the Constitution of Zimbabwe allows for political party competition and rivalry, establishing a framework for democratic governance (Moyo, 2019). However, this constitutional provision appears to contradict the ruling party's belief in a one-party state and the rule of a strongman (Bratton, 2014). The government's commitment to a one-party state is rooted in a narrative that foregrounds the fight against neo-colonialism, which is reinforced during electioneering and electoral triumphalism at the expense of ethical democratic consolidation (Chikerema & Chakunda, 2014). Over a decade ago, progressive civil society organisations, opposition parties, and other pro-democracy movements began turning to alternative communicative spaces (Ndlela, 2009). The expansion of internet connectivity and social media platforms facilitated an environment conducive to online activism (Nhapi & Mathende, 2019). Social media technologies have created a virtual community of dissent that actively fosters counter-hegemonic discourses (Gukurume, 2017). For example, the #ThisFlag, #ThisGown, and, more recently, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter protests illustrate how ordinary citizens have challenged the excesses of the government. These excesses are epitomised by endemic corruption and poor governance, which have resulted in massive unemployment and the continued deterioration of the Zimbabwean economy.

The state has responded to this wave of protests by deploying both old and new repressive measures adapted to the digital age. Since 1980, the Zimbabwean government has enacted legislation aimed at controlling and restricting civic freedoms (Ngwenya, 2014). Ngwenya highlights the Interception of Communications Act of 2011, which legalised the government's

surveillance of its political opponents and human rights activists. The state further entrenched surveillance laws through statutory instruments such as the Postal and Telecommunications (Subscriber Registration) Regulations. Before his forced resignation in November 2017, former President Robert Mugabe established the Ministry of Cybersecurity, Threat Detection and Mitigation to apprehend “mischievous rats” who “abused” social media (MISA-Zimbabwe, 2019). Additionally, former Minister of Communications Jonathan Moyo attempted to promote the #OurFlag online movement in 2016 as a counter-narrative to the anti-government #ThisFlag movement (Gukurume, 2017). This approach aligns with Mbembe’s (1992) argument that, beyond the use of violence, state actors construct entire constellations of ideas, adapting specific cultural repertoires and evocative ideological concepts to sustain their grip on power.

As the first generation of “born-free” Zimbabweans reached the age of 40, it remains difficult to identify significant victories, advances in human rights, or progressive legislative reforms achieved through political activism and protest. Young people constitute a historically volatile and ever-growing demographic group, often analysed through the youth bulge theory, as articulated by Hensohn (2006) (Nhapi & Mathende, 2019). This age group was instrumental in the MENA Arab Spring due to their rapid adoption of technology and adept navigation of the digital space. Despite comprising a significant portion of the voting-age population, young Zimbabweans have been disenfranchised by discredited elections, eroding their hope for regime change through democratic means. Even the resignation of Mugabe was a consequence of military intervention rather than civilian-led protest.

Youth activism in Zimbabwe is rooted in a long tradition, spanning from the liberation struggle (1966–1980) to the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 (Mare, 2015). Unlike earlier generations of activists, today's youth have no personal recollection of ZANU PF as a liberation movement, nor have they experienced a Zimbabwe governed by a different political party. Individuals between the ages of 20 and 40 have come of age during two decades of economic crisis. With unemployment estimated at approximately 95% (Bhebhe, Bhebhe & Bhebhe, 2016), the youth are disproportionately affected by both economic and political instability, prompting their participation in movements such as #ThisFlag and #ThisGown in 2016 (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). They also played a significant role in the post-2018 election protests and contributed to the establishment of civil society organisations such as the Youth Forum

Zimbabwe, the Youth Institute for Democracy in Zimbabwe, and the Youth Agenda Trust. However, despite these efforts, the political status quo in Zimbabwe remains largely unchanged.

In the post-Mugabe era, the government's attempts to position Zimbabwe as a favourable investment destination have necessitated a balancing act between repressing public dissent and maintaining an outward appearance of political legitimacy. This raises an important question: how do young anti-government activists perceive online participation—as a tool for political and social change, or as a mechanism of repression and control?

1.2. Problem statement

Online activism in Zimbabwe has been extensively researched. A substantial body of literature exists on political activism and digital media in Zimbabwe, authored by prominent scholars such as Bruce Mutsvairo, Last Moyo, Winston Mano, Shepherd Mpofu, Admire Mare, Simbarashe Gukurume and Martin Ndelela, among others. Preliminary investigation suggests that much of this scholarly work reflects either a cyber-optimist or cyber-realist orientation, rarely questioning the potential positive contributions of digital media. For instance, Mano, in Mutsvairo (2016), asserts that social media provides new-generation Africans with an opportunity to address challenges without hypocrisy, corruption, inefficiency, ineptitude, incompetence, or buffoonery (Mano, 2016). However, one could argue that many Zimbabweans, like others in both the Global North and the Global South, have yet to reap the political benefits of the digital revolution. Critical reflections from the West, as well as studies on the Arab Spring, suggest three potential fallacies regarding the democratising potential of digital media, which this study seeks to explore. The study examined the cases of virtual movements; This Flag, Tajamuka/Sesijikile, Zimbabwean lives matter, Team Pachedu and Varakashi members.

Firstly, digital technology does not necessarily create a space for universal, free, and participatory opinion formation—that is, a digital public sphere based on the normative ideal conceptualised by Habermas (1991) and Adut (2012) and perceived by the public as a regulatory institution against state authority. Drawing on established critiques of this concept, the digital public sphere can be criticised as elitist, as not everyone has the material means, skills, or ability to engage with such spaces effectively (Frazer, 1990). These varying levels of

digital inequality are widely discussed in the literature (Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2017). For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that, of the approximately five million out of Zimbabwe's 16 million citizens who have Internet access, the vast majority (95%) access it via mobile phones (Nduna, Rodrigues & Schellnack-Kelly, 2023). This mobile-first, mobile-centric, and mobile-only Internet usage may pose specific challenges to participation and has exclusionary potential (Walton & Donner, 2012). Furthermore, only a minority of connected individuals—35%—actively engage with social media in a meaningful way (Kemp, 2023). Among these users, committed and sustained political engagement, at least as understood within the Western democratic paradigm, remains fragmented, often irrational, and highly partisan (Gianolla, 2017). The current discourse on fake news, which is often framed as a degeneration of the digital public sphere in the West (Ireton & Posetti, 2018), is arguably an established practice in other contexts. For example, in Zimbabwe, pro-government activists work alongside the state's propaganda machinery to construct an ideologically distorted view of reality (Mungwari, 2017). Dahlberg (2007) conceptualises the digital public sphere in agonistic terms, arguing that it functions as a space of constant struggle and confrontation, particularly in highly conflictual environments. Within such an agonistic context, the oppressive and coercive capacity of the state, evident in other domains, cannot simply be negated on rational or moral grounds.

Secondly, online deliberation does not necessarily lead to democratisation. Dean (2009) argues that it is erroneous to attribute global protest movements to social media solely because these platforms facilitate coordination, or to assume that all such protests are struggles for democracy. She contends that these movements often reflect the political struggles of a knowledge-based class whose labour is exploited and whose lives are expropriated for the benefit of powerful elites. Notably, most North African countries, where digital technology was thought to have catalysed the Arab Spring, cannot be considered functional democracies (Jones, 2013). Morozov (2013) further problematises the link between deliberation and action by introducing concepts such as clicktivism and slacktivism, which suggest that online engagement—through petitions, campaigns, and whistleblowing—functions more as a pressure valve for subaltern subjects than as an effective means of holding oppressive governments accountable. Dean (2005) elaborates on this perspective through the lens of communicative capitalism, postulating that online political action has been subsumed by the logic of economic profit. She identifies mechanisms such as the reduction of political messages

to mere contributions and the trap of endless reflexivity as factors that render online interactions devoid of substantive engagement while sustaining the flow of data. In Couldry's (2015) terms, political activism has become yet another sphere of daily life in which human activity and relationships are subjected to asymmetric expropriation and accumulation. Until recently, governments such as Zimbabwe's struggled to leverage these asymmetric digital relationships effectively. However, this dynamic is rapidly evolving (Duncan, 2018). Crude, short-term tactics such as Internet shutdowns are increasingly being replaced by more sophisticated mechanisms of surveillance, monitoring, and systematic harassment (Chivandire, 2019). Combined with the self-censorship these tactics engender, the entrapment of users in endless cycles of sterile online discussions may create the illusion of open deliberation while deferring substantive political change.

Thirdly, online activism is intrinsically linked to a particular conception of democracy. The relentless process of datafication underpinning both digital capitalism and digital colonialism reinforces Western values, viewpoints, and ways of being in the Global South, thereby creating new forms of oppression and exclusion (Arora, 2016). This extends to the political sphere, where online activism is frequently understood through Western paradigms of monitorial citizenship, often enacted via recognised civil society organisations (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2017). Acceptable and recognisable forms of activism, in this framework, include campaigns, mass demonstrations, and the leaking of classified information. However, Mamdani's (1997) concept of a bifurcated public in post-colonial Africa allows for an alternative conceptualisation of political participation—one that includes diverse channels such as traditional leadership, family structures, and even state institutions. These modes of participation do not necessarily conform to the emancipatory model of relentless opposition aimed at exposing and replacing a dysfunctional state. Instead, they may serve a liberatory function, sometimes through convivial relationships with power (Willems, 2012). Decolonial critiques, which arise from the failure of formerly colonised states to fully extricate themselves from Western imperialism, knowledge systems, and cultural hegemony (Mignolo, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015), also extend to Western conceptions of democracy as inherently liberatory. From a decolonial perspective, genuine liberation first necessitates an acknowledgment of the historical processes that have ensured that modern governments in the Global South, while sometimes oppositional to the West, do not fundamentally challenge Eurocentric assumptions about politics and democracy (E-International Relations, 2017). The

decolonial turn, as a second step, entails embracing alternative forms of activism that transcend these assumptions and reimagine political participation (Mignolo, 2018). From this perspective, online activism should be understood not only in terms of protest and opposition but also as a means of imagining alternatives to Western paradigms and fostering novel, technology-enabled social practices (Wasserman, 2018). Mutsvairo (2013) argues that, in the digital era, activism is no longer the sole domain of self-identified "activists" (Hara, 2008), as ordinary citizens who use mobile devices and digital technologies increasingly perceive themselves as engaged participants in political processes.

1.2.1 Research questions

- i) How do activists make sense of the exclusionary and /or repressive potential of digital media?
- ii) How do activists perceive the relationship between online activism and political action?
- iii) Which forms of digital activism challenge the Western canon?

1.3 Rationale

The literature on social media and online activism in Zimbabwe suggests that social media has the potential to democratise the political landscape (Karekwaivanane & Mare, 2019). Such studies were largely informed by hashtag-driven social movements that gained prominence prior to the fall of Mugabe. However, the government that succeeded Mugabe has failed to meet the expectations of the youth who had actively engaged on digital platforms in opposition to his regime. Instead, the new administration exhibits continuity with Mugabe-era governance. Compounding this issue, the current government appears to be more adept at suppressing digital activism than its predecessor (Hlatywayo & Mangongera, 2020). This study therefore seeks to examine the perspectives of youth digital activists on the contemporary political landscape. It explores the effectiveness of social media platforms as used by youth activists based within Zimbabwe, drawing on their personal experiences. The hashtag movements This Flag, Tajamuka/Sesijikile, Zimbabwean Lives Matter, Team Pachedu and Varakashi played prominent roles in informing and countering disinformation in the digital communication space during a significantly volatile political environment. The period under study is important in the sense that it was the immediate aftermath of the transition from the long Mugabe era into a new political dispensation. Political contestations took place in the digital communication space marking a departure from political communication's prominence in the traditional mainstream media sphere.

The focus on youth and digital activism is justified for several reasons. Firstly, the youth constitute a significant proportion of the national population. Bangura observes that Africa has the world's youngest population, with nearly 60% under the age of 25 (Bangura, 2022, p. 2). In Zimbabwe, 62% of the population is under 25. Secondly, Zimbabwean youth have historically played a central role in activism, including during the struggle for national independence. They also engaged in resistance against the one-party state through student unions such as the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) (Moyo, 2024). Their activism was instrumental in pushing for multiparty democracy, particularly following the absorption of the main opposition party, PF-ZAPU, into ZANU-PF through the signing of the Unity Accord on 22 December 1987 (Raftopoulos, 2013). More recently, influenced by the Arab Spring, Zimbabwean youth have utilised digital technology to mobilise against government excesses, addressing issues such as unemployment and economic hardship. Bangura highlights the marginalisation of African youth, noting that:

In many ways, African youth operate on the outside of the formal socio-economic and political structures that define statehood. There is minimal youth representation in the elite political class of Africa, and young people instead occupy subaltern spaces, influencing change through protests, volunteering or working in grassroots Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), joining militias or gangs in the urban regions, or simply emigrating and instead becoming part of a growing diaspora that seeks to help their cause from outside the physical borders of the continent. (Bangura, 2022, p. 4).

Thirdly, studies indicate that the 18–25 age group is the most active demographic on social media and that this group exhibits the highest level of trust in the veracity of online information (Matema, Kallier-Tar & Cant, 2024). This demographic is predominantly urban due to rural-to-urban migration (Ndhlovu, 2020), and urban areas offer greater internet accessibility owing to better infrastructural development (Maphosa, 2021). Fourthly, elsewhere in Africa, youth have effectively harnessed digital communication technologies to mobilise offline action against underperforming governments. Ubachs asserts that:

In Africa, in countries characterised by bulging youth demographics, underperforming economies and non-responsive governments, youth mobilisations have been the harbingers of fundamental changes, as youth-led protests have contributed to the toppling of governments in many of the continent's countries. (Ubachs, 2022, p. 18).

Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe fits this characterisation. Regarding the increasing availability of technology and its impact on activism, Ubachs further observes:

The landscape of youth activism is changing. Shifting societal conditions and the availability of modern technologies produce new forms of communication and collaboration among young people. Driving social change, young people are testing new forms of cultural expression, reshaping languages and embracing new media. (Ubachs, 2022, p. 18).

Earlier studies on youth digital activism in Zimbabwe, including those by Mpofu (2014), Moyo (2009), Mare (2015), and Gukurume (2019), have often focused on Zimbabwean diasporans who critique the authoritarian government from a position of safety outside the country. A key contribution of this study is its focus on youth engagement within Zimbabwe. Specifically, it examines how youth digital activists navigate the increasingly restricted digital space, which has become more tightly controlled due to government surveillance and monitoring of online communications. The Zimbabwean government has further constrained the digital public sphere through the introduction of restrictive legislation, such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act of 2021 (Sabao & Nenjerama, 2023).

Previous studies on digital activism in Zimbabwe have often assumed that social media has facilitated democratisation within the national political sphere. For instance, Moyo asserts that:

"Through social media, social movements in Zimbabwe have managed to open an online democratic space in terms of freedom of expression and association; important values of democracy" (Moyo, 2018, p. 141).

This study, therefore, aims to critically assess youth activists' perspectives on the use of social media for activism within the current political context.

1.4 Goals of the study

The overarching aim of this study is to critically examine the role of digital media as a catalyst for political change in Zimbabwe, within the context of a long history of political struggle, increasing digital penetration, active civic engagement, and an increasingly technologically sophisticated repressive apparatus. The study acknowledges that the government positions itself in contention with Western epistemological and political frames. By Western epistemological frame I mean a philosophy imbedded in the exploration of nature, origin and human knowledge through the acquisition, validation and understanding through scientific or empirical evidence. Contemporary dominant Western political frame is grounded in individual

liberty, the rule of law, limited government, consent of the governed and democracy. The key objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To analyse how activists interpret the exclusionary and/or repressive potential of digital media.
- ii. To examine activists' perceptions of the relationship between online activism and political action.
- iii. To explore alternative forms of digital activism that challenge Western epistemological and political frameworks.

1.5 Methodology

The study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm (Saunders, 2009; Darby, Fugate & Murray, 2019), as it seeks to capture the emic perspective of young Zimbabwean activists. The research design integrates a critical literature review, content analysis of online protests, and an exploration of young Zimbabwean activists' perspectives on social media.

Critical literature reviews serve as a means of synthesising extensive bodies of knowledge and contributing to the understanding of what is effective and what is not (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). For this study, scholarly contributions by leading Zimbabwean researchers on digital media use in the political domain were analysed to identify limitations, such as the assumption of unrestricted access, rationality, and unitary deliberation as direct precursors to political action. The selected publications focus on the post-Mugabe era, characterised by increasingly sophisticated digital repression. This period has witnessed the government's strategic deployment of the *Varakashi* counter-narrative as a coordinated effort to neutralise opposition voices in the online space, in contrast to previous reliance on physical street violence.

A content analysis was conducted on social media posts from participants in the #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesjikile, and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter protests, alongside posts by *Team Pachedu* and *Varakashi* members. The data was sourced from the most commonly used social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube. The selection of content for analysis was purposive, focusing on at least 30 popular posts per platform that generated significant discussion on political change between January 2019 and December 2023. The dataset included user-generated content from prominent activists as well as concerned internet users. A coding framework was developed, comprising variable names, variable levels

reflecting response options, and operational definitions outlining categorisation rules and illustrative examples (Lac, 2016).

Additionally, interviews were conducted with ten digital activists aged between 25 and 40. Respondents were selected based on their direct, personal experience of Zimbabwe's current political landscape, and only those residing in the country were included. The upper age limit of 40 ensured that participants' experiences were specific to the post-Mugabe era. For the purposes of this study, a digital activist is broadly defined as an individual who is visibly active on internet-based platforms in advocating for political change in Zimbabwe. This definition extends beyond conventional Western notions of activism to include individuals who engage through pseudonymous commentary on social media posts and news articles.

1.6. Thesis outline

The thesis comprises nine chapters. In this first chapter, I provide background to the study, discuss the problem statement, justify the research, and outline its aims and methodology.

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature on digital activism at the global level, within the MENA region, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Africa, and Zimbabwe. It also examines government efforts to suppress online activism through legal instruments and counter-narrative strategies aimed at reclaiming control over digital discourse. Additionally, the chapter explores the state's use of legislation and surveillance to restrict freedom of expression within digital communication spaces.

Chapter 3 outlines the three theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. It first examines Habermas's theory of the public sphere and its adaptation into the digital public sphere. It then explores Jodi Dean's theory of communicative capitalism and the theory of decoloniality and data colonialism as advanced by Nick Couldry. The chapter concludes by considering alternative models of online activism that challenge or diverge from Western paradigms.

Chapter 4 details the study's methodological approach. It discusses the research design and justifies the chosen paradigm, approach, and data collection methods. Each of the three methods—critical literature review, content analysis, and interviews—is examined in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, sampling strategies, and data analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with reflections on validity and reliability, the study's limitations, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 presents findings from the systematic literature review, focusing on book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2023. It critically engages with academic perspectives on Zimbabweans' access to the digital public sphere, the conceptualisation of social media as a rational, communicative, and democratising space, and the relationship between the digital public sphere and offline political action.

Chapter 6 presents findings from the analysis of online posts. It explores the use of symbols by digital activists, their interactions with individuals who hold opposing political views, and the relationship between online activism and offline political engagement.

Chapter 7 presents findings from interviews with online activists to examine their perceptions of social media platforms in relation to their activism. It investigates the impact of digital platforms on youth-led activism and explores state responses to online activism that challenges government authority.

Chapter 8 offers a comprehensive discussion of the study's findings. It begins by addressing issues of exclusion and repression before examining the relationship between online activism and political action. The chapter concludes by identifying emerging forms of activism that diverge from or counter Western models and expectations.

Chapter 9 presents the study's conclusions. It begins by addressing the three research questions, followed by a reflection on the study's challenges, limitations, and potential shortcomings. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on digital activism at the global level, within Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Africa, and Zimbabwe. I examine scholarly work on government efforts to suppress online activism through legal instruments. I then analyse literature on state-led counter-narrative strategies aimed at reclaiming control over digital discourse.

2.2. Online activism

In this section, I explore the phenomenon of internet and digital communication platform usage by activists seeking political change. I review literature on activism in Zimbabwe up to 2018. That is the end of the Mugabe era and the immediate aftermath. This exploration is conducted under the sub-themes of digital activism at a global level, digital activism in sub-Saharan and Southern Africa, and a timeline of offline and online activism in Zimbabwe.

2.2.1. Digital activism at the global level

Digital activism entails the use of the World Wide Web as a site of protest that mirrors and amplifies offline demonstrations. Online activism is therefore internet facilitated protest. It involves the use of electronic communication technologies such as social media, email, and podcasts for various forms of activism (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2014). Online activism is most common in the form of online petitions, the hosting of campaign websites as well as large-scale verbal protests (Yang, 2009). These online protests and campaigns sometimes influence offline protest action. Digital communication technologies enable faster and more effective communication by citizen movements (Wells, 2015). They also enable the delivery of particular information to large and specific audiences as well as coordination and facilitation of interaction by a variety of political stakeholders (Pesce, Neirotti and Paolucci, 2019). Online activism can take a radical form and indulge in the hacking of websites (Yang, 2009). Online activism has emerged relatively recently as a varied and multi-dimensional phenomenon in different parts of the World. Protest action against the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, while not entirely digital, saw widespread use of online forums (Lance Bennett, Breunig, and Givens, 2008). Such forums included email lists and websites to coordinate and mobilise activists worldwide. Research on this experience suggests a complementarity between physical and virtual action. A study by Nah, Veenstra, and Shah (2006) revealed that internet news

contributed to both face-to-face and online discussion about the situation in Iraq. The study also established that online and face-to-face political discussion mediated certain news media effects on anti-war initiatives participation. The contribution of digital media to mobilisation and organisation of physical action is well documented (KalpoKas, 2016). In 2005, activists in Moldova used social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to organise protest action against election fraud (Hale, 2013). A study of the Moldovian protests by Lysenko and Desouza (2012) established that protestors organised their initial mobilisation through social networks services (SNS) and short message service (SMS). Lysenko and Desouza (2012) also declare that Twitter was mostly used during later phases of the revolution to disseminate information about the conflict to domestic and global audiences. Lysenko and Desouza (2012) concluded that through skilful use of internet-based technologies, it is possible to conduct a successful revolution without noticeable offline organisation. In 2011, the Occupy movement, primarily centred in the United States, utilised social media to organise protests against income inequality, corporate influence, and predatory financial systems (DeLuca, Lawson and Sun, 2012). From studying the American anti-capitalist movement, Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, and Flammini (2013) established that on Twitter, the movement elicited participation from a set of highly interconnected users with pre-existing interests in domestic politics and foreign social movements. However, while the users were highly vocal in the months immediately following the birth of the movement, they started losing interest in Occupy related communication in less than a year (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer and Flammini, 2013). The examples suggest that the online component plays a central role in mobilising activists and forming connections around a particular issue.

Belarus was the centre of online protests in Europe due to the government's mismanagement of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Critics labelled the Belarusian protests The Telegram Revolution. The protests were mobilised through the Telegram App (Slobozhan, Brik and Sharma, 2023). However, in response to the label of 'The Telegram revolution' in reference to the Belarusian uprising, Kananovich (2023) argues that social media does not possess inherently democratic capabilities. Kananovich also posits that social media use was only one of several ways for protestors to communicate and coordinate their actions. Social media use therefore "responded to, facilitated and reinforced the emerging changes in the nation's socio-political fabric that have been found by previous scholarship to be of central importance to democratising change" (Kananovich, 2023, p.144). The protests in Belarus were triggered by the Lukashenko government's mishandling of the Coronavirus pandemic. The president did

not consider coronavirus to be a serious threat to the nation. The government withheld important information on the virus and endangered the lives of healthcare personnel by not providing adequate Protection Equipment. Social media use led to a break in the spirit of silence characteristic of authoritarian states as people freely posted statistics of coronavirus casualties (Kananovich, 2023). Citizens became angry at the government after the state disrupted internet services to prevent citizen mobilisation and information exchange.

Whereas the Belarusian protests were based on social contract issues (conflict based on disagreements between the people and the ruling elite), some of the protests taking place in Southeast Asia post the Arab Spring were different. The online protests witnessed in Southeast Asia had their roots primarily in “tensions between secularism and religion-based identity movements, ethnic minority struggles and pro-democracy movements” (Shewly and Gerharz, 2022, p.3). Through an analysis of the Yogyakarta hashtag #GejayanMemanggil, Fuadi (2020) reached the conclusion that social media platforms can be utilised as tools to mobilise and unite people for action. The hashtag was used to mobilise Indonesians to fight for justice in 2019.

The so-called "Arab Spring" provides numerous and well researched examples of online activism. In 2010, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia sparked protests against unemployment and government corruption (Breuer, Landman and Farquhar, 2015). Social media use, especially Facebook and Twitter, facilitated organising and spreading awareness, leading to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Olaoye, Rose and Odu, 2023). In Tunisia, during the 2010 protests the use of social media platforms facilitated a union of an intellectual elite with the rural poor and urban middle classes to form a coalition that overthrew the government of Ben Ali (Breuer, 2012). Breuer (2012) claims that the digital elite managed to unite Tunisians from across the economic and political divide to circumvent gatekeepers and united the nation for protest action. Social media use was attributed a significant role in the mobilisation of protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011, leading to the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak (Faris, 2013). Vanguard of the demonstrations were more active on social media than followers during the revolution (Hamanaka, 2020). Hamanaka (2020) also established that those active bloggers tended to participate in physical demonstrations against the Mubarak government. These findings foreground elites and Avant guards' participation in the ouster of Mubarak. Social media use might not have *caused* the Arab uprisings (Arafa and Armstrong, 2016). However, digital communication technology provided the technical infrastructure for these uprisings to develop, sustain, and intensify over relatively short periods (Kamel, 2014). The technology included satellite television, cell

phones, social networking, video blogging, and citizen journalism platforms that allow broader dissemination and participation than traditional print and broadcast media (Mansour, 2013). Social media was also a tool for organising protests and disseminating information during the Arab Spring in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other Arab countries in 2011 (Cominos, 2011). However, in these countries, the Arab Spring did not bring about regime change. Even when successful, for example in Tunisia and Egypt, the results were authoritarian governments and not democracies (Amour, 2018). Bangura elaborates that

In August 2021, President Kais Saied of Tunisia dissolved his democratically elected cabinet of ministers, fired his prime minister and consolidated political power by appointing a new prime minister with a little political background, which sparked tension among the elites. After the fall of al-Bashir, Sudan went through a violent military coup that reversed the democratic gains made after the fall of al-Bashir in April 2019 (Bangura, 2022, p.12.).

In view of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, social media platforms did not usher in a democratic dispensation and therefore cannot be labelled as tools for democratisation.

During the past decade, online activism was mainly centred on social issues such as gender and race. The year 2014 saw the birth of the campaign #BringBackOurGirls following the abduction of Nigerian school girls by Boko Haram. The BringBackOurGirls campaign gained global attention and support through social media. Cyber-communities have the power to set the agenda for mainstream media organisations (Olson, 2016). Olson (2016) argues that online communities can educate, organise, and mobilise publics. Feminists from India also launched an online campaign of their own in 2017; #MeTooMovement (Loney-Howes, Mendes, Fernández Romero, Fileborn and Núñez Puente, 2022). The hashtag gained momentum on Twitter, as survivors of sexual harassment and assault shared their experiences, sparking a global conversation and leading to increased awareness and accountability. In the case of the hashtag Me Too, social media platforms were utilized to counter sexist biases inherent in patriarchal societies (Pain, 2020). While the Black Lives Matter movement predates social media, since 2013 platforms like Twitter played a crucial role in amplifying voices, organising protests, and raising awareness about racial injustice and police brutality against black communities (Liebermann, 2021). Studying the social media response to Black Lives Matter, Ince, Rojas and Davis (2017) found that #BlackLivesMatter is associated with five types of hashtags. They say that the hashtags mention solidarity or approval of the movement, refer to police violence, mention movement

tactics, mention Ferguson, or express counter-movement sentiments. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, social media played a pivotal role in organising global protests against systemic racism and police brutality under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement (Célestine, Martin-Breteau and Recoquillon, 2022). From studying the #BlackLivesMatter, Chan, Richardson, and Ferrara (2022) established that the hashtag revealed the emergence of non-institutional opinion leaders such as meme groups, independent journalists, and fashion magazines, which contrasts with the institutionally reinforcing nature of Twitter (now X). This is because Twitter is patronised by members of the elite more than other social media platforms.

2.2.2. Digital activism in sub-Saharan Africa

The wave of revolutions in North Africa inspired youth in Sub-Saharan Africa to stage demonstrations against unpopular governments, with varying outcomes. For instance, in Northeastern Africa, political change through protests led by social movements was achieved in Ethiopia and Sudan. In Ethiopia, the reliance on social media was driven by the fact that "critical traditional media was being decimated and journalists were leaving the country" (Adamu, 2020, p.15). Protesters used platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to mobilise opposition against "the new master plan of Addis Ababa for the Oromo regions" (Adamu, 2020, p.15). The master plan involved the government's intention to appropriate land from the Oromo and Amhara communities for the expansion of Addis Ababa city. Farmers, youth, and members of the diaspora protested this and other human rights violations, culminating in the overthrow of the government and the establishment of a new political dispensation in 2018 (Adamu, 2020, p.15). However, the new political regime did not immediately bring democracy, as human rights violations persisted in Ethiopia as of 2020 (Adamu, 2020).

In Sudan, the uprising that led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled for 30 years, began in Atbara. The catalyst for the protests was the government's decision to triple the price of bread following the removal of wheat subsidies. The majority of the protesters were young professionals who effectively harnessed the internet and social media platforms for mobilisation, and did not follow the lead of well-established political opposition movements (Gizouli, 2019). A UNDP report on social media use during the revolution, which led to al-Bashir's downfall, highlighted the critical role played by social media in mobilising popular action for peaceful change. According to the UNDP Resident Representative, Selva

Ramachandran, social media platforms were instrumental in informing citizens about the challenges posed by structural and systematic transformations. However, the report critiques the use of social media, noting that most users were urban based, educated members of the elite, meaning the perspectives shared on these platforms reflected the views of this demographic, excluding the less educated, rural majority (UNDP, 2019).

In West Africa, youth also utilised digital communication platforms to confront authoritarian governments. In Nigeria, the End SARS protests gained momentum through online mobilisation. The protests, which emerged in October 2020, were in response to the brutal actions of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), triggered by a video showing SARS officers commandeering a Lexus SUV belonging to a young man who had been killed in Ughelli, Delta State, on 3 October 2020 (Aubyn & Frimpong, 2022). The video sparked national outrage, leading to widespread protests across Nigeria, resulting in the disbandment of SARS and the demand for broader security sector reforms (Aubyn & Frimpong, 2022). The movement garnered international support from high-profile figures such as English footballer Marcus Rashford, American musicians Kanye West, Beyoncé, and Puff Daddy, Nigerian rapper Burna Boy, and Hollywood actress Viola Davis (Aubyn & Frimpong, 2022). However, Aubyn and Frimpong argue that the #EndSARS protests were not a success, asserting that although the government disbanded SARS, a similar police unit was established under a different name. They further contend that "digital activism failed to instigate meaningful systemic reforms or policy changes, partly due to the rapidly fluctuating attention cycles of social media platforms and the government's failure to face sufficient pressure to undertake substantial institutional and political reforms" (Aubyn & Frimpong, 2022, p. 70).

In Guinea Conakry, social media played a pivotal role in mobilising youth, providing a platform for Guineans in the diaspora to engage in the protests and build links of transnational solidarity by sharing messages and videos that encouraged Guinean youth and the international community to oppose President Alpha Condé's assault on democracy. Youth in Guinea also posted online videos and messages detailing their struggles, which were widely circulated on social media. They felt alienated by the ruling elite, especially regarding decisions about the country's politics and economy. For them, documenting and publishing government actions was of paramount importance (Bangura, 2022). However, the aftermath of the protests did not yield the desired changes; while President Condé stepped down, the military took control, and former elites associated with his regime reemerged to assume power (Bangura, 2022).

East and Central Africa also experienced youth-led protests. In Uganda, social media was harnessed to protest the arrest of opposition leader Bobi Wine in July 2018. Platforms were also used to criticise President Yoweri Museveni's government and demand regime change, as well as security sector reforms. Movements such as #Pairofbuttocks and #FreeBobiWine emerged online (Chitukutuku, 2022). However, despite these efforts, the protests did not lead to any tangible change, as President Museveni won the elections and continued to govern. Similarly, in Cameroon, the social movement #EndAnglophoneCrisis sought to raise awareness about the oppression of Anglophone citizens by the predominantly Francophone government of President Paul Biya. "Social media provided a platform through which the Anglophone diaspora, based in countries such as Germany, the UK, South Africa, the USA, and Belgium, could initiate group discussions that influenced millions of Cameroonians to either support or oppose the government" (Chitukutuku, 2022, p.58). Social media was regularly used to inform the global community about atrocities committed by the Cameroonian state, such as extrajudicial killings and executions of children and unarmed civilians. Under pressure from online activism and international outrage, the government engaged with secessionist groups in dialogue to address the crisis. Peace-focused groups, such as the Movement for Democracy, Development Transparency (MDTT), used social media to combat youth radicalisation in the conflict, promoting hashtags like #letdialoguelead, #YouthtoYouthCampaign, #stopYouthRadicalisation, #TalksNotGuns, and #inclusivedialogue, demonstrating social media's potential as a tool for peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Chitukutuku, 2022).

In Southern Africa, the youth spearheaded hashtag social movements following the Arab Spring. The #RhodesMustFall campaign, which originated at the University of Cape Town, marked a significant milestone in digital activism in the region. The campaign sought the removal of a statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, arguing that it symbolised institutionalised racism and a culture of exclusion for black students (Bosch, 2016). Bosch's study found that Twitter was central to youth participation in the RMF campaign, providing a platform for discussions on broader socio-political issues in contemporary South African society (Bosch, 2016). The #FeesMustFall movement also emerged in response to tuition fee increases in 2015-16, demanding free, decolonised education (Griffiths, 2019). While the government initially responded with police violence, President Zuma later froze fee increases for higher education. However, in 2017, funding schemes were adjusted, excluding more students due to inflation, and the movement did not achieve its desired outcomes. Similar to

protests elsewhere in Africa, the youth's mobilisation efforts in South Africa ultimately failed to bring about significant changes, as the political elite managed to maintain their power.

In Eswatini, the #EswatiniLivesMatter campaign in 2021 saw the youth, frustrated by social, economic, and political challenges, present a petition to the prime minister for submission to the absolute monarch. However, the prime minister refused to accept the petition and banned all marches, leading to arrests and escalating violence, including the death of a University of Eswatini law student, Thabani Nkomonye. Protests, including the burning of businesses linked to the king, resulted in at least 27 deaths and 150 injuries (Kali, 2023). The protest leadership encouraged participants to record videos for dissemination on social media platforms, leading to international calls for respect for human rights (Matsilele et al., 2021). Despite the mobilisation and use of social media, the political status quo in Eswatini remained unchanged, as the monarchy persists.

These instances illustrate the complex relationship between social media activism and political change across Africa, highlighting both the potential and limitations of digital mobilisation in confronting authoritarian regimes. Literature shows that use of social media by activists has limited effectiveness especially in terms of systematic changes. However, social media use includes the participation by diaspora communities who otherwise would be sidelined due to physical distance. These diaspora communities help with the mobilisation of resources to fund offline action as well as to mobilise the International Community for various social justice causes.

2.2.3 Digital activism in Zimbabwe

The year 2000 marked the onset of Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community, a process catalysed by the government's land reform programme, which resulted in the dispossession of the white minority's ownership of land. The land was subsequently redistributed to members of the black population, particularly ZANU PF supporters and the ruling elite (Zikhali, 2008). The government embarked on a campaign of political, economic, and cultural de-westernisation (Ndlela, 2006, p. 1). A key step in this process was ensuring a monopoly over the media space. However, urban youth responded to the government's Africanisation of popular culture by shifting their media consumption to satellite television and the internet. The influence of new technologies and globalisation on every aspect of social life in African cities (Ndlela, 2006, p. 1) was fortuitous for the youth, who used digital

communication technologies to bypass government control over the communication space. These technologies have been credited with facilitating the cross-border diffusion of popular culture (Iwabuchi, 2018), and the government's stranglehold on mainstream media drove youth towards online spaces for the sharing of ideas and activism.

Social media usage grew significantly between 2010 and 2012, with increased access to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Karekwaivanane and Mare, 2019). The youth have increasingly turned to these platforms to express their views (Mare, 2015; Chitanana, 2020). Makumbi observes that "The internet has been instrumental in recent years in mobilising young people and sustaining their involvement in real-time social mobilisation and protests across the world" (Makumbi, 2022, p. 155). Digital technologies are thus harnessed by youth for advocacy (campaigns supporting specific causes and policies) and activism (pushing for improvement or political change). Social media is undermining the liberation discourse that has historically dominated election processes and signalling the potential for more open political spaces where divergent views can coexist. Zimbabwean youth activists have also tapped into international support to further their agendas (Idowu, 2022), raising awareness of Zimbabwean issues on the global stage. However, the ZANU PF government accuses its internal critics of fabricating claims of human rights abuses to secure external support and funding (Chivanga, 2015). The youth's ability to use social media for activism has drawn attention to the Zimbabwean crisis, which in turn led to intervention by international actors who brokered a Government of National Unity between ZANU PF and the MDC from 2009 to 2013 (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2014).

Young Zimbabweans utilise social media platforms to share information, discuss issues, and organise events (Gukurume, 2022). Through these platforms, they engage in political discourse, express dissatisfaction with the government, and advocate for political reforms. They organise and participate in online campaigns related to human rights, democracy, and electoral transparency (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). Youth-led online activism often focuses on social justice issues, such as gender equality, access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Nhapi and Mathende, 2019). Through hashtags, videos, and images, youth raise awareness and mobilise support for these causes (Mutsvairo, 2018). Additionally, youth activists have created their own digital media platforms, including blogs, websites, and online publications (Chiwewe, 2017). Gukurume explains that "In Zimbabwe, the turn to symbolic and subtle forms of protest should be understood in part as an innovative way of

circumventing the risk posed by confronting an authoritarian and brutal regime. The social media space provided and still provides a relatively safe terrain for articulating and mobilising counter-hegemonic activities” (Gukurume, 2022, p. 174). However, the government has extended its control to cyberspace, especially with the rise of Mnangagwa’s regime.

Digitisation has ushered in new counter-hegemonic communication spaces and forms of journalism practice, with the result that communication has become more deinstitutionalised and radicalised, both in form and content, according to Moyo (2011). Moyo argues that this radicalism in Internet-mediated communication represents a rejection of state and capital control over print and broadcast media. He suggests that the Internet enhances ordinary citizens’ right to communicate. Digital and social media platforms played a significant role in mobilising and organising civil unrest, protests, and demonstrations in Zimbabwe from 2016. Gukurume elaborates, stating that “between January and October 2016, there were more than 40 youth-led protests against the Mugabe regime. Many of these protests were mobilised through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp” (Gukurume, 2022, p. 164). Given Zimbabwe’s authoritarian nature, characterised by state repression and police brutality, mobilisation for protests was only possible through social media (Gukurume, 2022). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram enabled activists, organisers, and protesters to communicate and coordinate their activities rapidly and efficiently (Sabao and Chikara, 2020). WhatsApp, the most used and accessible platform in Zimbabwe (Musimeki, 2022), facilitated the rapid dissemination of information regarding protest locations, times, and strategies. Campaigns highlighting human rights abuses, government corruption, and social, political, and economic hardships were communicated through social media (Sabao and Chikara, 2020). Hashtags such as #ThisFlag and #ShutdownZimbabwe were used to consolidate posts related to specific protests, propelling them to national and international prominence. Users shared photos, videos, and personal stories to garner sympathy and solidarity for their causes. During the protests, social media platforms enabled real-time updates and information about developments, including police brutality, arrests, and injuries. These platforms allowed citizen journalists and activists to post videos and images, enabling a wider audience to witness events as they unfolded.

The #ThisFlag movement, initiated by Pastor Evan Mawarire in 2016 (Gukurume, 2017), is one of the most prominent examples of youth-led online movements in Zimbabwe. Mawarire used social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to protest government

corruption, the economic crisis, and human rights violations (Gukurume, 2017). The movement gained significant traction, encouraging citizens to voice their grievances and demand accountability (Karekwaivanane and Mare, 2019). The #ThisFlag movement marked the first post-independence, social media-driven protest that left a lasting imprint on Zimbabwean politics and history (Nenjarama, 2020). It spread widely and inspired other forms of activism (Gukurume, 2017). Between January and September 2016, Zimbabwe witnessed over 40 instances of civil unrest (Hove and Chenzi, 2016). These protests were sparked by economic hardships, political grievances, and dissatisfaction with the Mugabe government. Examples included a reduction in customs duty rebates for cross-border travellers, revelations about US\$15 billion in lost diamond revenue due to smuggling (Hove and Chenzi, 2016), and the forced introduction of a national pledge for schoolchildren. In July 2016, a nationwide stay-away protest, organised by a coalition of online social movements led by #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, called for political reforms, an end to corruption, and improved economic conditions (Mutanana, 2016). These protests led to widespread shutdowns of businesses and services, temporarily paralysing the nation's economy. The hashtag #ShutdownZimbabwe trended on social media, with activists using it to coordinate on-the-ground actions. Social media was key in organising protests against government policies, economic hardships, and calls for social and political change (Musarurwa, 2016).

The year 2017 was a pivotal moment in Zimbabwe's recent history. In November, a military operation led to the resignation of Robert Mugabe and the appointment of his former deputy, Mnangagwa. The forced resignation of Mugabe excited even the academic community. Post-Mugabe literature presents differing perspectives on the role of social media platforms in changing the political status quo. Demonstrations against Mugabe had been mobilised through social media. Mutisi (2019) notes that the Zimbabwean Solidarity March of November 2017 was organised through social media. She concludes that, despite restrictive legislation, social media played a vital role in mobilising the masses and thus holds the potential to influence collective political thought (Mutisi, 2019). In 2018, protests escalated in violence as the military used live ammunition to disperse demonstrators. The announcement of significant fuel price increases in January 2018 triggered widespread protests and civil unrest (Matingwina, 2018). Civilians used social media platforms to mobilise for the demonstrations, but the government responded by imposing an internet shutdown to hinder mobilisation and prevent the outside world from witnessing evidence of state repression, while also paralysing business transactions.

In July 2018, Zimbabwe held its first post-Mugabe elections, but the outcome was disputed (Magaisa, 2019). Opposition youth mobilised protests through social media platforms, resulting in the deaths of six demonstrators and many injuries (Fitiwi and Kidane, 2018; Sithole, 2020). However, Mugari (2020) criticises the opposition's use of social media to instigate violence, arguing that their premature release of election results contributed to the outbreak of post-election violence. Social media platforms were also used to fundraise for legal fees, medical assistance for injured protesters, and other necessary resources (Chigova, 2020). Zimbabwean activists used these platforms to engage the international community, seeking support, solidarity, and advocacy for their causes (Hodzi and Zihnioğlu, 2023). International human rights organisations, journalists, and foreign governments monitored events in Zimbabwe through social media updates (Lunga, 2020). Zimbabweans in the diaspora have used the internet as an alternative democratic space, attempting to influence domestic political processes (Kuhlmann, 2010). They circumvent state control and challenge the government primarily through digital platforms. However, Matsilele et al. (2021) argue that online mobilisation is often ineffective and does not significantly impact offline activism. State intelligence agencies have been known to glean information from digital platforms and target protest leaders before they can mobilise street demonstrations. Without leadership, demonstrations by social movements cannot take place. Similar views are expressed by Mugari (2020), who describes social media platforms as “open-source intelligence platforms”.

2.3 Legal instruments

In this section, I examine several pieces of legislation that have been used to suppress freedom of expression. The ability of youth online activists to freely express themselves has been restricted by a legal environment that has become increasingly oppressive. This environment is structured in such a way that it hampers the transition of online activism into offline or physical demonstrations. The implementation of these laws reveals a pattern of criminalising dissent, shielding government officials, legitimising violence, and engaging in surveillance of citizens. The promotion of freedom of expression by civil society organisations has been rendered ineffective due to the neutralisation of non-governmental actors through the Private Voluntary Organizations Act (PVOA) of 2023. Civil Society Organizations have been at the forefront of advocating for freedom of expression, with online activists benefiting from free training in ethical conduct and fact-checking to expose disinformation from mainstream media (Ncube, 2021). The ZANU PF government utilises imprisonment as a weapon against its opponents. Zimuto (2024) asserts, “In Zimbabwe, imprisonment is a kind of political

punishment. People are jailed because of their political affiliations without regard to the severity of the alleged crime” (Zimuto, 2024, p. 230). Some of the laws are vague, and even the state finds it challenging to convict alleged online offenders when they are arrested. However, since 2020, new laws have been enacted that possess the potential to secure convictions for digital offences. The ZANU PF government has endeavoured to legitimise its actions through the creation of legal instruments designed to validate and/or conceal its authoritarianism (Kabonga, Zvokuomba, and Musara, 2022). Some of these laws are so unclear that activists are left in a state of legal uncertainty, providing the state with the opportunity for arbitrary enforcement. When these laws are applied by the authorities, activists complain of differential legal treatment, with government allies receiving more lenient treatment than opponents. In the following analysis, I will review legislation that is perceived to encroach upon the digital public sphere.

2.3.1 Laws inherited from the colonial regime

The government perpetuates the colonial legacy of weaponising legislation to suppress dissent (Mukurunge and Dalvit, 2024). The ZANU PF government has retained repressive colonial-era laws, such as the Official Secrets Act (1970), which is used to restrict freedom of expression and target journalists and activists critical of the government (Matsilele, 2022). The Act provides a legal basis for the government to classify information as secret and to prosecute those who disclose such information. This law is strategically employed as a means of silencing whistleblowers. Defamation and national security-related legislation are also used to target online activists and opposition figures for their online speech.

Whistleblowers exposed corruption in the procurement of personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahuni, 2023). In response, the government muzzled these whistleblowers by enforcing lockdown restrictions and arresting both whistleblowers and activists who sought to protest against government corruption. For example, three female activists were arrested for violating lockdown provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic for protesting the government's neglect of health workers (Chiweshe and Hove, 2023). Whistleblowers who exposed government corruption or misconduct have faced legal action under the Official Secrets Act, which deters individuals with information about government wrongdoing from coming forward (Chigudu, 2020). The Act grants government officials the power to classify information as secret, rendering it illegal to disclose such information to the

public. This leads to a lack of transparency and accountability in government actions. The threat of prosecution under the Official Secrets Act also deters investigative journalists from pursuing stories involving government misconduct or sensitive issues (Mpofu and Chimhenga, 2013). The mere existence of the Official Secrets Act leads to self-censorship among journalists and individuals, who fear legal consequences for reporting on government-related matters (Mhiripiri, 2020). The provisions and enforcement of the Act create a stifling environment for freedom of expression, with journalists and activists often reluctant to speak out against the government for fear of legal repercussions. A notable example is the arrest of journalist Hopewell Chin'ono in July 2020, charged under the Official Secrets Act for revealing government corruption through his social media posts (Sabao and Nenjerama, 2023).

Similarly, the Defence Act (1972) is invoked to restrict or censor media reporting on military matters, prohibiting journalists and online activists from investigating or publishing reports on military misconduct or human rights abuses (Ronning and Kupe, 2005).

Another example of legislation carried over from the colonial era is the Privileges, Immunities and Powers of Parliament Act (1971), which provides legal protections and privileges to members of parliament (MPs). This law makes it difficult for journalists and online activists to openly criticise legislators and the government. For example, the Act has been used to bring defamation cases against individuals who have criticised MPs (Chirengendure, 2018). MPs are legally exempt from criticism regarding corruption and misconduct, thereby complicating efforts by journalists and activists to expose wrongdoing within the political sphere (Mpofu and Chimhenga, 2013). The Act also contains provisions related to the publication of parliamentary debates and proceedings. Some MPs have threatened legal action under the Act against journalists and digital activists who criticise their actions, fostering a climate of intimidation and self-censorship.

2.3.2 State security

The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) is shielded from public and media scrutiny under the Police Act (1995). This legislation is utilised to limit media coverage of protests and public gatherings, with journalists facing significant obstacles and intimidation from the police when attempting to report on such events. This impedes freedom of the press and the right to information. Under the Police Act, it is a criminal offence to photograph police officers in uniform, which restricts the ability of the public and the media to expose police misconduct,

such as capturing footage or images of officers engaging in illegal behaviour (Dissel and Frank, 2012).

Similarly, the Zimbabwe Prisons Services (ZPS) personnel are protected from public oversight by the Prisons and Correctional Services Act (2016). While the Act primarily governs the administration of prisons, it has occasionally been employed to suppress freedom of expression, particularly regarding prisoners' rights and conditions. The Act grants prison authorities the power to regulate communication between inmates and the outside world, which has at times been used to restrict prisoners' freedom to express their views, including to the media or human rights organisations (Boozai, 2016). For example, political prisoners or detainees who voice dissenting opinions may face harsh treatment or severe restrictions on their ability to communicate while in custody (Alexander, 2010). The Act also includes provisions that delay or obstruct prisoners' access to legal counsel, which impinges on their ability to challenge their detention or highlight their conditions. Moreover, whistleblowers within the correctional services who expose corruption or human rights abuses risk facing reprisals or restrictions on their own freedom of expression (Madenga, 2021). The combination of inadequate conditions and fear of reprisal creates an environment that discourages both inmates and staff from reporting abuses, resulting in widespread self-censorship.

Activists, journalists, and protesters are subjected to frequent police intimidation and harassment (Mapuva and Muyengwa, 2012), which deters individuals from participating in public gatherings or expressing their views freely. The Public Order and Security Act (POSA) (2002) granted the government broad powers to regulate public assemblies, including protests, and to restrict freedom of expression (Zhou and Zvoushe, 2012). Under POSA, organisers of public gatherings were required to notify the police in advance and obtain permission, a stipulation that was often used to suppress political activity (Mapuva and Muyengwa, 2012). The law has also been employed to limit media coverage of such events. Following amendments in 2019, the Public Order and Security Act was renamed the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA), but it still contains similar provisions requiring organisers to seek police approval for public gatherings (Kabonga, Zvokumba, and Musara, 2022). This process can result in delays or denial of permits, restricting the right to freedom of assembly and expression. MOPA continues to operate in a similar manner to POSA, perpetuating a climate of fear that discourages civil liberties.

MOPA, like POSA, is sometimes applied selectively, with public gatherings organised by government supporters receiving more favourable treatment than those held by opposition or civil society groups (Kabonga, Zvokuomba, and Musara, 2022). This selective application further stifles freedom of expression and assembly for government critics. The Act also criminalises activities such as blocking roads, inciting violence, or disrupting public order, provisions that are often used to arrest and charge peaceful protesters, thus limiting their right to express themselves and assemble. Moreover, MOPA restricts media coverage of protests, with journalists facing obstacles and intimidation when attempting to report on such events, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.

The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (2004) encompasses a broad array of criminal offences, but its provisions have been utilised to curtail freedom of expression. Section 95 of the Criminal Law Code criminalises insulting the president or any public officer, a provision that has been used to target political opponents, journalists, and activists who criticise government officials (Feltoe, 2012). Similarly, Section 22 of the Criminal Law Code criminalises acts deemed to subvert a constitutionally elected government, often used to arrest and charge political activists and opposition figures (Manatsa, 2015). Section 31 further criminalises undermining the authority of the police, often applied against those who criticise police conduct during demonstrations (Feltoe, 2012). Additionally, Section 88 of the Code makes it an offence to undermine the exercise of freedom of expression, a provision that is too vague and has been used to target a wide range of activities (Feltoe, 2006). The provisions of the Criminal Law Code have been selectively enforced, with government critics facing legal action while government-aligned individuals often enjoy impunity (Feltoe, 2012).

For example, social media platforms were used by activists such as Hopewell Chin'ono and Jacob Ngarivhume to mobilise people for the July 31 protest, which led to their arrest on charges of inciting public violence under sections of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (Nyoka and Tembo, 2021). Despite the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, such legal frameworks effectively curtail those rights, particularly in the digital public sphere. As Gukurume (2022) observes, "although the 2013 Zimbabwean constitution provides for the right to peaceful protests, people continue to get arrested for exercising their constitutional rights to protest or organise."

Lastly, the Private Voluntary Organisations Act (2023) regulates the registration and activities of NGOs but has been used to suppress civil society and limit freedom of expression. The Act

requires NGOs to register with the government and comply with strict regulations, including financial reporting and disclosure of funding sources. Critics of the Act, such as Sibanda (2022), have argued that its provisions are burdensome and subject to government discretion, undermining the ability of NGOs to freely express their views. The PVO Act also grants the government significant control over NGOs, including the authority to investigate their activities and suspend or cancel their registration. NGOs critical of government policies are often denied the freedom to express their opinions openly. Additionally, the Act restricts NGOs from receiving foreign funding without government approval, further limiting their capacity to engage in critical activities. This selective enforcement results in government critics and opposition-aligned NGOs facing stricter scrutiny compared to those aligned with the government.

2.3.3 Information-specific legislation

The law that enables the state to monitor civilian communications in the digital space is the Interception of Communications Act. The Interception of Communications Act (2007) confers the government with extensive powers to intercept and monitor various forms of communication, including phone calls, emails, and text messages (Munoriyarwa and Chiumbu, 2019). This is concerning to activists and journalists as it facilitates broad surveillance of their activities. The Act is criticised for its lack of transparency concerning the conditions and criteria under which communications may be intercepted (Mugari, 2020). This is problematic, as the surveillance is frequently politically motivated rather than serving legitimate state security interests. Additionally, the Act enables potential violations of the privacy of individuals and activists. Consequently, those who fear such violations may refrain from participating in open and candid discussions, particularly those related to sensitive political matters (Mutiro, 2019). The Act also fails to provide sufficient oversight or checks on the use of surveillance powers by government agencies. The absence of independent bodies to supervise the implementation of the law leaves room for unregulated governmental surveillance (Mutiro, 2019).

The Freedom of Information Act (FoIA) of 2020 was introduced to replace the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). However, there is little substantive difference between the content and implementation of the FoIA and its predecessor. The only notable distinction lies in the renaming of the law. The FoIA is criticised for offering only partial guarantees regarding citizens' access to information, as the authorities can revoke such

access whenever they determine there is a threat to national security (Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove and Saki, 2023). As a result, it is largely perceived as serving the same function as AIPPA—namely, as a tool in the hands of the government. The AIPPA (2003) severely restricted freedom of expression and access to information. Furthermore, the Act impeded the free practice of journalism by both local and international reporters through accreditation requirements and various restrictions. The provisions of AIPPA also made it difficult for online activists to transition from online to offline protests. The AIPPA was partially repealed in 2020 and replaced by the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act (Mututwa, Mututwa, and Ndlovu, 2021). It is important to highlight how AIPPA was used to restrict freedom of expression, requiring media organisations—such as newspapers and broadcasting stations—to register and obtain licences from the government-appointed Media and Information Commission (MIC) (Muchena, 2013). The licensing process was often cumbersome, costly, and subject to political interference, making it challenging for independent and critical media institutions to acquire licences, thereby undermining press freedom. Moreover, AIPPA fostered a climate of self-censorship among journalists, who feared legal repercussions due to provisions that criminalised journalistic activities, such as publishing "falsehoods" or information deemed to undermine public confidence in the government (Khumalo, Musweu, and Bhebhe, 2016). Additionally, AIPPA imposed restrictions on foreign ownership of media organisations, limiting their influence in the Zimbabwean media landscape (Muchena, 2013). The Act also raised significant concerns regarding surveillance and data privacy, granting authorities the power to intercept communications, which could be used to monitor and intimidate journalists and activists. The law's provisions concerning access to information lacked transparency and were overly restrictive (Mututwa, Mututwa, and Ndlovu, 2021). Requests for information from government agencies were often met with delays, denials, or redactions (Khumalo, Musweu, and Bhebhe, 2016). AIPPA posed a grave threat to freedom of expression, as journalists and media outlets faced frequent risks of legal action and harassment for critical or investigative reporting. Moreover, AIPPA enabled political interference in media regulation, with the Media and Information Commission (MIC) being composed of government-appointed members, thereby raising questions about the impartiality of media regulation and favouring censorship (Muchena, 2013). AIPPA was selectively enforced to target independent and critical media outlets as well as individual journalists, while government-aligned media enjoyed relative freedom (Khumalo, Musweu, and Bhebhe, 2016). The transition from AIPPA to FoIA is essentially one of nomenclature, as journalists are still required to register with the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC), just as they were required

to obtain accreditation under AIPPA (Last and Akpojivi, 2022). Accreditation of media practitioners is governed by Statutory Instrument 169C of 2002 (Quansab et al., 2002).

The latest addition to the government's suite of laws designed to control activists is the Cyber and Data Protection Act. The Cyber and Data Protection Act (CDPA) of 2021 aims to regulate cyber activities, protect personal data, and combat cybercrime. However, it poses a significant threat to freedom of expression. The introduction of the CDPA was met with fear by civil society organisations (CSOs), opposition politicians, and activists, who were concerned that it would be used to target online activists and opposition figures (Hove and Chenzi, 2020). The CDPA defines various offences related to online communication, such as communication intended to deceive, the publication of false information, and the abuse of social media (Ncube, 2016). These broad definitions are prone to abuse, as they may be used to target online speech and criticism of the government. On several occasions, content critical of the government has been censored or removed from social media platforms (Mare, 2018).

The post-colonial government's deployment of legal instruments to stifle opposition voices is colonial legacy. However, the ZANU PF government's use of repressive legislation to annihilate freedom of expression is worse than the settler colonial regime. The settler regime unleashed state of emergency legislation because the nation was at war. The ANU PF government on the other hand inherited war time laws, modified some to make them more repressive and stringent to unleash them upon the nation in peace time. The information specific legislation is therefore unjustified.

2.4 Online repression

In this section, I examine the repression of internet communication by the government, which includes measures such as blocking protests and persecuting online activists. I then analyse the literature on various repressive tactics employed by the government to contain and destabilise digital activism, including surveillance and counter-narrative strategies.

2.4.1 Harassing protestors and whistleblowers

One form of online repression is the limitation of freedom to express dissent through demonstrations, with violent reactions often accompanying such actions. The government frequently responds to civil unrest, protests, and demonstrations by deploying security forces and making arrests. Protesters are subjected to physical mistreatment, injury, or even death at

the hands of the police, or, in extreme cases, the military (Hove and Dube, 2022). Instances of police misconduct and abuse of power remain significant concerns, undermining trust in law enforcement and civil liberties (Mugari and Olutola, 2018). The November 2017 protests were an exception, as they were supported by the security forces due to a shared goal of removing Robert Mugabe. In other instances, however, the military has been deployed under the guise of managing public disturbances, leading to heavy-handed responses that violate the right to freedom of expression and assembly (Mwonzora, 2022). Physical coercion is supplemented by online measures, such as attempts to suppress online protests by shutting down social media platforms. The government has resorted to temporary internet shutdowns during periods of civil unrest to limit the spread of information and communication among activists and protesters (Marchant and Stremlau, 2020). For example, access to Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp was temporarily restricted during protests and political events in 2018 and 2019 (Hove and Chenzi, 2020). Such shutdowns significantly hinder activists' ability to organise and share information.

Online activists and opposition politicians face harassment and intimidation both online and offline, including threats, doxxing, and other forms of cyberbullying. Gukurume highlights the situation of intimidation, particularly through abductions of activists, noting that:

Social movement and civil society activists in Zimbabwe have been victims of abductions by alleged state security apparatus. Examples include the abductions of Itai Dzamara, leader of the #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare movement in 2015, two #Tajamuka activists in 2016, Tawanda Muchehiwa, a student activist, and three MDC female activists—Joanna Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiru, and Netsai Marowa—who were abducted and tortured by state security agents after they raised concerns about the suffering of the people due to lack of social support and security from the state during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. (Gukurume, 2022, p. 173).

Several opposition figures and activists have been arrested for organising or participating in protests or for sharing anti-government content online (Nyoka and Tembo, 2022). Notable figures include opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, his deputy Job Sikala, and Jacob Ngarivhume (Kamete, 2021; Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu, 2019). These acts of repression have further alienated Zimbabwe from the international community, which condemns human rights violations perpetrated by governments against their citizens (Gukurume and Nhodo, 2020). Despite criticism from abroad, arbitrary arrests of activists

remain common, a practice that dates back to the Mugabe era (Mhandu and Ojong, 2022). State security agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) and the police, have been arbitrarily arresting activists, opposition members, and journalists since 1980 (Duri, Marongwe, and Mawere, 2019). Activists and opposition politicians consistently report experiences of torture, mistreatment, and harsh conditions while in detention (Tom and Chekera, 2022). The government has created a hostile environment for activists and all opposition voices.

2.4.2 Surveillance

Civil society organisations and human rights advocates have raised concerns regarding the monitoring and surveillance of online activists and opposition politicians. Gukurume explains that "Surveillance is the modus operandi of the ZANU PF government to deal with dissent. This surveillance not only involves monitoring of activists' movements and plans but also remote surveillance of their private telephone calls and mobile messages" (Gukurume, 2022, p. 172). Such surveillance results in violations of privacy and freedom of expression, as state agents monitor social media and online communications to identify and target activists (Madenga, 2021). To protect themselves from potential state brutality, some online activists and social media users resort to self-censorship when communicating online (Mutsvairo, 2018).

The Cyber and Data Protection Act (CDPA) includes provisions that grant authorities the power to intercept and monitor online communications, posing a significant threat of surveillance on online activities. This Act mandates that online service providers store data of Zimbabwean users within the country (Poshai, Chilunjika, and Intauno, 2023), raising concerns that user data can be easily accessed for monitoring purposes. Additionally, the CDPA empowers the government to issue orders prohibiting specific online activities and content (Ncube, 2016), thereby enabling censorship of online content or restricting access to particular websites, which limits the diversity of voices and the freedom of expression on the internet. The ambiguous interpretation and application of the CDPA further allow authorities discretion to suppress online speech (Poshai, Chilunjika, and Intauno, 2023). The government monitors social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp to track the activities and communications of activists and opposition politicians (Madenga, 2021), focusing on posts, messages, and discussions related to political activities and dissent. Activists and opposition politicians have reported cyber espionage, with email accounts and social media

profiles being hacked (Mugari and Chisuvi, 2021). These incidents indicate the exposure of private communications and information, thereby compromising the security and privacy of individuals. Furthermore, there have been complaints that the government uses spyware and surveillance technology to target activists and opposition members (Feldstein, 2019). This spyware allows for the monitoring of calls, messages, and online activities, as well as tracking the physical location of individuals.

China has extensive experience in building robust digital surveillance infrastructures and is a supplier of choice for authoritarian regimes seeking to deploy surveillance systems against their own citizens. Zimbabwe, having signed partnerships with Chinese companies under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a beneficiary of Chinese surveillance technology (Polyakova and Maserole, 2019). Following the Chinese model of state surveillance, Gallagher (2019) reports that, in collaboration with the Chinese cyber tech company Cloud Walk, the Zimbabwean government is developing a national facial recognition database and monitoring system in cities across the country. This marks the first instance of China deploying Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in Africa (Gallagher, 2019). Zimbabwe is acquiring this AI technology to monitor protests and track opponents of the ZANU PF government. Gallagher further explains that facial recognition is being used at political rallies, with drones capturing photographic footage. The deployment of such technology reflects the government's desire for social control. A Chinese company, Semptian, has developed a surveillance system that can be covertly embedded within phone and internet networks to monitor citizens' emails, phone calls, text messages, mobile phone locations, and web browsing activities (Gallagher, 2019). Gallagher elaborates that Semptian's Aegis system can monitor the private communications of entire populations and track location information, while also blocking specific online content. This technology, which can be purchased for between US\$1.5 million and US\$2.5 million, is available to any government except Syria and Iran. The Zimbabwean government has control over the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), which it uses to regulate telecommunications infrastructure. Through POTRAZ, the government monitors phone calls and text messages, which are commonly used for political organising and communication among activists and opposition members (Ndlela, 2010). Additionally, government agencies, through POTRAZ, have surveillance powers for national security and law enforcement purposes. The government also uses informants and undercover agents to infiltrate activist groups and opposition parties (Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove, and Saki, 2023). These individuals gather information, which is then reported back to government

authorities. The information obtained through surveillance is utilised in both legal and extra-legal proceedings against activists and opposition politicians, including charges related to public disorder, incitement to violence, or other offences.

2.4.3 Counter-narratives

The government and its supporters employ counter-narrative strategies to undermine the credibility of online activists and opposition politicians. Government officials, alongside state-controlled media outlets, issue official statements and press releases that present their version of events (Rasch, 2021). These statements are designed to downplay or refute allegations of governmental wrongdoing. State-controlled media, which hold significant influence in Zimbabwe, are utilised by the government to disseminate pro-government narratives through news reports, opinion pieces, and talk shows, which offer a platform for government supporters to articulate their views (Mazango, 2017). This strategy is particularly effective given that most ZANU PF supporters are concentrated in rural areas, where radio and newspapers are the most accessible forms of media (Mpofu, 2023). The government and its supporters focus on highlighting their own achievements or positive developments while downplaying or disregarding negative events or allegations (Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu, 2022). This effort aims to create a more favourable image of the government and deflect attention from criticism. In its counter-narrative, the government appeals to nationalist and patriotic sentiments, positioning itself as the defender of the gains from the liberation struggle, national interests, and portraying activists and opposition figures as unpatriotic and aligned with a Western regime-change agenda (Chibwe, 2020).

Faced with the popularity of social media platforms among the younger generation and Zimbabwean diaspora, the government resorts to rhetoric reminiscent of the liberation war era, labelling opposition politicians, civil society organisations, and all other anti-ZANU PF activists as agents of the West (Maringira and Gukurume, 2022). ZANU PF supporters maintain that they are the true custodians of Zimbabwe's sovereignty and territorial integrity, dating back to Mugabe's era. Any dissenting voice, particularly those condemning corruption, human rights violations, misrule, or state abuse, is thus regarded as an enemy, aligned with the imperialist former coloniser and their allies, who are perceived to be seeking to destabilise an independent Zimbabwe (Dzimiri, Runhare, Dzimiri, and Mazorodze, 2014). Consequently, the government justifies its actions as measures to protect the country against aggression by these Western powers and their allies.

Pro-government individuals and groups launch social media campaigns to challenge and discredit opposition narratives. The term "Varakashi," used on Twitter and Facebook, refers to pro-ZANU PF individuals and groups who engage in digital platforms (Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu, 2022). The technologically astute within ZANU PF have responded to President Mnangagwa's call for the youth to counter negative posts from the opposition online. ZANU PF operates in a manner akin to a military structure, with a problem-solving approach grounded in military tactics, as exemplified by operations like *Operation Maguta* (Kauma and Swart, 2022) for agricultural reform, or *Operation Murambatsvina* to address urban slum and squatter issues. A similar approach is applied to suppressing opposition voices in the digital sphere. For ZANU PF, engagement with opposing voices online is not seen as participation in the digital public sphere, but rather as an unacceptable neoliberal endeavour. The opposition, in ZANU PF's view, is not a domestic movement but a Western initiative aimed at illicitly instigating regime change. Consequently, the opposition must be dealt with decisively and eliminated swiftly. ZANU PF has therefore deployed cyber troops to flood the digital communication space with pro-government propaganda, and any vocal dissent is met with online trolling.

Chikafa-Chipiro critically examines the impact of the Varakashi phenomenon, particularly how it harms female activists and opposition politicians. She asserts that "The lives of Zimbabwean women in politics are continually subjected to multiple forms of violence online and offline. The 2023 election and its campaign period have shown that the socio-economic and political landscape is unpredictable with serious threats to women's participation in politics" (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2023, p. 15). Beyond the activities of Varakashi on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, the government also engages in disinformation and propaganda campaigns to spread false or misleading information designed to discredit activists and opposition politicians. Online trolling and harassment of activists and opposition figures are common, with groups of fake users adopting false identities to flood social media or online forums with specific messages intended to suppress opposition viewpoints (Marchant and Stremlau, 2020). The government has also been known to deploy bots—automated programs used to distort conversations by overwhelming platforms with misinformation and fake news. Moyo (2021) highlights prominent human rights advocates such as Beatrice Mtetwa and Douglas Coltart as prime targets of state-led social media trolling. Coltart, a human rights lawyer, is quoted by Moyo (2021) as stating that he is frequently trolled on Twitter. Student activists, opposition leaders, and critical journalists are also victims of this form of online harassment.

2.5 Summary and conclusions

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on online activism in the West, the MENA region, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Southern Africa region, and Zimbabwe. In the West, online activism is closely linked to the e-Government initiatives of democratic governments. Consequently, online activism is generally recognised and, in some cases, even supported by the authorities within these polities. In the MENA region, online media played a pivotal role in mobilising radical protests that led to the overthrow of several governments. The initial successes of the Arab Spring inspired hope among those advocating for revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, while youth in Sub-Saharan Africa harnessed digital platforms to mobilise for protests that resulted in the downfall of unpopular governments, the ruling elites managed to reinvent themselves, often emerging as the new rulers in place of the overthrown leadership. This pattern was evident in several Sub-Saharan African countries where unpopular governments were ousted. In Nigeria, for instance, the government simply rebranded the SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad), with operations previously conducted by the SARS now being carried out by a newly named unit. In Guinea, after Alpha Condé was ousted, chaos ensued, and his former comrades seized power following a military coup. In Southern Africa, despite the youth's spirited mobilisation via social media platforms, their aspirations largely went unfulfilled. In South Africa, university education remains prohibitively expensive for the children of the poor, beyond the reach of many. In Eswatini, King Mswati continues to wield full control, with no significant reforms taking place. In Zimbabwe, repression has intensified under the Mnangagwa government, which has introduced even more restrictive legislation concerning digital communication than was the case under Mugabe.

I also examined how the government attempts to contain online activism through state apparatus, legal instruments, and technology. The ubiquity of digital technology has made it easier for the government to surveil, monitor, and track individuals of interest. This enables the government to exert a more effective form of repression over the digital communication space. Additionally, I explored how the government actively engages online, with pro-government activists providing counter-narratives. The government deploys these activists to flood the digital communication space with pro-government narratives while simultaneously discrediting the opposition.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses three theoretical concepts that inform the study: the Digital Public Sphere, Communicative Capitalism, and Data Colonialism.

3.2 The Digital Public Sphere

This section comprises four subsections. The first subsection defines the concepts of the public sphere and the digital public sphere. The second subsection critically examines the issue of meaningful access, specifically the unequal distribution of benefits or the ability to derive benefits. The third subsection explores the notion of rational deliberation. Finally, the fourth subsection critically engages with the issue of fragmentation.

3.2.1 Definitions

The concept of the public sphere was first proposed by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in the 1960s. He argues that society should have a space where citizens can convene to discuss and debate issues of common concern, free from state control and manipulation (Calhoun, 1992). This sphere should function as a domain of social life where something akin to public opinion can be formulated (Habermas, Lennox & Lennox, 1974). It ought to be characterised by inclusivity, rational debate, and a commitment to the common good (Kellner, 2014). As a public platform, it allows citizens to congregate indiscriminately to exchange ideas regarding public affairs. Discussions within this sphere are intended to be inclusive, with issues thoroughly debated until a consensus is reached.

Habermas (1989) introduces the notion of the public sphere by delineating the significance of the term 'public'. He asserts that events or occasions are deemed public when they impose no restrictions and are open to all, in contrast to private or exclusive affairs. He argues that the idea of the public is intrinsically linked to the concept of the common, which, in turn, is associated with notions such as community. This is exemplified by the communal use of resources, such as marketplaces, public water reservoirs, and shared organisational structures.

At the centre of the modern public sphere lies the media. The mass media can provide a public sphere where citizens engage in debate within a democratic forum (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). This serves as a platform through which those in positions of power can be held accountable (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Additionally, the media plays a crucial role in informing,

educating, and engaging the public by disseminating news, analysis, and multiple perspectives on pertinent issues. By shaping public opinion and fostering debate among the government, organisations, and the public, the media ensures transparency and facilitates the exchange of ideas (Lowe, Van den Bulck & Donders, 2017).

A fundamental aspect of the public sphere is freedom of expression, which allows individuals to articulate their opinions and perspectives (Carlson & Weibull, 2018). However, this freedom is not absolute and may be subject to legal restrictions, such as those preventing or punishing incitement to violence, hate speech, or defamation. The quality and availability of information significantly influence individuals' ability to engage in informed discussions within the public sphere (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Barriers to accessing reliable information, such as censorship or limited media diversity, can hinder meaningful participation.

A particularly robust conception of the public sphere, arguably more so than the bourgeois public sphere explored by Habermas, is that of the agora in the city-states of ancient Greece. Dickenson (2014) contends that the classical era of ancient Greece, specifically the 5th to 4th centuries BCE, was characterised by open spaces where the public convened to deliberate on social and political matters of the day. The perception that these agora meetings were more dynamic and inclusive than the European coffee houses or contemporary elitist print, broadcast, or internet-mediated spheres is based on the all-encompassing nature of the agoras. However, it can be argued that the agora was not entirely inclusive, as it excluded women and lower social classes within the city-states (Kennedy, 2014).

The idea of a public sphere existed in pre-colonial Zimbabwe in the form of the *dariro* and *dare* (Ncube and Tomaselli, 2019). The pre-colonial *dare* was held at different levels. It was held at the household level, village level or at the level of the chief's court (Masitera, 2019). The traditional *dare* concept had significant gender balance attributes. At the household level, the women of the household, that is the aunts (*vana tete*) of the family could call for the *dare* gathering and preside over the proceedings. All the members of the clan would respect the outcome of the *dare* by the *tetes*. At community level, citizens were free to participate with the community leadership presiding. The headman or chief pronounced judgement after consulting and having been recommended by the court's council. Ncube and Tomaselli elaborate that

At the denotative level, *Dariro* means a place or group arrangement in which people sit facing one another and are able to see one another. It also means the physical space defined as a centre by the

sitting persons. However, at connotative level, *Dairo* becomes densely rich. It is a place for considering one another and one's contributions, ideas, needs, aspirations and concerns; the place of looking forward together; the place of collective morale, mutual confidence building, faith and optimism built on consensus, trust and reconciliation of otherwise, initially diverse views moulded into one position through processes of *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* (call and response) (Ncube and Tomaselli, 2014).

The *dare*, or *Chivara*, was a designated space located outside the yard or on its periphery in any homestead (Jaure, Makura, & Alexander, 2022). Within this space, the men of the family would gather around a fire while the women occupied the cooking *rondavels*. Men and boys did not partake in food preparation within the kitchens. Instead, they remained by the fireside, engaging in craftwork such as the production of tools, equipment, and weapons. The *dare* functioned as a site for intergenerational engagement, where younger males interacted with their elders. It served as an informal educational setting in which knowledge and cultural values were transmitted. Fathers imparted lessons on farming, hunting, politics, and warfare to their sons, while uncles provided guidance on courtship, marriage, and reproduction. However, this public sphere was disrupted by colonialism, as Native Commissioners forcibly conscripted teenage boys and men for labour (*Chibharo*) in mines, farms, road construction, and other infrastructural projects for white settlers (Kwashirai, 2010). Formal education, introduced by the state and missionaries, further removed children from their homes, redirecting them towards schooling and, subsequently, employment opportunities away from their communities.

The nationalist movement sought to revive the *dare* concept, albeit in a restructured form. Drawing upon the political models of their communist allies, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) nationalists adapted traditional structures, renaming them with Shona terminology. One such example was *Dare re Chimurenga* (Council of War), which referred to the leadership hierarchy comprising both political and military figures within ZANU and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) (Chikuhwa, 2013). There is, however, no evidence to suggest that these nationalist structures incorporated youth for the explicit purpose of grooming future leaders in social, political, or economic spheres. Instead, the *dare* concept was co-opted by the political elite during the liberation struggle. This pattern of political dominance persists in post-independence structures such as *matare* (parliament and judiciary), including the two houses of assembly and the courts of law.

The *nhimbe* was a communal labour practice predominantly observed among the Shona people in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe, and it continues in some rural communities today. The *nhimbe* was based on the principle of cooperative agricultural work (Sithole, 2014). As a public sphere, these gatherings served as platforms for communal censure, where individuals were subtly reprimanded for their misdeeds (Gwindingwe & Zinhumwe, 2023). Notably, all members of society, regardless of status, were subject to this form of social correction. Village heads, chiefs, and other authority figures were not exempt from criticism. However, direct confrontation was discouraged. Instead, reprimands were conveyed through song and dance. The transgressions of individuals were alluded to through satire, caricature, and mimicry, ensuring that the intended audience understood the message without explicit identification. Even those in positions of power, such as chiefs or headmen, did not suppress this expressive form of accountability but rather participated as if it were mere entertainment. Individuals who were the subjects of such songs typically adjusted their behaviour accordingly.

Funerals constituted another significant public sphere in both rural and urban Zimbabwe across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods (Gwindingwe & Zinhumwe, 2023). Lasting two to three days, funerals provided a setting for communal mourning and reflection. However, the underlying social dynamics extended beyond grief, rendering funerals key spaces for public discourse (Gwindingwe & Zinhumwe, 2024). During funeral proceedings, family friends, referred to as *vana Sahwira*, introduced humour to lighten the atmosphere, often by dramatizing aspects of the deceased's personality. For instance, if the deceased had a reputation as a womaniser, the *Sahwira* might theatrically recreate courtship scenarios associated with them. Similarly, if the deceased had been a corrupt politician, their actions might be parodied in front of the gathered mourners. The graveside ceremony also facilitated the revelation of hidden truths about the deceased, such as previously unacknowledged children or undisclosed relationships. These disclosures were subsequently discussed among family members to seek resolution. No topics were deemed too sacred to address within the funeral setting.

Moreover, funeral vigils facilitated cross-political engagement, as mourners from diverse ideological backgrounds shared food, drink, and blankets while engaging in conversations. This environment temporarily suspended political divisions, allowing for an exchange of perspectives.

With the advent of the internet and social media, the public sphere has expanded into digital spaces. The term *digital public sphere* refers to the dissemination of information, critical

publicity, and public debate mediated through digital information and communication technologies (Schafer, 2015; Sousa, Pinto, & Costa e Silva, 2013). Online platforms provide avenues for individuals and groups to engage in discourse on political, social, and cultural issues (Gripsrud & Moe, 2010). Cardon, Granjon, and Heurtin (2013) describe the digital public sphere as a networked arena where individuals participate in discussions, debate issues, and shape public opinion through social media, forums, and online communities.

Social media has broadened and transformed the public sphere into an interactive communication space. Scholars such as Fuchs (2012), Jenkins (2006), Loader and Mercea (2011), Papacharissi (2010), and Sorensen (2016) contend that the internet, particularly social media platforms, exhibits characteristics that align with the requisites of a public sphere. Fuchs (2021) posits that the digital public sphere represents an adaptation of the traditional public sphere in societies where digital communication prevails. Within this space, information creation, critical discourse, and public debate are facilitated through digital communication technologies. Schafer (2015) adds that the digital public sphere comprises communicative platforms provided by social media, including websites, weblogs, and microblogs, where participation is unrestricted and accessible to all interested individuals. In this sphere, matters of public concern can be discussed transparently.

With regard to the digital public sphere, Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen (2017) argue that digital platforms and social networks have facilitated a process of democratisation, enabling broader public participation in political discussions. The internet plays a crucial role in shaping civil society organisations' efforts to promote the rule of law in transitional states (Fenton & Anderson, 2013). However, challenges remain, particularly concerning information quality and the risks associated with echo chambers (Giannelos, 2023). Scholarly discussions on the digital public sphere continue to examine key dimensions such as accessibility and inclusivity, diversity of voices, information quality, and levels of engagement and participation.

3.2.2 Access and benefits

The digital public sphere is not universally accessible, particularly for ordinary citizens in the developing economies of the Global South. The challenges associated with access to the digital public sphere pose a significant challenge to the Habermasian conception of the public sphere. “Habermas envisioned an inclusive public sphere as a deliberative forum for generating public

opinion to satisfy epistemic and normative conditions underlying legitimate decision making” (Ingram & Bar-Tura, 2014, p.1).

Regarding access to the digital public sphere, Ragnedda and Ruiu (2018, p.21) identify three levels of the digital divide. These include access to the Internet (first level), how users engage with and utilise the Internet (second level), and the benefits derived from such engagement (third level). Material or physical access refers to an individual’s economic capacity to acquire devices such as smartphones and computers, as well as the financial means to afford internet connectivity. This form of access fundamentally determines an individual’s ability to participate in online discussions, debates, and information exchange across various digital platforms. In developed economies, where ICT infrastructure is sufficiently established, the digital public sphere has the potential to replace or significantly enhance the traditional pre-internet public sphere. In this context, Schafer (2015) notes that scholars have emphasised the relatively open, rapid, and easy access to information facilitated by online media. He further elaborates that the activities of various stakeholders—such as political institutions, corporations, universities, churches, and non-governmental organisations—can be readily observed online. The Internet, therefore, provides the reading public with a wealth of information on diverse viewpoints, potentially fostering critical reflection, greater care in discussing issues, and improved public debate (Schafer, 2015).

However, the developing economies of the Global South do not afford their citizens the same privileges that access to the Internet entails. Thus, access to the digital public sphere cannot be analysed through the same lens as in the Global North. Highlighting the limitations of the Internet as a public sphere in terms of accessibility, Moyo (2009) identifies several challenges, including social exclusion due to poverty, the prohibitive cost of advanced technologies, shrinking public and individual access due to corporate profiteering, counter-surveillance technologies, poor connectivity, outdated technology, a lack of relevant content, technophobia, commercial intrusions such as pop-up advertisements, and vulnerability to cyber threats such as viruses (Moyo, 2009). While material access is often the primary focus when discussing digital inequalities, mere access does not necessarily translate to meaningful engagement or the ability to derive benefits from online participation. In Zimbabwe, for example, the digital public sphere is profoundly impacted by the digital divide, exacerbated by factors such as economic instability, a volatile political environment, critical literacy levels, social class, education, race, ethnicity, and gender (Moyo, 2020).

Epistemological access within the digital public sphere refers to individuals' knowledge of ICT and the barriers associated with it (Gripsrud & Moe, 2010). Effective participation requires digital literacy skills, including the ability to navigate online platforms, critically evaluate information, and protect one's privacy. Regarding skill-based access, Hargittai, Piper, and Morris (2019, p.1) argue that "the theory of digital inequality suggests that even once people have gone online, differences among them will persist in important ways such as their online skills". Digital literacy, which encompasses the ability to effectively navigate online spaces, critically assess information, and adhere to online etiquette, is essential. Without these competencies, individuals may struggle to engage meaningfully in the digital public sphere. Moyo (2009) further identifies technological literacy as a key factor limiting participation in the digital public sphere. Additionally, language barriers can hinder access, particularly when digital platforms are predominantly available in a language that users do not understand (Fuchs, 2021). This presents significant challenges in Africa, where digital interfaces are primarily designed in European languages, thereby excluding the illiterate and semi-literate due to epistemological access constraints (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). In Zimbabwe, for instance, the majority of the population primarily communicates in Shona and Ndebele, yet digital media platforms are predominantly available in English (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018). Consequently, language becomes a significant barrier to effective online communication.

With regard to benefits, Moyo (2009) argues that the digital public sphere presents opportunities that may benefit only a select few, while being exploited and appropriated by the powerful to the detriment of the weak and marginalised. He elaborates on this perspective by asserting that those with economic and political dominance consistently leverage advancements in communication technology to further their own interests. From a cyber-optimist perspective, however, the Internet provides users with opportunities for interaction and the exchange of information essential for social, economic, and political development. This cyber-optimist stance, described by Ragnedda and Ruiu (2018, p.21) as a "techno-evangelist approach," envisions the Internet as a space of freedom where people from diverse backgrounds can collaborate. Scholars such as Schafer (2015) champion this perspective, emphasising that online media empower a greater number of individuals to make their voices heard in society. According to Schafer, online content can be published with relative ease, bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as journalists, while connective action enables peer-to-peer communication that is less dependent on large-scale infrastructure and harder for authorities to control (Schafer, 2015).

However, the cyber-optimist viewpoint has been increasingly challenged by growing scepticism regarding the benefits of the Internet. For instance, Ragnedda and Ruiu (2018, p.21) adopt a more critical stance, asserting that “a techno-sceptic approach sees the other side of the coin, in which the Internet users increase their activity online while decreasing and weakening their social interactions and civil participation offline”. This argument suggests that the initial optimism surrounding digital engagement is being supplanted by a more nuanced and critical perspective.

3.2.3 Rational deliberation

Habermas conceptualised a particular form of communication when he formulated the idea of the public sphere, namely communicative rationality—the rationality of genuine discussion (Blau, 2022). In the Habermasian ideal public sphere, different parties are expected to be committed to truth and respect rather than merely seeking to win arguments or pursue their own interests. Such a rational, respectful, honest, and disinterested mode of communication does not align with the reality of most online interactions. In political contestation, interlocutors often seek not to persuade opponents but to discredit them and dominate the narrative by any means necessary.

Moyo (2009), Schäfer (2015), and Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen (2017) have expressed concerns regarding the topics discussed in online media, recognising the political and economic influences at play. Schäfer is particularly concerned that the conditions of public debate online may foster specific forms of communication. He argues that the clear sense of the other and their identity, along with the accompanying social obligations stemming from face-to-face interactions, are absent in online discourse, rendering rational debate unlikely. From a sceptical, constructionist perspective on the public sphere, more emotional and confrontational debates, as well as phenomena such as trolling, may not necessarily be problematic. However, from participatory and deliberative standpoints, such tendencies are undesirable. The issue identified by Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen (2017) is that while online spaces offer diversity, this diversity also includes racist, extremist, or otherwise deviant viewpoints. Schäfer (2015) and Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen (2017) concur that digital public spheres align more closely with constructionist theory than with deliberative, participatory theory. They assert that although political discussions online tend to be more moderate and civil compared to discussions on other topics, they significantly diverge from rational, civil deliberation. Participants frequently stray off-topic, employ unpleasant or abusive language, and engage in ad hominem attacks.

Online interlocutors may present claims without supporting arguments or eschew rational argumentation entirely, instead leveraging their social standing within a given platform to delegitimise opposing views or silence opponents (Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen, 2017).

The availability of the internet and social media platforms does not inherently equate to genuine citizen participation in the public sphere. Crouch (2017) contends that online communications are often more performative than genuinely engaged discussions between interlocutors. His analysis of the digital public sphere presents a complex picture of its functions in facilitating deliberation, shaping opinion, and mobilising citizens' voices. On one hand, digital platforms provide a space for activists to express their views and organise offline action. On the other hand, these platforms can exacerbate political polarisation through uncivil attacks, the dissemination of fake news, and the spread of misinformation. Another pertinent issue in assessing the normative impact of the digital transformation of the public sphere is its influence on representative democratic institutions (Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen, 2017). The decline of broadcast journalism has enabled direct communication between politicians and the electorate, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and allowing new political celebrities to set the agenda (Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen, 2017).

Through the digital public sphere, individuals and groups have expanded their modes of discussion, opinion expression, and cultural participation. This expansion manifests through carnival, humour, satire, and music. Regarding carnival, Hanif, Irshad, and Mann (2024, p. 1) assert that "carnavalesque subversion operates through the inversion of entrenched hierarchies and established doctrines. It dismantles the perceived notions of power and authority." These creative and expressive elements play a crucial role in shaping public discourse, fostering community, and challenging dominant narratives. Carnival, traditionally a festive event characterised by parades, music, dance, and the blurring of social boundaries, is described by Langman (2014) as a celebration of anti-structural transgressive elements. In the digital public sphere, carnival and related cultural expressions are amplified through social media, online communities, and video-sharing platforms, enabling individuals to speak truth to power. Others employ satire and humour, which are powerful tools for commentary and critique (Kuipers, 2011). These modes of expression allow individuals to engage with serious issues in a light-hearted yet thought-provoking manner. On digital platforms, memes, humorous videos, and satirical content can spread rapidly, reaching vast audiences (Amir, 2021). Such expressions

can challenge authority, expose hypocrisy, and stimulate critical thinking while simultaneously fostering a sense of shared amusement.

Music has long served as a medium for social and political expression (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998). In the digital public sphere, songs and music videos can be easily disseminated, enabling artists to convey messages, raise awareness about social issues, and celebrate cultural heritage. Online platforms provide musicians with access to a global audience, transcending geographical boundaries and sharing their artistry with diverse communities. Digital platforms also facilitate the creation of parodies of political figures, institutions, and popular culture (Literat and Kliger-Vilenchik, 2021). Such parodies function as social commentary, highlighting absurdities, challenging norms, and questioning authority while engaging audiences in discussions of current events. For example, social media comedians such as Bus Stop TV are renowned for mimicking corruption among authorities, particularly within the traffic police force (Nyaungwa, 2021). However, their satirical portrayals have resulted in arrests, particularly when exposing corruption within the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP).

Music has historically been harnessed for political messaging. During the liberation struggle, music was a mobilisation tool used to inspire resistance against settler colonialism, with the Chimurenga Shona musical genre playing a prominent role (Chikowero, 2008). However, in the post-independence period, the same genre has been employed by artists such as Thomas Mapfumo to critique the hardships endured under ZANU-PF rule (Marara, 2023). Some of Mapfumo's songs, such as "Corruption," have been banned by the government. Similarly, younger artists, including Winky D, use the Zimdancehall genre—a form of reggae music popular among urban youth—to highlight socio-political struggles (Mavengano, 2023). These artists circumvent government bans on their music by sharing their work on YouTube, thereby reaching a wide audience.

Governments with authoritarian tendencies are increasingly leveraging the internet to advance their interests, sometimes even more effectively than their opponents. Morozov (2009) conceptualised the term "spinternet" to describe how authoritarian regimes manipulate the internet's democratic potential to shape public opinion while creating the illusion of grassroots mobilisation (Kerr, 2015). The spinternet utilises search engine optimisation to amplify specific perspectives, allowing governments to disseminate propaganda while appearing to engage with citizens. Observing how opposition groups effectively utilise new media for criticism, authoritarian governments have adopted similar techniques to spread their own spin.

The term "spin," originating from public relations and political practice, refers to a form of propaganda involving biased interpretations of events to shape public perception (Maloney, 2002; Samoilenko, 2017; Pearson and Patching, 2008). Morozov (2011, p. 117) describes the spinternet as "a web with little censorship but lots of spin and propaganda," reinforcing authoritarian ideological supremacy. Rather than relying solely on censorship, authoritarian governments strategically employ online propaganda. Morozov (2011) observes that China, for instance, employs actors to portray the Communist government positively, while Russia enlists young, technologically savvy influencers within government ranks. Other governments, including that of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, have used Twitter to engage younger citizens and control political narratives. According to Morozov (2011, p. 139), "One of the features of today's globalised world is how authoritarian governments learn from each other; any new innovations in internet control by the most advanced are likely to trickle down to others."

The increasing use of spin by governments exacerbates divisions within online political discourse. For instance, the Zimbabwean government's strategic use of spin in response to local and international critiques of ZANU-PF has intensified political polarisation along rigid partisan lines (Mazango, 2017).

3.2.4 Fragmentation

The internet's facilitation of a digital public sphere has contributed to the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles. These phenomena refer to the selective grouping of interlocutors based on political orientation, belief systems, and shared interests (Interian, Marzo, Mendoza, & Ribeiro, 2023). Discussing this concept, Bruns and Highfield (2015, p. 1) observe that "the mass media-dominated environment described by the public sphere has given way to a considerably more fragmented and complex system of distinct and diverse, yet interconnected and overlapping publics that represent different themes, topics, and approaches to mediated communication."

For instance, Schäfer (2015) questions the diversity of online debates, arguing that even among those who actively participate, there is a risk of fragmentation into small communities of like-minded individuals. The tendency to produce information derived from past communications encourages ideological homogeneity, thereby fostering filter bubbles that users may not consciously recognize. The rise of social media has further reinforced this phenomenon by introducing an inherently social dimension (Schäfer, 2015). Schäfer notes that in such digital

spaces, users can curate their interactions by choosing whom to follow and what content to consume, often filtering out perspectives that appear unfamiliar or conflicting.

Keijzer and Mäs (2022) highlight that such selective exposure leads to an echo chamber effect, wherein particular viewpoints remain unchallenged and are instead continuously reinforced within online communities. As a result, individuals are not exposed to diverse perspectives and may become less inclined to critically evaluate their own viewpoints. Furthermore, Cohen, Fung, Bernholz, Landemore, and Reich (2021) argue that the echo chamber effect can create a false sense of empowerment, as individuals may overestimate their influence within the digital public sphere.

Another drawback of echo chambers is that while individuals may perceive themselves as engaging in public discourse, they may be shielded from opposing viewpoints. This dynamic can lead to the misallocation of time and effort towards online engagement at the expense of more substantive forms of civic participation (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). Consequently, echo chambers and filter bubbles restrict the diversity of discourse, limiting exposure to novel or alternative perspectives and thereby contributing to the fragmentation of the digital public sphere.

In Zimbabwe, social media communities formed along political party affiliations reinforce societal divisions rather than fostering rational dialogue across ideological boundaries (Zirugo, 2023).

3.3 Capitalist capture of online activism

In this section, I examine the relationship between online activism and capitalist exploitation, drawing on the work of seminal authors such as Jodi Dean, Shoshana Zuboff, and Christian Fuchs. Specifically, I focus on the issues of freedom of expression and the exploitation of individuals' use of the internet, digital platforms, and social media by technology companies for profit.

3.3.1 Communicative capitalism

The profit-driven objectives of online platforms limit their potential as tools for democratisation. These platforms rely on capturing users' data to generate advertising revenue (Rieser and Furneaux, 2022). This occurs when platforms prioritise content that generates

clicks, likes, and shares in order to increase user engagement and advertising revenue (Yousef, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele, 2021). As a result, sensationalised or emotionally charged content is prioritised over substantive and nuanced information. Meaningful discussions on complex political issues are relegated in favour of sensational and controversial, yet less informative, content. The pursuit of profit also influences content moderation policies on online platforms (Liu, Yildirim and Zhang, 2021). This control over online spaces creates pressure on individuals and organisations to balance the need for free expression with the responsibility to curb harmful content. The consequence is often inconsistent or controversial decisions regarding content removal and censorship. Some online platforms routinely collect user data to enable targeted advertising (Ulla, Boleri and Kanhere, 2023). While this allows for more efficient advertising, it undermines the freedom of participation, as it frequently leads to the manipulation of users' beliefs and behaviours. Political actors and external entities exploit harvested user data to engage in targeted advertising, thereby influencing public opinion and potentially undermining democratic processes (Van Drunen, Helberger and Fathaigh, 2022). It can be argued that social media platforms were not designed to foster democratic participation but to generate profit from continuous communication.

Communicative capitalism, a term coined by Jodi Dean (2005), can be defined as a form of capitalism in which communication serves as a central driver of economic value. The information generated through exchanges by online communicators is harvested and sold by corporations without the communicators' knowledge or consent. Dean (2019, p. 8) asserts that: "Communicative capitalism's apps and trackers amplify the synchronization of common time and enclose forms for capitalist appropriation. For example, they measure how long a viewer spends on a particular web page, or whether a person watches an entire advertisement or clicks off after five seconds."

To the detriment of political communication or activism, the concept of communicative capitalism illustrates that value is not placed on the quality of content but rather on the quantity of communication streams. Dean (2005, p. 59) argues that "In communicative capitalism, the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a large pool, flow or circulation of content." Corporations collect and analyse vast amounts of user data to understand preferences, behaviour, and interests (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). This analysis enables businesses to optimise the consumer journey and create personalised experiences (Anshari, Almunawar and Al-Mudimigh, 2019). According to Prodnik (2015, p.

1), "Processes of transforming literally anything into a privatised form of (fictitious) commodity that can be exchanged in the market are thus of critical importance for both the rise and continuing reproduction of capitalism." Therefore, through the commodification of attention on the one hand and data on the other, capitalists extract value from communication. Online activism is thus treated as free digital labour. Declining symbolic efficiency, endless reflexivity, slacktivism, and virtue signalling divert attention from the real issues or offline action, as large technology companies do not profit from people demonstrating or solving problems. Their objective is to keep individuals trapped in cycles of endless discussions, as this generates greater income

3.3.2 Capture mechanisms

Decreasing symbolic efficiency refers to the use of symbols, such as hashtags and memes, to replace arguments, explanations, and actual opinions. While symbols can indeed be powerful tools for conveying meaning, their effectiveness depends on mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver. Tufekci (2017) posits that symbols, such as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, have been pivotal in representing global movements advocating for justice. The simplicity of the symbol belies its capacity to communicate a complex message, rallying individuals worldwide in the fight for racial equality. Similarly, Highfield and Leaver (2015) explore the concept of profile picture overlays, where users alter their profile pictures with overlays during protests as a means of expressing collective identity and solidarity. Memes also serve as powerful tools for political commentary, with Milner (2013) suggesting that memes distil intricate issues into digestible forms. These are often presented as humour or satire, yet they convey nuanced critiques or support for specific causes. Emojis, too, are harnessed in online activism; Hancock, Hilverman, Cook, and Halvorson (2023) note that emojis function as symbols that transcend cultural boundaries, carrying similar meanings across diverse online communities. For instance, the emoji depicting a yellow face with blue streaks running down its cheeks and an open mouth is universally recognised as a symbol of distress.

Digital art has become another prominent feature of online activism, typically shared on platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr. Senft and Baym (2015) investigate this visual form of expression, concluding that digital art not only conveys powerful messages but also evokes emotional responses and prompts important conversations. Moreover, online activists have adopted digital activist logos, which are emblematic symbols of their movements or struggles

(Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). The raised fist, for example, is one of the most recognisable activist logos. Virtual spaces also host silent protests, whereby activists change their usernames or profile pictures to particular symbols, thus creating a visual presence without the need for explicit language (Postill and Pink, 2012). Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate the dissemination of political messages through digital graffiti and street art (Iriberry and Leroy, 2009). Additionally, digital activists effectively employ Twitter storms—coordinated efforts in which specific hashtags are used within a set timeframe to amplify a message (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). This form of rapid-fire hashtag activism is a strategic means of gaining attention and enabling collective expression. Virtual sit-ins and online protests, as McCosker, Wilken, and Wilken (2017) point out, disrupt digital spaces and symbolise dissent.

However, Dean (2010) critiques the diminishing symbolic efficiency, highlighting instances where symbols fail to transmit meaningful content. Drawing on the example of blogs, she illustrates how meaning may be clear to some audiences but obscure to others. As Dean (2010) argues, "it is difficult to tell when a blog or a post is ironic and when it is sincere, when it is funny and when it is serious" (p. 5). Furthermore, the choice of words and expressions that resonate with in-group members may appear incomprehensible, even offensive, to outsiders. Dean (2010) takes a negative view of symbols in online activism, including hashtags, memes, emojis, reaction GIFs, and even linguistic patterns designed for search engine optimisation (Dean, 2019). She contends that these shortcuts, while facilitating communication flow, lack real depth, and contribute to the prominence of generic markers that keep content circulating without regard for the effectiveness of the messages conveyed.

Endless reflexivity refers to a phenomenon where online activists find themselves engaged in perpetual debates that fail to produce substantive outcomes. Dean (2010) elaborates on this by suggesting that "when reflexivity goes all the way down... the endless loop of reflexivity becomes the very form of capture and absorption" (p. 13). Although such debates may prove ineffective in advancing political discourse, they are profitable in terms of communicative capitalism. Dean (2005) notes that social media content created by activists contributes to the "attention economy," where initially meaningful expressions of activism are commodified (Dean, 2005). The visibility achieved by such online activism is often capitalised on by profit-driven entities through what Dean (2009) terms "spectacle," a prioritisation of appearance over substance. Dean (2010) argues that a fully reflexive self is incompatible with democracy, as it shifts the focus from political engagement to the mere appearance of engagement.

Consequently, visibility tends to overshadow the real political issues that activism seeks to address, fragmenting online activism and preventing the development of a cohesive resistance narrative.

Critics argue that online activism is often reduced to performative acts, where individuals, particularly influencers or celebrities, engage in activism as a means of self-promotion (Wellman, 2022; Dolan, 2001). These "performative activists" use social media to broadcast their involvement in social causes, not to advance society but to enhance their personal brands. Another form of criticism is the rise of slacktivism, which refers to activism that requires minimal effort, such as liking, sharing, or forwarding content (Christensen, 2011). Slacktivism, as Ralston (2022) suggests, is often seen as ineffectual, as it involves little personal involvement or risk. Such actions are typically categorised as digital spectator activism (George and Leidner, 2019). The concept of "slacktivism" is extended by Morozov, who proposes that limiting activism to the digital realm results in shallow and short-lived impacts (Ralston, 2022). According to George and Leidner (2019), slacktivism, including actions like liking or following on social media without providing original input, lacks real commitment and fails to stimulate meaningful change.

Dean (2005) criticises slacktivism, suggesting that it is a form of "interpassivity," where individuals believe their actions, such as clicking a button or signing a petition, constitute meaningful engagement. In fact, Dean argues that such actions prevent real political change, as they embody a kind of passivity masked as activity. She terms this process "fetishisation," where the frantic circulation of content prevents actual action from taking place. Slacktivism, in this sense, represents a disavowal of more impactful, offline protest actions, rendering it ineffectual in challenging existing power structures.

Furthermore, digital petitions, which are often seen as a hallmark of online activism, have been criticised for their potential to be manipulated by governments. While e-petitions can be effective in democratic contexts, where governments respond to petitions with significant public support (Leston-Bandeira, 2019), they have also been used to advance non-democratic agendas. For example, President Obama faced criticism for using e-petitions to further policy goals related to gun control, with signatories often being the same individuals repeatedly signing petitions on the same issue (Spitzer, 2020). Similarly, authoritarian regimes use petitions to promote their own agendas, as seen with pro-government activists pushing for the swift passage of the Patriotic Bill in 2023.

Moreover, online activism can fall victim to virtue signalling, where individuals engage in moral discourse to enhance their reputations rather than effect real change (Westra, 2021). While some argue that virtue signalling is morally appropriate (Levy, 2020), it remains a contentious practice, as it may overshadow substantive action and be co-opted by commercial entities for reputational gain. This dynamic, when left unchecked, may detract from the genuine pursuit of social justice, reducing activism to symbolic gestures rather than impactful movements for change.

3.3.3 Surveillance capitalism

Surveillance refers to the focused, systematic, and routine monitoring of personal information with the aim of influencing, managing, protecting, or directing individuals by state authorities, corporations, and individuals (Čas et al., 2017, p. 1). Democracies, as well as authoritarian states, often justify violations of digital rights by invoking the fight against terrorism. Under the guise of counterterrorism efforts, public authorities, governments, and supranational organisations have advocated for the deployment of surveillance technologies in the interest of national security (Čas et al., 2017, p. 1). However, the threat of surveillance is not limited to the state alone; technology companies running social media platforms also pose significant risks to digital activists. Governments can request data from these companies, or they may use activists' online posts as evidence for arrest (West, 2017). In response, some individuals, upon realising that they are under surveillance, take protective measures, the most common being self-censorship. This practice involves withholding personal opinions, which can have negative consequences on both professional and personal lives, as well as the quality of public discourse (Celuch et al., 2023). Repressive governments that enact laws threatening political activists in the digital sphere exacerbate self-censorship, particularly within online activist communities (Ong, 2021).

Zuboff's concept of *surveillance capitalism* critiques the capitalist exploitation of the masses in online communication. Surveillance capitalism describes an economic system focused on the collection, analysis, and monetisation of personal data harvested through the surveillance of individuals' online activities and behaviours (Zuboff, 2019). This model is characterised by the appropriation and commercialisation of personal data to generate profit (Zuboff, 2019). For instance, tech giants such as Amazon, Apple, Google, and Facebook use surveillance to collect users' personal data, which includes search histories, social media posts, physical locations,

and even product keywords captured by microphones in smartphones and Internet of Things (IoT) devices (Zuboff, 2019). The way in which this data is used to categorise individuals and potentially influence their political views illustrates the manner in which surveillance capitalism can silence individuals and contribute to social injustices. Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalists manipulate the future by predicting and influencing individuals' behaviours, with their collected data serving not only to forecast actions but also to shape them. Data harvesting occurs when a technology company collects, repackages, and sells user data for profit to third-party organisations. A notable example of this is the case of Cambridge Analytica, a British firm accused of harvesting user data from Facebook without consent and using it to influence the US elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 (ur Rehman, 2019). In contrast to Zuboff's perspective on surveillance capitalism, Venkatesh (2021) presents a Marxist critique of the relationship between technology companies and digital platform users. He contends that the exchange of data for service provision can be viewed as a business transaction: the user seeks to fulfil a communication need, and in return, provides their data, which is monetised by the company. This exchange, however, is not conducted transparently, as the average user remains unaware of how their data is utilised. Consequently, Venkatesh views this relationship as exploitative, operating in bad faith, as users' data is harvested without informed consent.

Moreover, the platforms that digital activists utilise are also susceptible to being weaponised by state agents to monitor and control them. Activist communications are surveilled with the active participation of private phone companies and search engines (Nurik, 2022). This surveillance is not confined to authoritarian regimes; even established democracies engage in similar practices (Coudry, 2019). Notably, China is often cited as the first digital authoritarian state (Gravett, 2022), having developed extensive technologies for surveilling its citizens and suppressing domestic dissent over the past two decades (Gravett, 2022). These Chinese technologies have found a market in African authoritarian states, with 16 African countries reportedly benefiting from Chinese surveillance technologies in 2022 (Jili, 2022). The export of these technologies is facilitated through Huawei's smart city package, which is part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (Jili, 2022, p. 32). Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese firms do not seek to understand the end-user purposes of the technologies they sell, raising concerns about the promotion of unaccountability in authoritarian regimes and the erosion of citizens' digital rights across the African continent (Feldstein, 2019).

3.4 Digital colonialism

This section is divided into three subsections. The first subsection introduces the concept of digital/data colonialism. The second subsection presents the decolonial perspective. Finally, the third subsection explores alternative forms of activism.

3.4.1 Digital activists as colonial subjects

Digital activists are colonial aspects in two respects. First, they are subjects to big corporations. Second, they are subjects to Global North hegemony. Unequal power dynamics in the digital domain reflect the enduring legacy of historical forms of oppression and exploitation, specifically coloniality. Coloniality can be defined as a set of attitudes, values, ways of knowing, and power structures upheld as normative by Western colonial societies, which serve to rationalize and perpetuate Western dominance (Scott, 2005). Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a mode of thought that seeks to dismantle European dominance in knowledge hierarchies and ways of being, aiming to justify the existence of alternative ways of life (de Paula, 2015). Decolonial theory seeks to liberate the people of former European colonies from the colonial matrix of power, which is anchored in three layers of coloniality: power, knowledge, and being (Mignolo and Escobar, 2010).

The term "coloniality of power" was coined by Anibal Quijano to describe the structures of power, control, and hegemony that emerged during the colonial era and continue to persist today, from the conquest of the Americas to the present (Martinot, 2011, p. 1). "Coloniality of knowledge" refers to the situation in which the people of the Global South remain trapped by colonial domination in their ways of knowing, seeing, and imagining (Ndlovu, 2018). Meanwhile, "coloniality of being," a term introduced by Mignolo in the mid-1990s, is deeply rooted in racism. It describes a condition in which certain groups of people are deemed inferior and thus dehumanized based on their physical appearance (Bignall, 2020). An example of this is the alienation of black people and other people of colour by Europeans during the colonial era.

Whereas in the past, the subjugation of colonial subjects was enacted through force or conquest, in the era of digital communication, the colonial subject is subjugated through voluntary compliance with the rules and regulations of the tech companies that own digital platforms

(Kumar, 2021). Violation of these rules, regulations, and online policies often leads to sanctions or complete denial of access to the digital platforms.

Digital communication communities are exploited through the content they generate while interacting online. Digital activists, therefore, can be considered colonial subjects in a double sense: as subjects of large technology corporations and as subjects of Western or other global powers' imperialism. Data colonialism refers to the process by which governments, non-governmental organizations, and corporations claim ownership of and privatize the data produced by their users and citizens (Brodie, 2023; Rainie et al., 2019). It pertains to the data relations that generate raw inputs for information processing, a primary means by which new forms of economic value are created (Couldry and Meijas, 2018). The value of such extractive processes depends on the comprehensiveness of the data generated. Data colonialism, consequently, results in a highly unequal social arrangement, with the negative impacts being most acutely felt by the traditional victims of colonialism.

Data colonialism is an ongoing process as long as activists continue to engage in online communication. Resisting it requires strategies that have been at the forefront of decolonial thought for decades (Couldry and Meijas, 2018). Couldry (2020) posits that data colonialism involves three main stages: First, there is the looting of human action in the form of online data. Second, there is the colonization of human relations by data processes, as technology companies maximize data extraction for economic gain. He argues that, over time, data extraction will become as central to capitalism as the extraction of human labour and raw materials was during the colonial era. Third, the economic value extracted by these processes results in the wealth of new colonial corporations, such as Google and Facebook.

Couldry (2020) further explains that there are new colonial ideologies designed to disguise the nature of these processes: not the idea of civilization per se, but the notion that we must remain perpetually connected, that everything must be put into data form (datafication), and that all of this, including surveillance, is somehow inevitable and necessary for the advancement of humanity and self-knowledge. Data capitalism, according to Couldry, represents not merely the development of capitalism but a new phase of colonialism (2020). He asserts that "today the resource being appropriated by a new colonialism is us: human life in all its depth and variety, extracted as value through the medium of data" (Couldry, 2020, p. 11). He draws parallels between data colonialism and the physical conquest and extraction of material resources characteristic of past colonialism. Couldry elaborates that through data expropriation,

colonialism's reach extends far beyond the extraction of raw materials like gold, explaining how we unwittingly surrender our rights to our information online: "When we accept terms and conditions as we log in or try to use apps, we enter into a whole set of data relations that unfold in ways we only very partly understand" (Couldry, 2020, p. 12).

Digital colonialism is imposed when Western powers, such as the United States, or other world powers like China, construct critical and extensive digital infrastructure in the Global South to extract data and monopolize it (Kwet, 2019). Imperial powers deploy vast amounts of technology that wield significant power (Horowitz, 2018). Such power derives from defining rules, designs, languages, cultures, and belief systems that serve the interests of dominant imperial forces (Kwet, 2019). In interacting with these technologies from dominant global powers, there is no reciprocity between digital activists and corporations or imperial powers (Casilli, 2017). Activists are compelled to surrender their information, which is then further exploited by technology companies, capitalist entities, and global imperial powers.

Decoloniality in the political sphere is often associated with liberation. The philosophy of liberation, a consequence of dependency theory, has been critiqued as bourgeois, middle-class, capitalist, and Eurocentric (Mignolo, 2002). What an African perceives as liberation differs from the European perspective. Whereas the European might view the liberation of Africans as advantageous to themselves, the African perspective is framed by a desire to liberate themselves from the economic and cultural domination that colonialism imposed (Mignolo, 2002). Banerjee (2021) argues that deliberative democracy, as it is currently understood, cannot work outside the context of the Global North. His argument rests on the idea that deliberative democracy cannot adequately account for the needs and aspirations of marginalized people who are seeking to defend their lands and livelihoods against exploitation by Western powers. As with other former liberation movements, ZANU PF labels activists who champion Western democratic ideals as sellouts, accusing them of advancing the cause of Western imperialism (Mangani, 2019). This issue is further explored in the next section.

3.4.2. Alternative forms of activism

There are forms of activism which are not explicitly or overtly political but have a political undertone. Geographic location and local traditions play a significant role in shaping the types of activism individuals engage in. For example, political movements and neoliberal-oriented civil society organisations (CSOs) often view activism as agitation for political change

(Pellerin, 2023), based on the belief that political participation serves as a means to amplify the voices of the marginalised. Their activism primarily focuses on promoting liberal democracy through citizens exercising their freedoms of expression and the right to choose political leadership. Academics critical of both real and perceived authoritarianism commonly assert that activism is a call for regime change or the adoption of more democratic policies. This assumption is especially prominent among pro-democracy scholars who critique the rule of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) government in Zimbabwe, as exemplified by Sithole (1997). However, activism is not solely directed at challenging political establishments nor is it invariably pro-establishment. While activism for regime change or for maintaining governmental accountability forms part of the broader activism discourse, it represents only a segment of the larger picture.

For instance, Fenton (2025) argues that:

Democracy has come to mean liberal democracy, which today, in practice, is neo-liberal democracy enclosed in the constitutional shell of the Western neo-colonial state. In media and communication studies, all too frequently, any discussion of media and democracy hinges on Habermas (1989) and his concept of the public sphere that is also captured by a liberal democratic framing and horizon. (Fenton, 2025, p. 28).

In the context of Zimbabwe, there is no substantive evidence, beyond assumptions by academics, civil society actors, activists, and the political opposition, that the general population fully understands or supports Western-style liberal democracy. Since ZANU PF assumed power in 1980, the party has enjoyed the support of the majority for over four decades, yet it has not embraced liberal democracy. Elections have been held every five years, with consistent disputes over the results from both Western liberal democracies and local opposition forces. Nevertheless, the general populace has not risen in revolt against the ruling party demanding liberal democracy. Thus, participatory democracy remains an illusion within the Zimbabwean political landscape, as the ruling party has shown little regard for it despite pressure from internal opposition and the international community.

Activism is highly diverse, as evidenced by the study of environmental justice movements. Environmental injustice activism has evolved across three key areas, as identified by Schlosberg (2013): the definition of the environment, the factors contributing to environmental injustice, and the pluralistic conception of justice within environmental activism. For

environmental justice advocates, the definition of the environment has expanded beyond rural, untamed wilderness to encompass urban spaces where people live, work, and play (Schlosberg, 2013). This shift in perspective critiques all practices perceived to be damaging to the environment, not only those historically attributed to poorer communities. Activism for environmental justice thus includes campaigns to protect both rural and urban spaces, as well as efforts to halt environmental damage caused by both impoverished communities and capitalist conglomerates engaged in extractive activities.

In the Americas, ethnic minorities engage in peaceful political actions to resist forced assimilation, eviction from ancestral lands, and widespread discrimination and persecution (Duguid, 2020). Indigenous communities in Ecuador and Bolivia, for example, developed significant activism to preserve their cultural identity in the late 20th century (Lupien, 2020). This movement gained momentum as indigenous Latin Americans recognised their increasing marginalisation by the ruling elite. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico has been at the forefront of advocating for indigenous autonomy, resisting the Mexican government and Western conglomerates (Klein, 2019). Notably, the EZLN has utilised the internet for activism since 1995 (Ramírez Plascencia, 2018). Indigenous activism in the Americas largely centres on maintaining cultural identity and independence from the political and economic elite.

In Europe, activism can take forms distinct from the typical Western model, as exemplified by the case of Russia. Rosenberg (2017) studied protests in Russia between 2011 and 2013, seeking to analyse their motives. However, the researcher was unable to ascertain a clear agenda for the protests when framed through Western theoretical lenses. Unlike examples of environmental activism in the Americas, the Russian case is different. Russian activists tend to focus on local, everyday issues affecting large sections of the population (Sundstrom, Henry, and Sperling, 2022). These activists avoid forming identifiable leadership structures that could be neutralised by the government and use social media for mobilisation without external funding or excessive publicity (Sundstrom, Henry, and Sperling, 2022). The Russian protests illustrate a form of activism that diverges from the typical liberal democratic political expression, highlighting the need for diverse approaches when analysing protests across various political contexts.

In India, political parties and politicians are facing legitimacy crises due to widespread corruption (Singh, 2014). National parties are losing support, with protest movements

emerging as a response to this decline. These movements operate on the periphery of established political channels, using innovative mobilisation techniques to influence politics (Singh, 2014). Rural communities in India, for example, have utilised platforms such as Twitter (now X) to seek redress from the government (Akoijam, 2023). The 2020 protests by the women of Shaheen Bagh against proposed changes to Indian citizenship laws involved sit-ins rather than violent confrontation (Chopra, 2021). In Pakistan, social movements offer underrepresented communities' opportunities to engage in civic and political activism outside the scope of traditional political parties (Akram, 2023). Youth in Pakistan harness social media to engage in activism, while women actively advocate for issues ranging from child sexual abuse to improved employment benefits, protection from sectarian violence, and post-conflict security (Khan, Jawed, and Qidwai, 2021). Protestors in Pakistan employ strategies such as government advocacy, court petitions, engagement with formal politics, and alliances with feminist leaders (Khan, Jawed, and Qidwai, 2021).

In Nigeria, activism in the Niger Delta communities challenges both the Nigerian federal government and Western oil conglomerates, who exploit oil resources and pollute the environment. These communities adopt a confrontational stance against oil mining companies and the Nigerian government, which defends the interests of these Western corporations (Paterson, 2023). The activism is driven by the environmental degradation caused by oil extraction, which contaminates the air, water, soil, and food sources (Bose, 2024). Social media plays a pivotal role in rallying support and mobilising communities, circumventing government attempts to neutralise agitators, who have faced imprisonment and execution in the past (Uwalaka, 2020).

This global overview of activism reveals its diverse nature and how it responds to unique political, social, and environmental contexts. It also highlights the varied methods of mobilisation and the different objectives that activists pursue across the world.

3.4.3 Forms of resistance by Zimbabweans

Ordinary Zimbabweans engage in passive forms of resistance that can be described as subaltern, in contrast to the more dramatic confrontations such as riots, rebellions, revolutions, and organised political movements (Willems, 2020). The Tangwena people of Makoni District, in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe, have a history of passive activism against evictions by both the colonial and ZANU PF governments (Ruguwa, 2021). Chief Rekayi Tangwena led

the people of Kaerezi in Eastern Zimbabwe in their resistance to eviction from their ancestral land by the Rhodesian government during the 1960s and 1970s (Moore, 2005). After independence, the government evicted some of the Tangwena people from Kaerezi to establish a farming cooperative (Moore, 2005). The villagers employed the same methods they had used to combat racial discrimination and dispossession under colonial rule to resist the post-colonial government's efforts to dispossess them through passive resistance.

The youth of Matebeleland are well organised in their activism, with the Mthwakazi Republic Party standing out for its radical approach (Ndlovu & Mlotshwa, 2022). The Mthwakazi Republic Party is composed of youth born after 1980, as well as those born post-Gukurahundi (a period between 1983 and 1987 during which the government engaged in the elimination of political opposition in Matebeleland North, South, and the Midlands Provinces) (Reim, 2023). These youth defy the government and stage demonstrations around the 22nd of December, commemorating the unity between ZANU PF and the then-opposition PF ZAPU, which was signed to end hostilities on 22 December 1987. The youth of Mthwakazi erect monuments on mass grave sites to memorialise the Gukurahundi massacres (Mpofu, 2023). They agitate for the establishment of a Mthwakazi Republic along the borders of the ancient Ndebele Kingdom, as ruled by the old Ndebele kings Mzilikazi and Lobengula, in their quest for Matebele autonomy.

Various online activist groups support and defend the policies of the ZANU PF government on social media platforms, the most prominent being Varakashi. These digital activists, deployed by ZANU PF, engage in digital battles with the opposition (Tagwirei, 2021). The activism of Varakashi can be seen as the opposite of Western activism, which seeks to confront the government in order to effect change. Instead, Varakashi speak in terms of Pan-Africanism, anti-Western imperialism, and neo-colonialism (Tagwirei, 2021). The deployment of Varakashi by ZANU PF aims to convey the message, both to the international community and the local constituency, that ZANU PF is the custodian of Zimbabwe's sovereignty and does not tolerate attempts at regime change by the West (Bhebe, 2022).

3.5 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I sought to examine how the internet and digital media platforms facilitate activism in Zimbabwe. I explored the theory of the public sphere, as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, and extended this to consider the digital public sphere. Through this analysis, I

demonstrated that, while digital platforms can serve as alternative public spheres, they are not equally accessible to all. Literature indicates that the internet does not provide a public sphere for the poor, who lack both the material resources and the technical know-how to engage meaningfully in online discourse. Additionally, the content on these platforms may not be sufficient to sustain substantial conversations. In examining the digital public sphere, I found that the profit motive of platform owners and technology companies negatively impacts the potential for digital platforms to serve as spaces for genuine activism.

By employing the concept of communicative capitalism, as introduced by Jodi Dean, I examined how digital platforms are designed to generate profit for platform owners rather than to support activists seeking social and political change. These technology companies harvest users' data for resale to advertising companies, often without the knowledge or consent of those whose data is being sold. Additionally, I explored the theories of coloniality and data colonialism, highlighting how capitalism benefits more from exploiting the former colonies of the Global South, now reliant on communication platforms owned by companies based in the Global North. Users in the South are subject to the terms and conditions set by these companies, which places them in a position of subservience to the Global North.

I concluded the chapter by examining alternative forms of activism, particularly among indigenous communities contesting the extraction of resources by Western conglomerates, often supported by Southern governments. I also explored the phenomenon of governments deploying cyber troops, such as the Varakashi, to counter negative posts by the opposition in the digital space. This form of activism, in support of the government, represents a distinctive and strategic use of digital platforms for political purposes.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodology for my study. By 'methodology', I refer to the philosophy or conceptual framework underpinning the research process. Creswell and Miller (1997) describe methodology as a belief system, paradigm perspective, or inquiry paradigm that provides the philosophical foundation for conducting a study within a particular content area. I discuss the research paradigm, research design, and justify my methodology in terms of data collection, presentation, and analysis methods. I then examine the three methods I employed—critical literature review, online content analysis, and interviews—in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, sampling, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with reflections on issues of validity and reliability, the limitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

4.2. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a philosophical approach to investigating a phenomenon (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). Research paradigms are also defined as philosophies of science that guide how research is conducted, considering the core elements of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), axiology (the role and values of the research process), methodology (how the paradigm defines research processes), and rigor (the criteria used to evaluate research quality within the paradigm) (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). Paradigms from which scholars may choose to guide their studies include positivism, critical theory, and interpretivism.

Positivism, as a research paradigm, is commonly associated with experiments and quantitative research (Ryan, 2018). The focus of the positivist paradigm is on measurement and reason. Knowledge is perceived as being revealed through neutral and measurable (quantifiable) observations of activity, action, or reaction (Tal, 2015). The positivist paradigm is characterised by the belief that scientific knowledge is based on empirical data and that reality exists independently of the observer (Sparkes, 2012). Among the values of the positivist research process is a heavy reliance on objectivity (Park, Konge and Artino, 2019). Thus, positivism dismisses the significance of individuals' subjective experiences. As this study aims to gather information based on the personal and collective experiences of participants, scholars, and the digital communication community, I have opted not to use the positivist research paradigm.

One of the reasons for this choice is that positivism is primarily scientific and focuses on quantitative data within controlled environments. My study, however, does not require data from a scientific laboratory or controlled environment. Instead, I have gathered data from participants and content within their natural environments. The study seeks to understand how digital activists perceive the repressive nature of social media platforms within a repressive polity, which is not conducive to the positivist paradigm. My study is qualitative in nature and employs multiple methods for data gathering and analysis.

The critical theory paradigm assumes that scientific investigation should be conducted with the goal of social change. The critical paradigm situates research within the context of social justice issues, seeking to address political, social, and economic problems that lead to social oppression, conflict, struggle, and power dynamics at all levels (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This paradigm is particularly concerned with power relations and the deliberate efforts by researchers to promote human rights, increase social justice, and foster reciprocity (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Critical theory research is also characterised by the use of ethnomethodology, the situating of knowledge socially and historically, and the adoption of participatory research methods (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). However, critical theory has been criticised for being cliquish, conformist, and anti-individualistic (Vedda, 2021). While the critical paradigm was not chosen for this study, it is important to note that this study aims to understand the perspectives of digital activists rather than seeking to influence them or address social justice concerns directly.

The interpretivist paradigm, in contrast, assumes that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed. Interpretivism posits that a person's reality can only be understood through their experience of it, which may differ from others' realities, shaped by their unique historical or social perspectives (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). This paradigm promotes openness to varied conceptions and strives to understand groups or individuals under study (Omo-Abu, 2007). The interpretivist paradigm is based on the assumption that truth and knowledge are subjective, shaped by differences in culture and life experiences (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). Interpretive research focuses on understanding and interpreting the subjective experiences of individuals within a specific context (Thorpe, 2016). As such, interpretivism seeks to understand how individuals perceive and experience realities. Reflexivity is crucial in interpretivist research, as it enables researchers to foreground the voices of participants (Duffy, Fernandez and Sène-Harper, 2022). The focus is on meaning-making, with the researcher

becoming an instrument for collecting and analysing data. Interpretive research often involves studying people in their natural environments, allowing theory to emerge from the data as it is generated (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2018). This approach aligns closely with qualitative methodologies, and I chose the interpretivist paradigm to explore and interpret subjective meanings, values, and social phenomena. The interpretive approach also accommodates flexibility in adapting research questions as the study progresses (Thorne, 2016).

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, I sought to capture the emic perspective of young Zimbabwean activists. This approach involves exploring and interpreting their beliefs, values, motivations, and behaviours within the context of activism. By considering their subjective experiences and internal frames of reference, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of their digital activism (Belotti et al., 2022).

Both the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms focus on understanding the subjective nature of reality. Constructivism emphasises the role of social constructs and the importance of context in shaping individuals' perceptions and beliefs (Parsons, 2010). Interpretivism, on the other hand, focuses on the interpretation of meanings and symbols in social interactions, highlighting the significance of understanding individuals' perspectives and experiences. While both paradigms share a focus on subjectivity (Putnam and Banghart, 2017), constructivism places greater emphasis on structures and institutions, whereas interpretivism is more concerned with individual agency and interpretation

4.3. Research Design

In this section, I present the research design for this study. Research design refers to the plan or strategy that guides a research project from its inception through to the final analysis of data (Zina, 2021), ensuring consistency, reliability, and validity. It acts as a blueprint that a scholar uses to conduct a study and gather data (Cresswell, 2014), providing specific directions on the type of information to be collected, from whom, and how. Urcia (2021) argues that grounded theory, ethnographic, phenomenological, and case study designs are among the most popular qualitative research options.

Grounded theory seeks to develop theories by continuously analysing and comparing collected data from a relatively large number of participants (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). It involves an inductive, bottom-up approach, allowing the data to speak for itself without being influenced

by pre-existing theories or the researcher's preconceptions (Charmaz, 2014). This approach includes data collection through interviews and observations, followed by analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). These evolving ideas are validated by collecting further data until a saturation point is reached, at which point a theory can be formulated. Grounded theory is particularly suitable for studies aiming to generate new theories, though its limitations include being time-intensive due to the multiple rounds of data collection and analysis required (Charmaz, 2014). Since my research topic has already been extensively theorised, and with an abundant body of existing data available, my focus is on refining, adapting, and problematising existing theories, rather than developing new ones.

Ethnographic research design involves observing and studying a culture-sharing group in their natural setting to gain insights into their behaviours, beliefs, and values (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The emphasis is on observing participants in their natural environments rather than in controlled or artificial settings. Ethnographic research often includes both observation and in-depth interviews to explore participants' views, beliefs, and behaviours (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010), with unobtrusive observation being a key component (Spradley, 2016). This design generates rich, contextually embedded insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of human behaviour (Moore and Mahadevan, 2020). However, ethnographic research faces challenges such as researcher bias, participant confidentiality, and ethical complexities, particularly due to the researcher's immersion in the studied community (Fetterman, 2010). Given the substantial existing literature in my area of study, I did not deem it ideal to spend an extended period in the company of activists. My primary interest lies in exploring how activists perceive potential pitfalls, such as repression and the online/offline disjunction, which affect their activism, rather than observing their participation or motivation. Focusing solely on a limited number of activists could have restricted the scope of my study, so I turned instead to a critical literature review, online content analysis, and interviews with digital activists.

Cyber-ethnography is a research tool within the interpretive paradigm (Keeley-Browne, 2011), where the researcher engages with online communities and virtual spaces to observe and analyse interactive discussions. This approach is particularly useful in studying online interactions (Keeley-Browne, 2011). One advantage of cyber-ethnography is that it enables a deeper understanding of the behaviours, needs, and desires of virtual communities due to their diverse cultural compositions (Akturan et al., 2009). It is adaptable and generates rich qualitative content with open-ended findings (Kozinets, 2002). Cyber-ethnography allows for

a more active role for participants, with researchers interacting directly with them, thereby gaining a more objective understanding of participants' perspectives (Akturan et al., 2009). Additionally, the researcher can verify their interpretations by cross-checking them with members of the virtual community (Caliandro, 2016). However, cyber-ethnography has its challenges, such as limited control over dialogue, as well as issues with participant anonymity and identity, leading to potential difficulties in accurately tracking individuals (Akturan et al., 2009). Further, it can be challenging to extract researchable objects from the complexity and interweaving social and cultural processes of the internet (Nixon and Odoyo, 2020).

Phenomenological research design aims to explore the meaning of lived experiences and the ways in which individuals perceive these experiences (Giorgi, 2009). It seeks to understand the perspectives, emotions, and behaviours of participants in particular contexts (Moustakas, 1994). Data collection typically involves in-depth interviews or open-ended questionnaires, with qualitative analysis methods such as thematic analysis being used to identify patterns (Cresswell, 2013). However, the highly interpretive nature of phenomenology increases the risk of researcher bias (Giorgi, 2009), and establishing validity and reliability can be challenging due to the descriptive, reductionist, and intentionality aspects of this approach. In the context of my study, the complexity of online spaces poses further challenges, as digital activism spans multiple online platforms and involves diverse interactions. A phenomenological approach may fail to fully capture the intricacies of these interactions, potentially oversimplifying the experiences or overlooking critical nuances. Additionally, the dynamic and fast-evolving nature of online activism means that phenomenology, which focuses on in-depth individual experiences, might struggle to keep pace with rapid changes within digital activist communities (Kaun and Treré, 2020).

A case study is a qualitative research method used to explore or investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2012). It involves studying a single individual or group in depth to understand their experiences, behaviours, or outcomes (Merriam, 2017). Data collection methods for case studies include interviews, surveys, and the analysis of documentation (Hancock, Algozzine, and Lim, 2021). Variations of the case study design include single-case, multiple-case, and longitudinal designs. A single-case study focuses on analysing a single entity to uncover its unique characteristics (Flyvbjerg, 2011), while a multiple-case study compares and contrasts several cases to identify patterns (Gustafsson, 2017). In longitudinal case studies, a single or multiple cases are studied over an extended

period to understand how factors develop over time (Street and Ward, 2012). The case study approach is ideal when in-depth contextual understanding of a specific phenomenon is required, though generalising findings to a broader population can be difficult (Yin, 2018). To address this challenge, triangulation—verifying information from multiple sources such as interviews and documents—can help enhance the reliability and validity of case study research (Natow, 2020). Triangulation is particularly useful in overcoming biases inherent in the use of single-observer, single-method, or single-theory approaches (Olubayo and Oloyede, 2020).

The case study design was the chosen approach for this research. Scholars such as Shepherd Mpofu (2011) and Brian Pindayi (2021) have previously used case studies to explore digital patterns in political communication in Zimbabwe. Mpofu’s study focused on the online newspaper *NewZimbabwe.com*, while Pindayi examined Twitter use in political communication. Similarly, I employed a case study to investigate how digital activists in Zimbabwe utilise social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X). This design aligns with the goals of qualitative research by enabling me to describe, comprehend, and explain the phenomena under study. I describe how these platforms are used by digital activists, explore the historical context of activism discourse to understand the themes they engage with, and offer explanations of the challenges they face. By delving into the lived experiences of youth digital activists, I seek to understand their perceptions of online activism and their motivations for participation. The case study design is well-suited to my study as it allows me to capture the rich, diverse experiences of digital activists while considering the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape and influence their activism (Kaun and Uldam, 2018)

4.4. Research approach

A research approach refers to the procedure selected by a researcher to collect, analyse, and interpret data (Alase, 2017). These worldviews merge to form three main approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Grover, 2015).

A quantitative research approach focuses on the quantity and analysis of variables to derive results (Apuke, 2017). It involves the use and analysis of numerical data through specific statistical techniques, answering questions such as who, how much, what, when, where, how many, and how (Apuke, 2017). For my study, I am concerned with understanding how activists interpret state surveillance in the digital space and the potential threats such surveillance poses

to their activism. These questions can only be answered qualitatively, which is why I did not opt for the quantitative research approach.

The mixed methods research approach combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. It intertwines quantitative and qualitative data, providing a solid foundation, methodological flexibility, and a deeper understanding of smaller cases (Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri, 2021). Mixed methods research involves collecting and analysing data from multiple sources and using various research methods, which can complicate a study (Sharma, Bidari, Bidari, Neupane, and Sapkota, 2023). For this study, my aim was to explore how digital activists interpret activism in the digital era, particularly in light of the state's capacity to neutralise their activities in the digital space. I sought to gain in-depth insights from the activists and analyse their online communication patterns. I also aimed to understand academic perceptions of the subject by analysing scholarly works. Consequently, I employed a qualitative methodology to achieve these goals and thoroughly answer the study questions outlined in Chapter One.

Qualitative research is an inquiry process used by scholars to understand and interpret the meanings that individuals or groups attach to social phenomena (Creswell and Poth, 2017). The qualitative approach is centred on understanding how things happen and how people make sense of the causes and outcomes. In the context of my study, the qualitative approach guides my investigation into how digital activists perceive and respond to the challenges of online activism, such as surveillance, monitoring, and tracking by the state. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Merriam, 2009). It aims to explore and search for meaning, rather than simply collecting statistics. As Patton (2015) explains, qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning people or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The search for meaning through interpretation is one of the strengths of qualitative research in addressing social issues. Charmaz (2014) describes qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the researcher in the field. Consistent with the research design and paradigm chosen for this study, I employed qualitative methodology for collecting, presenting, interpreting, and analysing findings. The study questions that aim to determine digital activists' perceptions of online activism in the context of Zimbabwe are best answered through rigorous qualitative research. Qualitative methodology is employed in research to capture information that cannot be expressed numerically. According to Ugwu and Eze (2023), qualitative research examines the nature of phenomena, including their quality, different manifestations, contexts, or perspectives, while excluding their range, frequency, and place in

an objectively determined chain of cause and effect. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) view qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. They assert that qualitative research involves interpretive practices that make the world visible, such as conducting in-depth interviews to understand the lived experiences of individuals affected by a particular policy.

I employed methodological triangulation by using three data collection methods: critical literature review, online content analysis, and interviews. Triangulation is described by Bryman (2012, p. 717) as the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked. This approach allowed me to enrich the study by offering a variety of datasets to explain different aspects of digital activism. The use of multiple methods added depth to the research findings. I critically reviewed journal articles to gain insights into the nature of digital activism from an academic perspective. I then analysed online content to understand how and what the activists communicate. Finally, I interviewed the activists to obtain clarification on their feelings and views about digital activism, information that neither the critical literature review nor online content analysis could provide. For the critical literature review, I analysed themes such as access, types of online communication, fragmentation, echo chambers, and online/offline relationships. For content analysis, I focused on symbolic efficiency, endless reflexivity, slacktivism, virtue signalling, and profit generation goals. The interviews were analysed based on themes of cyber optimism, cyber realism, the dangers of activism, online and offline relationships, data colonialism, and alternative models of online activism outside of Western frameworks. Qualitative content analysis is one of several available approaches for analysing data and interpreting its meaning (Schreier, 2012). As a type of analysis, it represents a systematic and objective means of describing phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Schreier, 2012). Successful content analysis requires that data be reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) by creating categories, concepts, models, or conceptual maps (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Morgan, 1993; Weber, 1990). I analysed the findings thematically. Thematic analysis is a comprehensive process that allows researchers to identify numerous cross-references between the data and the evolving research themes (Alhojailan, 2012). Organising my findings and analysing them thematically helped me to focus and structure the work procedurally. It guided me in determining which information to include or exclude, discarding findings that did not align with the themes relevant to the study questions.

4.5. Research Methods

In this section, I outline the research process for my study. I employed deductive qualitative analysis. "Deductive qualitative analysis is a specific approach to deductive qualitative research intended to systematically test, refine, or refute theory by integrating deductive and inductive strands of inquiry" (Fife and Gossner, 2024, p. 1-2). Fife and Gossner (2024) further explain that deductive qualitative analysis is primarily suited for theory testing, refinement, refutation, and reformulation. I employed this approach because it allowed me to systematically use theories while simultaneously testing the guiding theory. I conducted a literature review on the topic to establish what was already known and identify which theories had already been applied in the field from which my study emerged. This review guided my selection of the three most relevant and useful theories to frame my study. Deductive qualitative analysis's primary strength lies in its ability to test theory and hypothesis by directing attention to supporting, contradicting, refining, and expanding evidence (Fife and Gossner, 2024). Additionally, the methodology enables the combination of both deductive and inductive analysis within the same project. However, one limitation of this approach is the potential for faulty theorising, whether through operationalising theory in a disingenuous manner or falling prey to confirmation bias (Fife and Gossner, 2024). To mitigate the risk of confirmation bias, I employed continuous reflexivity. I also used triangulation strategies in data collection and constant member checking.

I conducted qualitative research through a critical literature review, social media content analysis, and interviews with digital activists. My choice of the interpretive research paradigm influenced my decision to employ qualitative research methodology. A research paradigm shapes the researcher's choice of methods for gathering, presenting, and analysing research findings. For my study, I regard reality as multifaceted, relative, and dependent on the scholar. This relativity recognises that people are different and cannot be categorised into a single monolithic group. The strength of qualitative research in enabling the researcher to study how people generate meaning also influenced my choice of methodology.

For studies using the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research, factors such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are crucial for validating the study's findings. Dependability refers to the accuracy of the data collected and whether it accurately reflects the subject under study. Confirmability ensures that information can be cross-referenced with

sources or verified by other researchers. Transferability seeks to establish whether findings from a specific source can be generalised.

4.5.1 Systematic literature Review

I conducted a systematic literature review for this study to explore recent scholarly publications on online activism in Zimbabwe, examining both the content and the manner in which it is discussed. A systematic literature review involves identifying and selecting various sources to assess their relevance and significance to the topic of study, analysing them in a systematic and rigorous way (Myburgh, Larsen, and Hartvigsen, 2008). The scholar conducting the review draws connections between sources, comparing and contrasting the points raised (Seuring & Gold, 2012). In my study, the advantages of using a systematic literature review lie in its ability to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of qualitative data related to digital activism. It offers the opportunity to examine different aspects of activism, uncovering nuances and underlying meanings. For the researcher, this method encourages a critical assessment of assumptions, theories, and interpretations within the domain of digital activism, revealing power dynamics, inequalities, and contextual subtleties that shape activism in Zimbabwe. It allows for findings to be contextualised within the broader societal framework. Engaging in a systematic literature review requires considerable time and effort, due to the thorough analysis involved (Johanns, Dinkens & Moore, 2017).

However, this method also presents certain limitations, particularly regarding objectivity. Balancing critical scrutiny with objectivity in analysing digital activism can be challenging (Karpf, 2016), which may result in the neglect of certain perspectives or an overemphasis on critical viewpoints. Additionally, systematic literature reviews often deal with complex theoretical frameworks and multifaceted data (Walzberg et al., 2021), which can impede clear and concise interpretation of findings. To address these limitations, I adopted an iterative approach, revisiting and refining my analysis repeatedly (Lai et al., 2021). I concentrated on critical aspects, limiting the effort required to address every minute detail. Striving for a balance between depth and breadth, I aimed to provide comprehensive coverage while maintaining analytical quality. My analysis critiqued the literature in line with emergent themes, which developed as I progressed through the review.

I gathered and analysed journal articles from Google Scholar (10 articles/book chapters), ResearchGate (10 articles/book chapters), and Academia.edu (10 articles/book chapters)

relevant to digital activism in Zimbabwe. Excluding overlaps, I ended up reviewing a total of 24 articles and book chapters out of 30. I only downloaded full-text journal articles and book chapters, ensuring a comprehensive yet systematic and replicable search process. The keywords used to narrow the focus of the search included *digital activism in Zimbabwe*, *online activism in Zimbabwe*, and *surveillance of social media communication in Zimbabwe*, and I limited the publications to those from 2019 to 2023. This period is significant as it marks the onset of a new political era following Mugabe's ousting and the subsequent change in government (Mangeya, Mhute & Jakaza, 2021). I examined the abstracts of each source to identify its primary topic, with the study questions guiding the selection of articles and chapters for analysis. Emerging sub-themes were identified and used to present and analyse the findings thematically. I looked for commonalities, conflicts, and gaps in the literature related to online activism. The articles were coded by themes, and I analysed the qualitative aspects of their textual content, tone, and arguments. I then compared and contrasted the viewpoints and findings, discussing both consistent and contradictory findings. Furthermore, I evaluated how these articles aligned with the theory of the digital public sphere or how they introduced new conceptual models relevant to youth digital activism. Critical reflections on the state of knowledge, areas for further research, and the significance of the reviewed literature were also included (see Appendix C).

4.5.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method for systematically analysing and interpreting the content of textual, visual, or auditory materials (Kynge, 2020). It involves subjective interpretation of text data through a systematic classification process of coding, identifying themes, and detecting patterns (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This method allows researchers to establish meaning and social reality from interactions in a subjective yet scientific manner. The primary function of content analysis is to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within data, providing scholars with meaningful insights. I chose content analysis of online posts to explore activists' political views when engaging with digital activism (Orth et al., 2020). Additionally, I sought to leverage the method's flexibility in digital contexts (Orth et al., 2020).

Previous studies on political communication patterns in Zimbabwe, such as Mabweazara (2006), Mpofu (2011), and Pindayi (2021), have applied content analysis to mainstream print media, online newspapers, and social media content. For my research, I used the study questions (outlined in Chapter 1) as guiding themes for selecting content from Facebook,

Twitter (now X), and YouTube for analysis. These social media platforms are widely used by activists in Zimbabwe (Ncube, 2021), with Facebook having 2.05 million users and Twitter (X) 336,300 users as of February 2024 (Kemp, 2024). However, I was unable to analyse content from WhatsApp due to its privacy protections. I focused on publicly available content from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as these platforms are open sources of information (Giglietto, Rossi & Bennato, 2012). I collected posts from youth activist groups such as Team Pachedu, Tajamuka/Sesijikile, and Varakashi, as well as posts from individual activists, including those aligned with or independent of these groups. I downloaded publicly accessible posts from these platforms. I performed a visual content analysis of YouTube posts (Bell, 2012). Sub-themes emerged during the analysis, with the responses and comments providing additional themes, which guided my presentation and analysis of findings.

I focused on a maximum of 15 posts per platform, reaching saturation, which refers to the point where no new codes emerge in data, signalling that further data collection would yield no additional insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saunders et al., 2018). I started by analysing 15 posts that featured hashtags commonly used by anti-government youth activists (e.g., #Tajamuka, #PacheduZW, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #ThisFlag), along with posts from individual activists. I also included posts from pro-government activists, such as Varakashi, to capture counter-narratives in support of the government online. I used a similar approach for other platforms. Additionally, I downloaded 15 posts from Facebook pages by activists and 5 transcripts of videos from YouTube. The content of the tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube video transcripts was coded, ensuring inter-code reliability for consistency. I analysed the coded data to identify patterns, themes, and trends, interpreting the meanings behind these codes. The findings were discussed in relation to the study objectives. I ensured the validity of the content by addressing coder bias and subjectivity. The methodology and decisions made during the analysis were documented to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

Content analysis of online material provides insight into the context, language, and discourse surrounding digital activism in real-time (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019), reflecting the current socio-political landscape in Zimbabwe. It is a non-intrusive method, as it does not require direct interaction with participants, although I did engage with some activists for interviews. This approach is particularly useful in high-risk contexts such as Zimbabwe, where activists may be under surveillance by state agents, thereby reducing the risk of endangering participants. However, online content can lack nuanced context or background, which poses challenges in

fully understanding the motivations, intentions, or emotions behind the activism (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). Ensuring the reliability and validity of coding schemes and interpretations of online content remains challenging (Olmedilla, Martínez-Torres, & Toral, 2016). Additionally, online posts may be deleted, edited, or manipulated, presenting difficulties in maintaining data integrity and capturing comprehensive content. To mitigate these challenges, I provided detailed descriptions and contextual information during the presentation and interpretation of online content, acknowledging the limitations of online data while purposefully sampling from diverse digital platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Throughout the research process, I maintained reflexivity, documenting decision-making processes, coding choices, and interpretations to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Appendix I).

I employed criterion sampling for the collection of online content. Criterion sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, is used in qualitative research to select elements based on predetermined criteria relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). It enables the researcher to focus on specific characteristics that align with the research goals. For this study, I selected 15 posts from three social media platforms, drawn from youth-led groups like Team Pachedu, Tajamuka/Sesijikile, and Varakashi, within the period of 2019 to 2023, and in line with the study's research questions. The benefit of criterion sampling lies in its efficiency, as it allows for a focused selection of data pertinent to the research, ensuring that time and resources are used effectively (Baimyrzaeva, 2018). By focusing on specific characteristics, I was able to avoid irrelevant data. However, the narrow focus of criterion sampling may exclude posts that, while not directly fitting the predetermined criteria, could still contain valuable insights. To counteract this limitation, I included posts from activists who were not necessarily aligned with the aforementioned movements but whose posts were relevant to the themes being studied. I analysed the downloaded texts using thematic decomposition analysis, a method that separates content into coherent themes (Orth et al., 2020). This method allowed for the identification of individual participants' subject positions and their contributions to the construction of the social phenomenon of digital activism (Orth et al., 2020). I organised the data into structured themes, removing duplicates and outliers that could distort the analysis. The data from the three platforms were consolidated into a unified dataset, allowing me to analyse patterns across platforms and compare trends in the content shared by activists.

4.5.3 Interviews

Interviews are a qualitative research method employed to gather information, insights, and data directly from individuals or groups through structured or semi-structured conversations (Minhat, 2015). For my research, I utilised the semi-structured interview model. According to scholarly work, "The researcher can adjust and change the direction of the questions, especially in a semi-structured interview" (Alamri, 2019, p. 66). Semi-structured interviews were particularly suited to my topic, as they allowed for additional exploratory questions beyond the scripted ones. I deliberately avoided using structured interviews, as they do not offer the flexibility to develop follow-up questions creatively (Brinkmann, 2014). The ability to ask follow-up questions enabled me to request more detailed information from various perspectives, while rephrasing questions helped facilitate better mutual understanding between myself and the participants. I could engage the activists with more specific questions related to their experiences, rather than adhering to a fixed set of questions for all participants. This flexibility resulted in more detailed insights into the activists' actions, strategies, and the context of their activism. Semi-structured questions, by allowing for probing and adapting based on participants' responses, facilitated the exploration of emerging themes (Rahman, 2023). Moreover, establishing a one-on-one connection during the interviews helped foster trust, which encouraged candid and detailed responses about sensitive or personal experiences (Lavee & Itzhakov, 2023).

However, interviews do have their disadvantages. For instance, they can be influenced by interviewer bias, which may lead to biased or idealised narratives. Additionally, participant bias may occur when respondents unintentionally influence the results of the study (Althubaiti, 2016). One cause of participant bias arises when individuals provide answers they believe are socially acceptable or aligned with perceived expectations (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). To mitigate participant bias, I ensured that my questions were clear and straightforward, avoiding any that could imply the expected answers. I also reassured the participants that their identities would remain confidential, ensuring that the information they shared could not be traced back to them once the study was completed.

I interviewed activists to gain their perspectives on social media and activism in Zimbabwe. I prepared a set of questions, but allowed for open-ended discussions to explore the subject matter in more depth. The list included 13 questions, covering topics such as their experiences with online activism, personal security, and their views on the future of online activism in the

country (see Appendices A and B for the interview questions and schedule, respectively). With the interviewees' consent, I recorded the sessions to ensure the accuracy of the information captured. I then transcribed the interviews and made detailed notes for analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, while participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using codes rather than names or the names of their affiliated organisations. Through the interviews, I was able to gain deeper insights into why young people engage in digital activism, drawing from the participants' shared experiences and perceptions.

To further prevent bias and encourage genuine responses, I kept the questions simple and clear. Research suggests that for participants to respond accurately, questions should be simple, specific, and concise (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). I avoided leading questions that could prompt assumptions. I also employed probing questions and critical questions to encourage the digital activists to reflect more deeply, rather than simply providing desirable responses. I made a conscious effort to include Ndebele-speaking participants from Matebeleland to avoid excluding any groups. The interviews were conducted in English, which was used by both Shona and Ndebele speakers. The youth from Matebeleland have a long history of resistance and activism, particularly since the 1980s during the Gukurahundi era, when the ZANU PF government committed atrocities against the Ndebele-speaking population (Ndlovu, 2018). A youthful organisation, the Mthwakazi Freedom Party, emerged to advocate for the creation of an independent republic based on the pre-colonial Ndebele kingdom (Moyo, 2022). I also ensured gender and ethnic balance in the selection of participants. I specifically interviewed individuals aged 40 and under, as this generation was born in post-independence Zimbabwe and has experienced the economic meltdown since 1990. This generation has also faced repression by the ZANU PF government and has been at the forefront of struggles for a democratic Zimbabwe with a free media sphere.

I screened participants through a background check before engaging them in the interview process. Conducting interviews can be time-consuming and resource-intensive (Opdenakker, 2006), particularly in Zimbabwe, where access or connectivity issues pose logistical challenges for many citizens. To address this, I employed purposive sampling, selecting participants from various digital activism groups.

Due to limitations in resources, time, and language, I could not interview every youth digital activist in Zimbabwe. Moreover, many interviewees are likely to share similar or overlapping views, a phenomenon known as saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation occurs when

no new data are emerging, and further research cannot yield additional insights (Saunders et al., 2018). Therefore, I focused on a sample of digital activists. A research sample refers to a subset of the population chosen for study and analysis (Babbie, 2016). I employed purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study (Patton, 2014). This method allows the researcher to target individuals who can provide rich and relevant information. Purposive sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling technique, where participants are chosen for their expertise, uniqueness, or representation of a particular subgroup (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017). I chose this approach because it was suited to obtaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter of my study. I initially contacted 30 online activists, but only 10 participated due to various reasons discussed in the Limitations section below. The activists I interviewed were aged between 25 and 40 years, a generation shaped by the political and economic challenges faced under ZANU PF's rule (Oosterom & Gukurume, 2019). I also limited my interviews to activists based in Zimbabwe, as diaspora-based online activism has been extensively studied (Betts & Jones, 2016). I aimed to gather diverse perspectives on online activism across gender and ethnicity, hence the balance in the representation of these factors among the interviewees.

Purposive sampling was well-suited for this study because the emphasis was on understanding the subjective experiences of a small, specific group of online activists, with a focus on their involvement in technology-facilitated mobilisation and their interactions with the state. To select interviewees, I used snowball sampling, where initial participants referred me to others who met the study's criteria. This technique is particularly useful for accessing individuals who may otherwise be difficult to reach, such as digital activists in Zimbabwe (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I had prior knowledge of a large portion of the population relevant to my study, as I have interacted with the activist and civil society communities in Zimbabwe through my work as a trainer for journalists and consultants for Inter News Johannesburg. I accessed participants through my existing contacts within these networks. Chain or snowball sampling, where participants nominate others with similar characteristics or experiences, is a well-established method for studying hidden or marginalised groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). As I interviewed initial participants, I asked each one to refer others, allowing the snowball to grow, providing more information-rich cases. This method is efficient in terms of cost and time and, as participants were referred through trusted networks, it often resulted in more detailed and valuable information (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

For the analysis of interview findings, I focused on identifying themes and patterns within the qualitative data (Roulston, 2014). I transcribed the interview recordings accurately, reading and re-reading the transcripts to familiarise myself with the content. I conducted initial open coding, extracting key concepts, phrases, or ideas, and grouping similar codes to form broader themes (Elliot, 2018). Axial coding was then used to establish connections between the codes (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). I refined these themes through selective coding, developing sub-themes within the main themes and analysing relationships between codes and sub-themes to construct a structured framework. Constant comparison was used to compare new data with existing codes and themes, ensuring consistency and depth (Saunders et al., 2018). I employed visual aids, such as thematic maps, to display relationships between codes and themes. I identified recurring patterns and contradictions, interpreting the meaning behind these patterns within the context of the digital activists' perspectives (D'Angelo et al., 2019). Representative quotes from the interviews were included to support themes and provide evidence for the analysis (see Appendix E).

4.6. Quality and ethics

In this section I present ethics issues. These are validity and reliability, positionality, limitations of the study and ethical considerations.

4.6.1 Validity and Reliability

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods and data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Carter, 2014). Validity is tested through the convergence of information from different sources. In seeking a comprehensive validation of the study's findings, I employed triangulation. I approached the study from three distinct theoretical perspectives, thereby employing thematic triangulation. Guided by these three theories, I gathered three distinct data sets, combining theory with data source triangulation. Following the theory of the digital public sphere, I conducted a critical literature review to gather data. Using the theory of communicative capitalism, I analysed online content. Finally, under the framework of data colonialism, I conducted interviews with youth digital activists in Zimbabwe.

4.6.2 Positionality

Positionality reflects the stance the researcher adopts within a study (Holmes, 2020). "The term positionality both describes an individual's worldview and the position they adopt concerning a research task and its social and political context" (Holmes, 2020, p.1). Having lived outside Zimbabwe since 2013, with occasional visits, my understanding of the current situation in the country is shaped by various media outlets, fellow diasporans, and relatives within Zimbabwe. Each of these sources carries inherent biases that influence my interpretation. My own perspectives and biases as a researcher may inadvertently affect the interpretation of data, potentially leading to subjective conclusions about digital activism by the youth. The news I consume and the individuals I interact with present challenges in balancing the portrayal of Zimbabwe's political and economic situation. Much of the information tends to be biased against the ZANU PF government. I made an effort to avoid overt, conscious, or systematic bias and sought to maintain neutrality in data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Reflexivity, which enhances the integrity of a study and improves the research process, including data generation, analysis, and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), was central to my approach. Throughout the study, I remained vigilant in ensuring that my personal perceptions did not influence data collection, presentation, or analysis, and I adhered to ethical practices throughout the study.

4.6.3 Limitations of the study

The limitations of a qualitative study refer to the constraints or shortcomings in the research design, methodology, data collection, or analysis, which may restrict the scope, applicability, or credibility of the findings (Fellows & Liu, 2021). Limitations provide insight into the boundaries or challenges encountered throughout the research process (Cresswell, 2013). One challenge I faced was accessing a diverse sample of youth activists due to limited engagement with certain digital platforms. I could have reached more youth had I been able to access their WhatsApp platforms. However, gaining access to WhatsApp groups of activists is difficult for an outsider. Consequently, this led to the exclusion of perspectives from communities that primarily interact on WhatsApp. I also struggled to find relevant posts by youth activists on YouTube, as the methodological search using keywords aligned with my research objectives did not yield significant results. Additionally, YouTube's costs and the slow internet connection for video uploads presented a further barrier. As a result, I sourced content from outlets such as the SABC and The Sunday Mail. I also encountered challenges reaching youth from other towns, cities, farming, and rural areas, despite my efforts through existing contacts. Access to the internet and digital resources is not uniformly distributed across urban, peri-urban, and rural communities, nor across different demographics in Zimbabwe. This limitation affected the inclusivity of the study, resulting in the exclusion of voices from

marginalised remote areas. The study mainly attracted participants who were more vocal and active in digital spaces. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving landscape of digital activism posed a challenge in capturing the most current trends or shifts in youth activism (Youngs, 2019). The effects of recent legislation regarding digital communications are yet to be fully realised, and their impact could not be incorporated into this study.

4.6.4 Ethical Considerations

In research, ethics refers to acting in morally and legally appropriate ways during a study (Resnik, 2015). Ethics also encompasses the broader set of rules, both written and unwritten, that govern researchers' behaviour (Wiles, 2012). Researchers must always act with integrity to protect the rights of research participants, particularly in studies involving humans who may be endangered in authoritarian states, where activism is met with hostility. Therefore, researchers must adhere to ethical principles to safeguard participants. In my interactions with youth digital activists, I prioritised respect, confidentiality, and participant well-being, in line with ethical research principles. I clearly communicated the purpose, nature, and potential outcomes of the study, offering participants the opportunity to ask questions or seek further clarification prior to the interview. I provided a detailed informed consent form in understandable language, outlining their rights, the voluntary nature of participation, and how the data would be used and protected. I took cultural nuances into account, ensuring that these did not hinder the data-gathering process or participant comfort (Tiamzon, Iwata & Adur, 2022). For example, I avoided sexist language to prevent offending female participants who may have been victims of verbal abuse. I ensured participants' confidentiality by guaranteeing that their identities and sensitive information remained anonymous during data collection. I anonymised the participants' identities in the research outputs by using identifiers, such as alphabetical letters, based on the order in which they were first mentioned. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in a familiar, controlled environment, rather than at participants' residences or places of work. I acknowledged potential risks and took steps to minimise harm to participants, ensuring the study content did not put them at risk of retaliation, legal repercussions, or harm due to their activism. I kept interview recordings securely stored, avoiding online storage where they could be compromised if my online accounts were hacked. I safeguarded the collected data using secure storage methods and encryption to prevent unauthorised access or data breaches that could compromise participants'

information. Throughout the research process, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity regarding ethical considerations, rather than limiting it to the pre- and data-collection stages.

4.7 Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter Four, I presented the research design, methods, and ethical considerations for my study. I explained that my study adopted an interpretive paradigm and was a case study focusing on the experiences of online activists, aiming to understand their use of online platforms in the context of Zimbabwe. I employed qualitative methodological triangulation, using three data collection methods aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks. Systematic literature review corresponds with the theory of the digital public sphere; online content analysis aligns with the theory of communicative capitalism; and interviews correspond with the theory of data colonialism. I also outlined the steps taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the study's findings, including participant validation of my interpretations. Finally, I presented the limitations of the study and the measures taken to ensure that the study adhered to ethical principles.

Chapter 5: Systematic literature review

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I present findings from systematic literature review of recent literature on digital activism in Zimbabwe. I present the systematic literature review under the subthemes of access, rationality and fragmentation.

5.2. Access

In this section, I present findings from the literature that critique the challenges related to accessing the digital public sphere. It is widely acknowledged that the digital communication space is not easily accessible to the majority of Zimbabweans, hindering its ability to function as an ideal and effective public sphere.

The challenges to access are varied and stem from factors such as poor or non-existent infrastructure, the lack of resources to acquire the necessary devices and data, insufficient knowledge and skills to navigate the digital communication space, repressive laws, and government-induced or enforced internet shutdowns (Moyo, 2020; Chitanana, 2019; Dendere, 2019; Mare, 2020). Poor internet infrastructure in both rural and urban Zimbabwe limits easy access to the internet for most citizens (Chitanana, 2019). While there is potential for Zimbabweans to transform their lives economically, socially, and politically through internet connectivity, this potential remains constrained due to inadequate infrastructure (Chitanana, 2019). Communities would be able to achieve more in social, political, and economic communication if better telecommunications and internet connectivity infrastructure were in place.

Some citizens are unable to fully utilise digital platforms due to a lack of strategic skills, preventing them from participating meaningfully in the digital public sphere (Moyo, 2020). Unlike Chitanana (2019), who only conducted desktop research, Moyo combined desktop research with interviews with Twitter users. Through the study, Moyo found that while some citizens have access to the information and digital communication space, they lack the critical interpretive skills essential for meaningful or productive participation in the digital public sphere (Moyo, 2020). Moyo also noted that there exists a middle class with ample digital and interpretive skills, yet this group remains confined within a middle-class social media monologue, which limits their transformative impact beyond their small circle. As a result, this

group excludes themselves from the broader digital public sphere by becoming trapped in a middle-class echo chamber or filter bubble.

Poverty is another factor contributing to the exclusion of certain citizens from the digital public sphere (Moyo, 2020). The economically disadvantaged members of both urban and rural areas cannot afford the necessary devices or data bundles to access the internet regularly. Moyo's finding is supported by Mare (2020), whose study revealed that internet data is packaged in a stratified manner. Many people can only afford WhatsApp data bundles, as they are the cheapest, while the wealthier middle class can afford a wider range of bundles, allowing them to access diverse platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Mare, 2020). Chitanana (2019) found that the government is unwilling to open up the digital communications space. This finding is substantiated by Mare (2020), who revealed that the government charges exorbitant licensing fees to telecommunications companies. For example, the government charges US\$137.5 million in registration fees for private companies seeking to operate as telecommunications providers (Mare, 2020). Such high charges limit the number of internet service providers, with the few companies in operation running an oligopoly, which results in higher service costs due to the lack of competition.

Rural-urban and demographic divides further limit communities' access to the digital public sphere (Chitanana, 2019; Dendere, 2019). Chitanana (2019) found that the digital divide in Zimbabwe is evident along geographical lines and age groups, with rural communities having less access to the internet compared to their urban counterparts. Echoing Chitanana's findings, Kwenda (2019) observed that the rural voice is noticeably absent from the digital public sphere, which is instead dominated by a youthful urban elite. Younger people are more connected, more active online, and more skilled with using digital technology compared to the elderly (Chitanana, 2019). However, Chitanana's study lacks statistical data that could have provided more useful insights into the reasons behind the divide and the impact on different communities and demographics. Additionally, in 2019, when Chitanana and Kwenda conducted their studies, data bundle prices were lower than they became after subsequent increases. The government approved higher data prices following digital activism that mobilised for a national shutdown in July 2020.

The government also enacts exclusion from the digital public sphere through forced internet shutdowns and repressive legislation (Chitanana, 2019; Dendere, 2019; Mare, 2020). The government has denied citizens access to digital communication platforms by shutting down

social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook during times of unrest (Chitanana, 2019). Dendere (2019) substantiates Chitanana's claims, with his study showing that the government has used internet shutdowns to deny citizens access to the digital communication space. Mare (2020) comprehensively researched government internet shutdowns, employing an idiographic case study to investigate the shutdowns in July 2016 and January 2019, which were triggered by the worsening economic crisis, including fuel and cash shortages and increased human rights violations by the state. Mare conducted a thematic content analysis of ministerial orders, press statements from telecommunications companies, regulatory authorities, and reports from advocacy organisations. He found that the government is a major shareholder in NetOne, TelOne, Africom, and Telecel, with Econet Global Limited being the only provider of fixed mobile internet through Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, Liquid Telecom, and ZOL Zimbabwe (Mare, 2020). Mare also discovered that most Zimbabweans connect to the internet via mobile phones. With the government having a monopoly over ownership and control of internet gateway systems, it is able to disrupt internet connectivity for both voice and data communications at a national level (Mare, 2020). The state controls the regulatory authority, the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), making it easy for the government to surveil online communications. By limiting the number of service providers and centralising entry points, the government secures a single point of control. The Postal and Telecommunications Act of 2000 and the Interception of Communications Act of 2007 grant the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) the power to intercept citizens' mobile phone and email communications (Mare, 2020). Statutory Instrument SI 95/2014 mandates the registration of subscriber identity module (SIM) cards, making it easier for the government to access private communications. Mobile network operators can be compelled to release these communications to the government through court orders, leaving activists vulnerable when expressing their views and mobilising opposition online.

The studies by Moyo (2019), Chitanana (2019), Dendere (2019), and Mare (2020) critique the digital public sphere as divisive due to the challenges of access. Their critique is grounded in a democratic participatory perspective, arguing that with greater resources and the skills necessary to navigate the digital communication space, all citizens would be able to participate more fully in the polity. This cyberoptimist view assumes that with freedom of expression and equal access within the realm of digital communications, the digital public sphere would lead to political transformation. However, such a belief is not necessarily accurate, as there are many

dynamics beyond the digital public sphere that either hinder or promote democratic transformation in any polity.

5.3. Rationality

In this section, I present findings from the literature critiquing social media platforms as spaces that, on the one hand, are viewed as promoting free participation, thereby enhancing democracy. For activists, the assumption is that digital communication spaces foster healthy democratic engagement. On the other hand, these platforms are seen as spaces compromised by state control, to the extent that they negatively impact the potential for a robust digital public sphere.

Scholarly perspectives on social media use in political communication diverge. Some scholars posit that social media use has a positive impact on Zimbabwe's political sphere. For instance, there is a prevailing view that citizens use social media to counter government propaganda (Kwenda, 2019; Mare and Matsilele, 2020; Matsilele, Mpofu, Msimanga, and Tshuma, 2021; Nyoka and Tembo, 2021; Gukurume, 2022). Kwenda (2019) conducted desk research and concluded that social media use positions citizens to make more informed decisions. His study also found that the Mnangagwa government became more adept at using social media to connect with voters prior to the 2018 July general elections. Mare and Matsilele (2020) noted that presidential candidates established Facebook and Twitter accounts, with Mnangagwa's account managed by a UK-based public relations firm. This departure from Mugabe's approach, who had no social media presence, indicates a shift in the political landscape. Additionally, Kwenda (2019) revealed that the January 2019 protests against government-induced economic hardships were coordinated via social media. The study also indicated that social media improved communication between politicians and their constituencies by facilitating direct and easier exchanges.

Taking a similar perspective on social media use, Nyoka and Tembo (2021) expressed a cyber-optimistic view. They argued that activists use social media platforms to call for the resignation of incompetent government officials, and their study highlighted the close relationship between digital democracy and digital activism. They also found that activists on Twitter (now X) felt safe using the platform for political engagement. Kwenda (2019) and Nyoka and Tembo (2021) study findings could have been more comprehensive with a wider range of research methods. For example triangulating data through interviews with various stakeholders engaged in digital

political communication and employing digital ethnography could have provided data from various approaches and sources to cross check how data from different sources is related and verifiable.

While some scholars contend that social media use by activists has positively impacted Zimbabwean politics, others express caution. Mungwari and Ndhlebe (2019) argue that social media-related movements and campaigns represent a third political force outside of government and traditional political parties, positioning social media as an alternative or subaltern public sphere, where the constraints and surveillance of an authoritarian state can be circumvented. However, their assertion that social media influenced political decisions during the 2018 elections requires more rigorous empirical support. Political decisions are shaped by numerous factors, including public opinion, party platforms, and historical context, suggesting that social media is just one among many variables. These platforms are dominated by Western technological corporations and align with Western cultural norms and values, which raises concerns about their suitability for advancing Zimbabwean political goals, even in the context of resisting authoritarian rule. Although social media has influenced political discourse in Zimbabwe, it has not yet translated into meaningful real-world political change.

A more cautious approach is taken by Matsilele, Mpofu, Msimanga, and Tshuma (2021), who argue that digital activism has not resulted in significant offline action and has not brought about the change sought by activists. The researchers employed virtual ethnography and interviews, revealing that while digital activism has gained momentum, it has not led to tangible political outcomes. Their study found that the ruling elite in Zimbabwe makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to access digital communication platforms, thereby stifling the development of a robust digital public sphere. The study also examined the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter movement, which supported journalists arrested for exposing corruption during the Covid-19 pandemic and called for the democratization of the post-Mugabe state. The findings also highlighted the role of international solidarity, with politicians and celebrities expressing support for the movement via social media. However, the study also revealed that the Zimbabwean government attempted to control the flow of information by using spin tactics, accusing activists of fabricating abductions to tarnish the government's image. The study also found that some activists created fake or parody accounts to simulate international solidarity, further complicating the landscape of digital activism. Compared to

Kwenda (2019) and Nyoka and Tembo (2021), this study provides a more balanced and nuanced perspective.

Political parties and candidates in Zimbabwe have also utilised digital communication platforms for political campaigning. Mare and Matsilele (2020) found that social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter were employed by political organisations and candidates to mobilise voters, coordinate campaigns, and influence the public agenda during the 30 July 2018 elections. The scholars observed that WhatsApp was particularly useful for coordinating campaigns at all levels, while social media platforms also facilitated fundraising and networking. They highlighted the weaponisation of social media for smear campaigns, which led to high levels of online harassment, fake news, and cyber-propaganda. This balanced discussion of social media's role in political communication complements Gukurume's (2022) findings, which also identify negative aspects of social media use in political discourse. Gukurume's study, which used digital ethnography, revealed that the state employs violence and surveillance to intimidate and silence activists, with creative strategies such as cyber-activism and popular art being used to resist state control.

Some scholars, however, view social media use for political communication in Zimbabwe with greater pessimism. For instance, studies by Stevens, Fussey, Murrey, Hove, and Saki (2023) and Munoriyarwa (2022) have shown that the digital public sphere is heavily subjected to state surveillance. Munoriyarwa's study uncovered that the Zimbabwe Defence Force (ZDF) conducts surveillance through military intelligence, the Special Air Services, and the Signals Unit, which possess the necessary equipment and training to monitor public communications. These surveillance activities are well-funded by the state and focus on opposition politicians, civil society organisations, and other factions within the ZDF and ZANU PF. Furthermore, Munoriyarwa discovered that surveillance equipment is supplied by companies from China and Iran, often in violation of the country's constitution, which limits the ZDF's surveillance powers to external threats.

The Zimbabwean government's use of surveillance as a tool for repression is consistent with broader trends of authoritarian control (Reisboard, 2022). While some scholars, such as Munoriyarwa, argue that China is exporting digital authoritarianism to Zimbabwe, Reisboard (2022) disagrees, suggesting that the Zimbabwean government uses China's surveillance technologies to achieve its own autocratic goals. Both scholars, however, agree that surveillance technology is easily accessible to the Zimbabwean government through Chinese

suppliers. Furthermore, Reisboard's study draws parallels between Zimbabwe's surveillance laws and those in China, such as the Cybersecurity Law of 2016, and the Zimbabwean Data Protection Act of 2021, indicating a convergence of authoritarian strategies.

Surveillance in Zimbabwe extends beyond state actors, involving both state and non-state participants who spy on one another on behalf of the government (Stevens et al., 2023).

5.4. Fragmentation/Political action

This section presents a critical review of the literature demonstrating how the use of social media platforms by activists has exacerbated political polarisation in Zimbabwe. The analysed literature highlights the prevalence of intense online conflicts along political lines, transforming the digital communication landscape into a domain characterised by political intolerance, trolling, harassment, and cyberbullying.

Pro-democracy academics expressed strong opposition to the ruling ZANU PF party's launch of Varakashi, a digital initiative designed to counter narratives propagated by opposition activists and supporters online. For instance, Moyo (2019) examined political contestation among Zimbabwean political actors from a governmental countermeasure perspective. Moyo conducted his study using a digital ethnographic methodology, analysing posts from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram accounts associated with various social movements, including #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, #ThisGown, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, and #ThisFlower. Additionally, Moyo scrutinised posts by pro-ZANU PF digital activists, known as Varakashi. His findings indicate that social media engagement by social movements has facilitated an improved democratic space, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and association. His study also established that social movements utilise social media platforms to counter state propaganda, expose government shortcomings, recruit new members, and mobilise for offline action. Furthermore, Moyo found that these movements encourage participation and debate through digital media platforms. However, he also noted that while social media is a crucial tool for mobilisation, its effectiveness in translating online engagement into offline activism remains limited. His findings further suggest that the activities of Varakashi have deepened political polarisation. Additionally, Moyo observed that digital political engagement predominantly involves the youth, with the elderly and rural youth being largely excluded from the digital public sphere. He also identified increasing state surveillance of digital communications.

Moyo is not alone in expressing concern over the emergence of Varakashi as a force opposing pro-democracy activists in the digital public sphere. Other scholars, including Chenzi (2021), Chitanana (2019), Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu (2022), as well as Mavengano and Moyo (2023), have conducted studies that corroborate Moyo's perspective on Varakashi.

Political communication in Zimbabwe is often characterised by misinformation and manipulation. For example, Chenzi (2021) argues that the Mnangagwa government systematically weaponises fake news. His study findings suggest that the government employs misinformation to obscure human rights violations and suppress freedoms of expression and the press. However, Chenzi does not provide concrete evidence demonstrating how the government utilises fake news for these purposes. He contends that Mnangagwa initiated Varakashi, which he describes as an anonymous shadow organisation of social media trolls, to disseminate misinformation. However, he fails to acknowledge Varakashi as a group of cyber operatives deployed by ZANU PF to counteract the negative portrayal of the ruling party and government online by opposition political parties and their affiliates. Key figures among Varakashi include Tafadzwa Mugwadi, government spokesperson George Charamba, ZANU PF spokesperson Nick Mangwana, and Jones Musara. Through his findings, Chenzi exhibits bias by portraying misinformation as a strategy exclusively employed by the government, thereby absolving opposition political parties and their supporters from any involvement in the dissemination of fake news. However, evidence from other sources suggests that opposition politicians have also engaged in misinformation, such as the dissemination of false electoral results that contributed to the 2018 protests, which ultimately resulted in civilian casualties.

Misinformation is a challenge in the political communication sphere. Chitanana (2019) explores the phenomenon of disinformation within the Zimbabwean digital public sphere. His study indicates that by 2017, Zimbabwe had achieved more than 100% mobile penetration, with Facebook and WhatsApp being the most widely used platforms, the latter boasting over 5.2 million users. Chitanana's research reveals that Varakashi engaged in disinformation by exaggerating government achievements and distorting opposition parties' shortcomings. His findings also suggest that Varakashi misled the public through doctored images, historical revisionism, and the strategic use of ghost social media accounts, fake profiles, and sensationalist political blogs.

Another study highlighting the fragmented nature of Zimbabwean political discourse is that of Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu (2022). Their research focuses exclusively on the political

communication strategies of ZANU PF supporters on Twitter (now X), without examining how activists from across the political spectrum misuse the platform. The scholars aimed to expose the shortcomings of one political faction rather than undertaking a holistic examination of digital public sphere abuses. Their study analysed content from four Twitter accounts associated with Varakashi and found that these digital activists sought to legitimise the military coup that ousted Robert Mugabe, portraying it as a constitutional intervention necessary for national security. The study further revealed that Varakashi framed the opposition MDC-Alliance as anarchic and dictatorial while depicting Mnangagwa as Zimbabwe's saviour during the July 2018 election period. Additionally, their findings indicated that Varakashi engaged in blame-shifting regarding the military's killing of six civilians during the 2018 post-election protests, attributing responsibility to the MDC-Alliance for allegedly inciting unrest. The study also suggested that Varakashi utilised spin tactics to justify the Constitutional Court's ruling on the election results, asserting that ZANU PF's victory was fair while branding the opposition as "sore losers." However, the authors fail to acknowledge that spin is a pervasive issue within Zimbabwe's digital public sphere, not limited to ZANU PF supporters. Varakashi was only launched in 2018 as a reaction to opposition activists' online criticisms of ZANU PF. Addressing misinformation in Zimbabwe requires an apolitical approach wherein academics critique disinformation objectively rather than attributing blame to one side of the political divide.

Mavengano and Moyo (2023). Their research examines the language choices of digital activists aligned with political parties, focusing on their rhetorical strategies in defending political leaders. The study compares ZANU PF supporters (Varakashi 4ED) with supporters of the opposition Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) from a linguistic perspective. The researchers employed content analysis of Twitter posts by both groups of activists. However, their dataset consisted of only seven posts—five from Varakashi 4ED and two from CCC supporters. The first post by Varakashi 4ED was a direct response to an earlier post from the opposition camp. The study would have benefitted from a more equitable selection of posts from both political factions to ensure a balanced analysis.

Overall, the reviewed literature illustrates the deepening polarisation of Zimbabwe's political landscape through social media activism. Addressing misinformation in Zimbabwe's digital public sphere requires an objective and balanced scholarly approach that critically examines disinformation practices across the political spectrum. Unfortunately, the scholars did not share

the post by the CCC that led the Varkashi 4ED to respond through Cadre Shangri-La whose post had the message that

Striking while the enemy least expect, #Varakashi4ED for you. Jecha Brigade, CIA, misinformants, MDC-CCC: western puppets hokoyoi! You can never get away with false and falsified accounts in the watch of a well-coordinated and collaborated force. #ED2023. (Mavengano and Moyo, p.73).

Incorporating interview findings from victims of Varakashi 4ED and Nerrorist online attacks could have provided the reader with more insightful information regarding the situation and its impact. The findings illustrate the harshness and toxicity of Varakashi 4ED posts. However, this perception appears to be rooted in the historical context of ZANU PF and its leadership rather than arising directly from the content of the tweets analysed in the study. In comparison to the explicitly threatening language used in Varakashi 4ED posts, the Nerrorists appear more moderate and rational in their choice of words. Whereas Varakashi 4ED employs terms such as "*hokoyoi!*"—a Shona warning meaning “watch out” or “danger is approaching”—the CCC posts are more measured, often framed using proverbs. For instance, the CCC post cited utilises the proverb, “One who beats the drum for the madman to dance is also mad” (Mavengano & Moyo, 2023, p. 75). This African proverb embodies reasonableness, particularly when contrasted with the inflammatory rhetoric of Varakashi 4ED, who label the CCC as puppets of the West and a CIA project. Based on the selection of tweets from both factions, the authors appear to have portrayed Varakashi 4ED more negatively than the Nerrorists.

A study by Sabao and Nenjerama (2023) aligns with a broader trend among academics in critiquing Varakashi’s online activities. Sabao and Nenjerama describe the establishment of digital movements such as Varakashi 4ED and ZANU PF Patriots as “*active pages on most mainstream social media platforms created especially to provide counternarratives to opposition political discourses while at the same time popularising ZANU PF ideology and political propaganda*” (Sabao & Nenjerama, 2023, p. 166). The scholars further argue that the introduction of the *Cyber Security and Data Protection Act 2021* and the *Patriot Act 2023* effectively criminalises online expressions of dissent against ZANU PF (Sabao & Nenjerama, 2023, p. 166). These laws reinforce the dominance of pro-government Varakashi and ZANU PF Patriots within the digital sphere. The communicative space has historically been restricted, and these new legislative measures further curtail the prospects for democratic contestation through emerging digital public forums. The findings of Sabao and Nenjerama’s study highlight the polarisation of political and communicative spaces.

The challenges arising from the abuse of digital communication spaces, which contribute to the fragmentation of Zimbabwe's political landscape, are also addressed in the study by Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020). Their analysis examines the online–offline dynamics within the Varakashi–Nerrorist nexus. The scholars conducted a content analysis of tweets from Varakashi and Nerrorists—supporters of Nelson Chamisa, the leader of the MDC-Alliance. Their findings indicate that Nerrorists were particularly active in targeting Chamisa's opponents on Twitter, often engaging in what they term “memory mining.” The study also reveals that Nerrorists used Twitter to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, notably through attacks on prominent female government officials, such as the chairperson of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, Priscilla Chigumba. Additionally, the research highlights the conflation of party and state within Varakashi tweets, demonstrating how Varakashi defended the ZEC as if it were an extension of ZANU PF. Moreover, the findings suggest that Nerrorists utilised Twitter as a platform to express resistance against ZANU PF's authoritarian governance. Unlike other studies that adopt an overtly partisan stance, Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020) approach the issue from a broader perspective, critically examining the misuse of social media platforms rather than targeting a particular political party and its supporters. Their analysis thus avoids the activist tone prevalent in some academic discourse that appears to champion an anti-ZANU PF narrative.

The literature also examines the challenges of transitioning from online activism to offline mobilisation in Zimbabwe. This issue is explored in depth by Hodzi and Zihnoglu (2024), who adopt a perspective that moves beyond cyber-optimism. They argue that “*expectations regarding the potential of social media go beyond the utopian and dystopian views of social media and activism*” (Hodzi & Zihnoglu, 2024, p. 44). They identify a lack of organisational structure within internet-based movements as a key impediment to translating online activism into tangible offline action, noting that “*the constant fluidity is, to a greater extent, a symptom of the lack of organisational structure within the internet-based movements*” (Hodzi & Zihnoglu, 2024, p. 45). For instance, they attribute the failure of the #ThisFlag movement to its absence of clear leadership, rendering it a form of *clicktivism* rather than a structured campaign. Additionally, they argue that #ThisFlag struggled to resonate with economically disadvantaged urban populations and rural constituencies. In drawing comparisons with the #OromoProtests movement in Ethiopia, which successfully contributed to the overthrow of the Ethiopian prime minister, Hodzi and Zihnoglu highlight the importance of a coherent and widely understood narrative. They contend that “*the #OromoProtests were therefore more*

focused than #ThisFlag because their ‘crisis’ was framed in a simplified narrative that the Oromo people of different classes understood and identified with” (Hodzi & Zihnoglu, 2024, p. 54). Furthermore, the scholars assert that Zimbabwean online activists tend to be elitist and dismissive of traditional grassroots activism. They argue that “social media activists in Zimbabwe looked with disdain on conventional social movements, making it difficult for the old and the new to gel together in couching new counter-hegemonic narratives to construct counter-power so as to democratise the state and expand opportunities for citizens” (Hodzi & Zihnoglu, 2024, p. 55).

This view is echoed by Admire Mare, who comments on the exclusivity of online activism. On Facebook, Mare (2017) observes: *“Opinion on social media represents urbanites and middle-class people and sometimes diasporised people. Unless rural people have been invited to be part of the table conversations, those who predict elections based on social media public opinion will continue to be described as false prophets.”* The spontaneity of online activism in Zimbabwe is thus presented as a key weakness, particularly when faced with an organised and well-resourced authoritarian government.

In the case of the Oromo protests, deep-seated tensions over territory and distribution of state resources and power among the different Ethiopian nationalities was the main mobilising factor. The protests and demonstrations in the region were organised at the Oromia ‘national’ level and bore the characteristics of nationalism; hence, there was consensus on the grievances, how they had to be solved and the effect they required. In Zimbabwe, #ThisFlag lacked that consensus. In the Oromo protests, social media resulted in a ‘networked collective’, whereas in Zimbabwe, #ThisFlag remained a ‘network of individuals’. #ThisFlag therefore struggled to ‘filter out aspects of a rather diffuse worldview, which as a source of collective identity has served as a framework for mobilising supporters, into clearly defined items for political negotiation in the institutional frameworks of the established political culture. (Hodzi and Zihnoglu, 2024, p. 55).

The scenario in Zimbabwe was characterised by the assumption that all citizens oppose the government and the subtle appeal to the international community for intervention.

Studies by Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020) and Hodzi and Zihnoglu (2024) adopt a more neutral scholarly perspective on the fragmentation of the digital public sphere. Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020) illustrate how pro-democracy activists have misused digital

communication platforms, at times engaging in sexist-related bullying. They also highlight how *Varakashi* were mobilised to counter the negative narratives disseminated online by opponents of the ruling party and government. Conversely, Hodzi and Zihnoglu (2024) examine the challenges faced by activists in Zimbabwe in transitioning from online to offline activism. They contrast this with the success of digital activism in Ethiopia and argue that Zimbabwean digital activists have failed to capitalise on opportunities for offline mobilisation.

5.5. Summary and Conclusions

The challenges that activists and citizens face in accessing the digital public sphere are multifaceted. Barriers include inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources to acquire digital devices and data, and a lack of digital literacy. Furthermore, access is restricted by repressive laws and government-imposed internet shutdowns. The literature also highlights the existence of a rural-urban and demographic divide in digital engagement.

Scholarly perspectives on social media use by activists and citizens vary. Some scholars adopt an optimistic stance, arguing that social media has had a positive impact on the polity. Others take a pessimistic view, contending that social media poses risks to both users and society at large. Pessimistic scholars highlight the dangers of state surveillance and its consequences for targeted individuals. They also emphasise the potential for activists to misuse social media platforms in ways that threaten state security. Additionally, some scholars argue that social media contributes to the fragmentation of an already polarised polity.

Chapter 6: Online content posted by digital youth activists in Zimbabwe.

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I undertake an examination of online content produced by activists across three social media platforms: Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube. This analysis is structured around specific thematic categories, namely symbolic efficiency, endless reflexivity, slacktivism, virtue signalling, and individual profit generation. These theoretical concepts were identified in Chapter Three as indicative of potential pitfalls in online activism.

6.2 Symbolic Efficiency

In this section, I critically examine the extent to which symbols used by activists online effectively represent their intended meanings. I begin by exploring the use of the national flag as a rallying point for protests and how other social movements capitalised on its popularity following its adoption by the #ThisFlag movement. Additionally, I analyse the use of the raised fist and specific colour combinations employed by political parties.

6.2.1 The Zimbabwean Flag

Social movements utilise symbols as rallying points or as signifiers of the causes they advocate. For instance, the Zimbabwean national flag is frequently used by opposition activists in their online posts, following Pastor Evan Mawarire's popularisation of the flag as a symbol of protest in 2016. The flag was subsequently adopted as the emblem of the #ThisFlag movement. As Mawere (2020) explains,

The use of the flag by the movement challenged ZANU PF's ownership of the national flag, which is quite similar to and has been drawn from the flag of the party, hence the movement was challenging the identity of the party, its ownership and its relevance. (Mawere, 2020, p. 167).

This act provoked responses from both government sources and pro-government activists, albeit in different ways. Pro-government activists attempted to counter this movement with their own campaign, #OurFlag, but were ultimately unsuccessful (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). The interpretation of the Zimbabwean flag as a symbol varies depending on individuals' geographical locations and socio-political backgrounds.

Below is an image depicting a ZANU PF supporter holding the Zimbabwean national flag in their left hand while raising a picture of President Mnangagwa in their right.

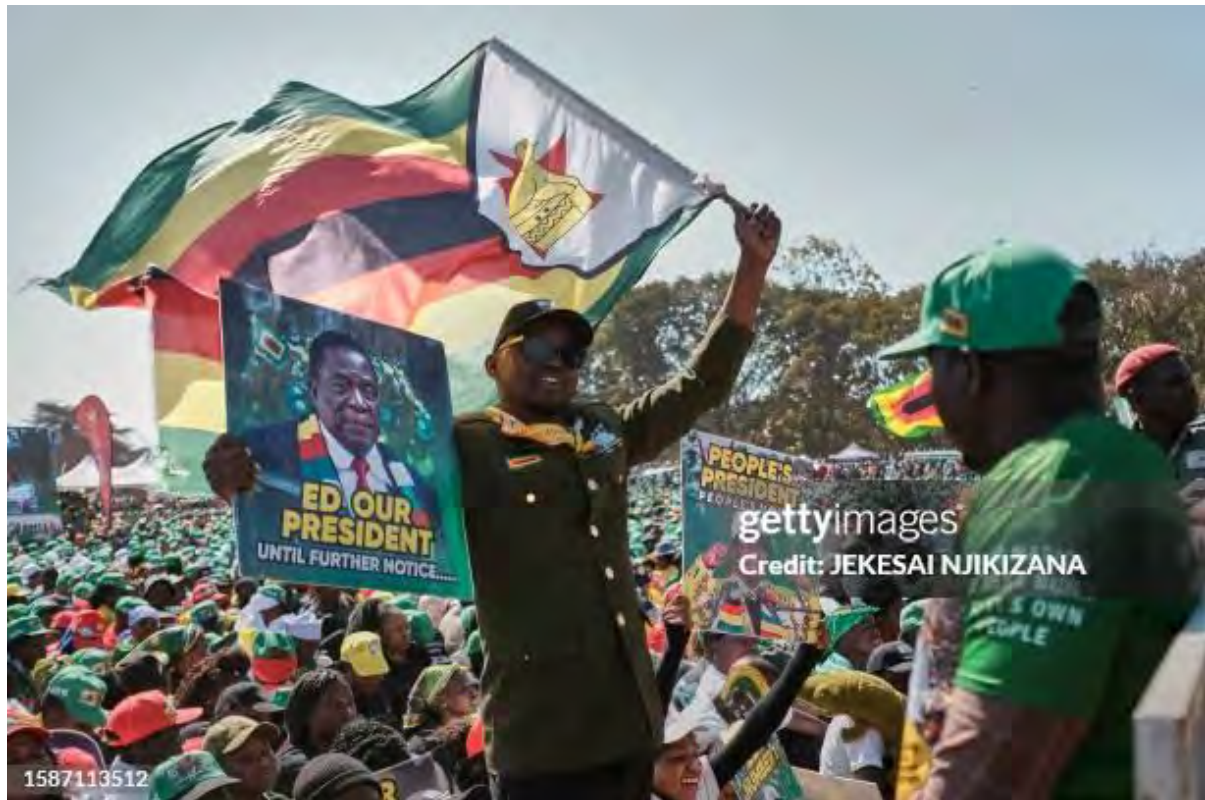


Fig 6.1. A ZANU PF supporter raising the Zimbabwean national flag with his left hand and holding the poster with the portrait of President Mnangagwa written ED OUR PRESIDENT UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Rural and farming communities, which constitute traditional ZANU PF strongholds, associate the national flag with the party. Since 1980, ZANU PF's official party colours have been identical to those of the national flag. Consequently, for traditional ZANU PF constituencies, the flag cannot meaningfully be associated with anything other than ZANU PF, the government, and Zimbabwe itself (Mamvura, 2021). Mawarire's interpretation of the national flag as a symbol of protest was more likely to resonate with the urban middle classes and members of the diaspora, who were able to access his Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook video posts explaining how government failures had rendered the flag meaningless. By contrast, this

interpretation was less likely to be understood by rural communities. These posts illustrate the contestation between social movements and government supporters. The #ThisFlag social movement sought to redefine the meaning of the national flag, while ZANU PF supporters endeavoured to preserve its original significance. The activists' attempt to resignify the flag's meaning occurred within the broader context of its decreasing symbolic efficiency. For instance, pro-ZANU PF activists could repurpose an image of youths draped in flags to depict a ZANU PF rally simply by altering the caption, a reinterpretation that would be readily accepted by ZANU PF supporters.

Ultimately, the government imposed a ban on the use of the flag by protesters both online and offline in an effort to curtail the momentum generated by protests inspired by its symbolism. An example of the flag's use as a symbol by activists is found in a tweet by one of the founding leaders of the #ThisFlag social movement:

Remember the time Zimbabweans celebrated their flag to a point where the Govt had to pass a law banning us wearing our OWN national flag? Musanyeperwe. Zimbabweans love Zimbabwe. (Fadzayi Mahere, 2020).

Through legal measures, the government sought to reclaim control over the national flag and prevent its use as a symbol of protest by social movements and activists.



Fig 6.2. #ThisFlag social movement inspired protestors kneeling with Zimbabwean national flags draped around their shoulders.

Fadzayi Mahere's tweet is accompanied by an image of young people kneeling on the ground, with the national flag draped around their shoulders and flowing behind them like a cloak. The tweet was a direct response to the government's decision to prohibit civilians from carrying the national flag. The government justified this ban by claiming that so-called sellouts were abusing the flag, leading to legislation that criminalised its public display by unauthorised individuals. Mahere rose to prominence through her activism, eventually becoming a legislator as a member of an opposition political party. In her tweet, she reminded the nation of the widespread influence of the #ThisFlag social movement.

Since 1980, ZANU PF has monopolised the narrative of being the sole defender of the country's sovereign status (Good, 2020). However, the #ThisFlag social movement disrupted this hegemony by redefining the meaning of the national flag, asserting that the government had deviated from its mandate and had failed to represent the aspirations of the people. The government's decision to ban the use of the national flag by activists, as referenced in Mahere's tweet, can therefore be interpreted as a desperate attempt to reclaim control over the symbol and reassert its authority over the flag's national significance.

Following its adoption by the #ThisFlag movement, the Zimbabwean flag gained renewed prominence, prompting other social movements to incorporate it into their campaigns. For example, the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter movement integrated the national flag into its activism. Below is an illustration of how the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter social movement utilised the national flag in one of its protest posters, which highlights and condemns state repression against protesters. The tweet below is from the @ThisFlag1980 (2020) Twitter handle.



Fig 6.3. A picture of a woman wearing a golden mask with a gagged baby wrapped in the Zimbabwean national flag on her back.

The tweet is accompanied by a graphic portrait depicting a woman with a child strapped to her back using the Zimbabwean flag. Instead of a face, the mother has a golden skeleton mask, while the infant's lips are sealed shut. The mother's hands, along with the flag securing the baby to her back, are drenched in blood. Above them, the sky is filled with dark clouds and streaks of lightning. The tweet's caption reads: *A child that does not cry will die of abuse on the evil mother's back*. This is derived from a Shona proverb (*Mwana asingacheme anofira*

mumbereko), which encourages individuals to speak out in distressing situations rather than endure suffering in silence. The imagery suggests that the mother is a killer, as indicated by the death mask and blood-stained hands. The child's sealed lips symbolise its inability to cry out for help, signifying a silent, stifled death at the hands of the very figure expected to provide care and protection. This visual metaphor is a critique of the leadership's suppression of citizens, preventing them from exposing or protesting against the maladministration that is destroying the country.

The golden skull death mask in the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter tweet is culturally specific. Its symbolism is more likely to be recognised in Western or Asian contexts, where death masks have historical associations with ancient Egyptian, Roman, and certain Asian traditions (Wang, 2021). However, the meaning of this symbol is not readily understood by ordinary Zimbabweans, as it does not align with traditional representations of death in Shona and Ndebele cultures. For example, among the Shona people, signs of impending death include sightings of a hyena, an owl, or a snake with heads at both ends within the homestead (Mwandayi, 2011). These creatures are inherently wild and avoid human settlements, making their presence in a homestead, particularly during daylight hours, considered a taboo and an omen of death. Given that many rural Zimbabweans have limited exposure to Western films and literature—where such symbols are more commonly featured—they are less likely to relate to the meaning of the death mask in the tweet, as it represents a Western import rather than an indigenous symbol.

6.2.2 The Raised Hand with a Clenched Fist

The raised hand with a clenched fist is a globally recognised symbol of resistance, signifying power from below. However, within Zimbabwe, it is particularly associated with ZANU PF, which adopted the gesture during the liberation struggle and retained it after independence. When chanting the ZANU PF slogan, individuals are required to raise a clenched fist. In contrast, the MDC introduced the symbol of the raised open palm to signify transparency, positioning it as an ideological counter to ZANU PF's clenched fist. Nevertheless, some anti-government protesters have appropriated the clenched fist symbol alongside the Zimbabwean flag to represent the collective power of the masses in opposition to the ZANU PF elite. This act of defiance demonstrates the decline in the symbolic efficiency of the clenched fist, as its meaning has become contested and open to multiple interpretations.



Fig 6.4. A raised clenched fist with the Zimbabwean national flag painted on it and with the Zimbabwean national flag in the background.

The image above depicts the Zimbabwean flag painted on a clenched fist, symbolising strength, power, and protest. This visual representation can be utilised by both ZANU PF and anti-ZANU PF protesters, depending on the interpretation ascribed to the use of the flag and the clenched fist. Within the current protest culture in Zimbabwe, the combination of the raised clenched fist and the national flag serves as an artistic expression of resistance against ZANU PF.

The X post below by *ZANU PF Patriots* (2022) features the ZANU PF party president on a campaign poster, captured in the traditional ZANU PF sloganeering pose with a raised clenched fist. The poster was used as a mobilisation tool to encourage ZANU PF supporters in Mutare to attend a rally addressed by Vice President Chiwenga.



Fig 6.5. A ZANU PF campaign poster with the face of President Mnangagwa with a clenched fist raised over his head.

The picture below shows a crowd attending a ZANU PF rally. The crowd displays the raised clenched fist symbol and is dressed in the traditional ZANU PF colours, which correspond to the colours of the national flag.



Fig 6.6. ZANU PF supporters attending a rally displaying the raised clenched fist symbol.

The raised fist symbol in Zimbabwe is closely associated with ZANU PF, as the political party has continued to use this symbol in its sloganeering, a practice it adopted during the liberation struggle. The symbol was borrowed from the communist allies of ZANU PF, who provided funding for the nationalist fight against settler colonialism (Chitukutuku, 2017). However, protestors have reduced the monopoly ZANU PF holds over the raised fist symbol by employing it in their own protests against the party.

6.2.3 Use of Colours as Political Party Symbols

The colour yellow on both the national flag and the ZANU PF flag represents the country's mineral resources. Yellow is also a prominent part of ZANU PF party regalia, often used interchangeably or alongside the other colours of red, green, white, and black. The adoption of yellow by the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party in 2022 led ZANU PF to accuse the CCC of plagiarism. Noreen Welch (2022) shared on Facebook the use of yellow by the CCC, prompting ZANU PF to protest that the CCC was deliberately attempting to confuse the electorate by adopting a colour that had been associated with ZANU PF for over 40 years. For political parties whose voter base includes a significant proportion of the illiterate and semi-literate, colour symbolism holds considerable weight. This is why ZANU PF objects to any other political party using the colours associated with its identity. To demonstrate the potential for confusion resulting from the CCC's adoption of yellow, below are images of ZANU PF supporters and the party president at a rally, all dressed in yellow. The significance of yellow for ZANU PF supporters is somewhat diluted by the CCC's widespread use of the same colour.



Fig 6.7. ZANU PF and CCC supporters attending their separate respective rallies dressed in the yellow colours of the political parties.

The use of colour symbolism by political parties in Zimbabwe has also led to a clash over the use of the colour red by both the MDC and ZANU PF. For ZANU PF, the colour red holds significant meaning. On both the national and ZANU PF flags, red represents the blood shed during the liberation struggle from 1966 to 1979. The MDC's adoption of the colour red is viewed by ZANU PF as a violation of the memory of the heroes who sacrificed their lives for the country's liberation. Since the MDC is regarded by ZANU PF as a party of 'sellouts,' its use of red dilutes the colour's significance in ZANU PF's narrative. For over 20 years, red has been synonymous with the MDC, resulting in a decline in its symbolic power to represent the blood

spilled during the liberation struggle. Below is a photograph from Facebook showing footage of a rally held by the MDC-T in Highfield, Harare, in 2022.



Fig 6.8. To the left are MDC supporters dressed in red at an MDC rally and to the right ZANU PF supporters dressed in red attending a ZANU PF rally.

The red colour is still utilised by ZANU PF, as demonstrated in the photos above. The widespread use of the same colours by various political parties can be manipulated to misrepresent the number of attendees at rallies. Media outlets have also been manipulated in instances of political violence, where perpetrators are attributed to specific political parties based on the colours they are seen wearing. For example, in print media, wide-angle shots of large crowds can be captioned as representing one party, when in reality, the event may have been organised by a different party. The only distinguishing feature on the party regalia, which differentiates the political parties represented by the colours, are the images of the party candidates and the party names, which are typically in small print. As a result, the colour no longer serves to identify the party being represented, leading to a decline in its symbolic efficiency.

6.2.4 Representation of Liberation Heroes:

(a) The Statue of Mbuya Nehanda

Mbuya Nehanda is a symbol of the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe. Nehanda, a female spirit medium, along with another spirit medium, the male Sekuru Kaguvi, is credited with leading the resistance against settler colonialism by initiating an armed uprising in 1896. Nehanda represents resistance and is regarded as a guiding spirit for both Zimbabwe and ZANU PF. Ndlovu and Khupe (2024) state that, "Mbuya Nehanda is a revered Shona spirit medium who was instrumental in the armed struggle of 1896 to 1897 as she became a symbol of the resistance to colonial rule in modern-day Zimbabwe. Mbuya Nehanda occupies a central place in the imagination of Zimbabwe" (Ndlovu & Khupe, 2024, p. 211). The symbol of Nehanda has been monopolised by ZANU PF since the era of the liberation struggle. Her statue was erected by the Mnangagwa government on 25 May 2021 to honour the spiritual leader and commemorate the essence of the struggle for independence. However, this symbol is also utilised by activists and workers in their pursuit of justice and improved living conditions. Below is a tweet by a pro-ZANU PF youth, @MadondoMaria (2021), celebrating the erection of the Nehanda statue in Harare's Central Business District:

"Mbuya Nehanda, a liberation war icon and anti-colonial figurehead who led the first Chimurenga, was honoured with the erection of a statue. Thank you, President ED Mnangagwa."



Fig 6.11. The statue of Mbuya Nehanda in Harare.

At the same time, the statue of Nehanda, as a symbol of liberation, can carry a meaning that diverges from that assigned to it by ZANU PF. It has been appropriated by disgruntled teachers who staged a demonstration against the government at the site of the statue. A Twitter post by @TendayiZinyama (2021) explains that the Amalgamated Rural Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) staged a protest at the statue's location, demanding better remuneration from the government. The tweet includes a video of young people singing and dancing, calling for the intervention of Mbuya Nehanda in their plight—this performance was a typical liberation struggle song against the colonial regime. The singing and dancing were staged in front of the statue of Mbuya Nehanda. Thus, the symbol was used to challenge the government, which seeks to align itself with Nehanda as the liberator.

(b) The Statue of Joshua Nkomo

Joshua Moqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo, leader of PF ZAPU, became Robert Mugabe's Vice President on 22 December 1987 following the signing of the Unity Accord between PF ZAPU and ZANU. Joshua Nkomo passed away on 1 July 1999. The ZANU PF government erected a statue of Nkomo on 22 December 2013 in Bulawayo to honour the late Vice President.

However, for the youth of Bulawayo, "Nkomo's statue, a state-sanctioned artistic work, has come to symbolise a wounded Matebeleland and a reminder of unreconciled hurts" (Ndlovu & Khupe, 2024, p. 211). The youth of Matebeleland, who recall the Gukurahundi atrocities of the 1980s, gather around the statue of Nkomo during Unity Day commemorations to protest against the ZANU PF government. Ndlovu and Khupe further explain that "Unity Day and Nkomo's statue have become floating signifiers as their social meanings are contingent, multiple and contested. Floating signifiers are elements which are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning" (Ndlovu & Khupe, 2024, p. 211).



Fig. 6.12. the statue of Joshua Nkomo in Bulawayo.

Symbols play a crucial role in political contexts, as they serve to communicate ideas and beliefs. Flags, colours, and the raised fist are significant signifiers of identity and culture, and they shape public perceptions (Geisler, 2005). By appropriating the national flag, the colours yellow and red, and the raised fist from ZANU PF, social movements, activists, and opposition political parties challenged ZANU PF's established role as the guardian of national sovereignty. In adopting the national flag as their rallying point, these groups contested the government's conservative stance on what it means to be a true Zimbabwean. Through the use

of these symbols, they declared their patriotism as equally legitimate, aligning themselves with the national identity defined by these symbols.

The ZANU PF government, in turn, sought to celebrate and memorialise the liberation struggle and national unity through the erection of statues honouring icons of the liberation struggle and national unity. Statues of Mbuya Nehanda and Joshua Nkomo stand as powerful symbols of resistance to oppression, liberty, and unity. However, when protestors gather at these symbolic statues, they express defiance against the very government that has erected them. In response, the ZANU PF government reasserted its control by reappropriating the national flag, imposing a ban on its use by activists.

6.3. Endless reflexivity

Digital activists may find themselves caught in never-ending social media debates, a phenomenon known as endless reflexivity (Dean, 2014). In this section, I present five examples of posts that triggered endless reflexivity: three from Facebook and two from Twitter (now X).

6.3.1 Pro-Government initiated conversations

(a) The teaching of patriotism in schools

Online debates concerning ZANU PF policies often degenerate into exchanges of insults, as opposition voices respond, and ZANU PF supporters counter their arguments. For example, Aubrey Mpofu initiated a debate proposing the introduction of patriotism classes into the school curriculum. Mpofu's post (2024) appears on the Democracy Advocate Initiative Facebook account, where he argues that patriotism should be instilled in children from an early age to foster a love for their country and its institutions. His rationale is that such an approach would encourage children to appreciate themselves and discourage the uncritical admiration of foreign products and lifestyles. He contends that these foreign products and ways of life are not inherently superior to indigenous ones.

To illustrate his point, Mpofu refers to Zimbabweans who migrate to work in Western countries and take up menial jobs, such as washing the elderly, in exchange for pounds and dollars. He asserts that such individuals subsequently denigrate the Zimbabwean dollar, labelling it as worthless paper, even though the pound and dollar are themselves paper-based currencies rather than gold-backed. Consequently, he advocates for the deployment of graduates from the School of Intelligence into primary and secondary schools to instil the ethos of patriotism.

Mpofu further asserts that ZANU PF's Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology should collaborate with all primary and secondary schools to entrench a culture of patriotism among future citizens. He proposes the introduction of a dedicated subject titled *Patriotism*, to be taught by tutors from the #HCSol. Furthermore, he argues that ZANU PF should no longer be treated merely as a political party but rather as a quasi-parastatal overseeing the Ministries of Education, Lands, Home Affairs, Culture, and Heritage. He expresses concern that Zimbabwe cannot achieve prosperity while opposition politicians continue to view the country as a British province. He contrasts this with South Africans, whom he perceives as having pride in their identity and currency. Mpofu reiterates that the disdain for the Zimbabwean dollar stems from a lack of patriotism, arguing that the Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology should assume responsibility for the administration of all schools in Zimbabwe. (See Appendix J for the full set of responses.)

Mpofu's proposal elicited 55 responses, many of which were highly polarising due to the partisan nature of the debate. For instance, one comment reads: *"School of brainwashing citizens instead of equipping hospitals with life-saving machines and medicines."* This response highlights one of the key criticisms levelled against ZANU PF—poor healthcare service delivery. The comment suggests that Mpofu and ZANU PF prioritise peripheral issues at the expense of critical concerns such as healthcare.

Several responses were direct attacks on Mpofu, with some commenters calling him derogatory names and labelling him an "idiot" for supporting ZANU PF. One participant attempted to engage in the discussion by asking for specific examples of corruption within ZANU PF, as raised in other comments. However, instead of receiving a substantive response, they were themselves insulted and accused of being a shameless supporter of a corrupt party. The discussion quickly descended into circular arguments, with Mpofu attempting to defend his position while facing continuous criticism of ZANU PF and its supporters.

The responses reveal a stark divide along political lines, with pro-ZANU PF voices supporting Mpofu while opposition-aligned participants resorted to mockery and insults. Crucially, what is absent from these exchanges is a substantive counterargument engaging with the merits or demerits of Mpofu's proposal. This suggests that meaningful debate on digital platforms is difficult to achieve, as discussions are shaped more by political affiliations than by critical engagement with the issues at hand. The debate ultimately degenerated into personal attacks, including disparaging remarks about individuals' levels of education and intellectual

capabilities. For instance, Mpofu responds to one critic by asking: “*Chikoro chacho mutombori nacho here?*” (*Do you have any education at all?*). This further illustrates the unproductive nature of the discussion, which fails to foster constructive dialogue or mutual understanding. Although corruption within the ZANU PF government is repeatedly cited as a major issue, no specific examples are provided to substantiate these claims.

(a) Varakashi versus Team Pachedu

Endless reflexivity is exemplified in a post by Hungwe Charles, as outlined below. Hungwe Charles (2023) posted on Facebook to provoke debate on the online activities of *Varakashi* and the pro-democracy digital activist group *Team Pachedu*. In his post, Hungwe praises the activities of *Varakashi* while taunting *Team Pachedu*, which in turn elicited responses that highlighted the partisan and unproductive nature of inter-party political debate online. Rather than engaging in a rational exchange of perspectives, participants resorted to mockery and belittlement, resulting in an endless cycle of confrontation devoid of meaningful debate or resolution.

Varakashi 4ED muri ko here uko,!!!!

Kuti Ziiiii sevanhu vāri politically matured, basa mapedza zvinyu

Ko TeamPachedu 🤔🤔

Ko Mandla kuti Ziiiii semunhu amedza Hove mbishi 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔?

Saka m uchaitaseyi

Ahh ini Zvangu Ini

(Varakashi 4ED are you there!!!!

You are quiet like the politically mature people, you finished the job

How about TeamPachedu

How about Mandla who is very quiet like someone who has swallowed raw fish

So what are you going to do next

As for me, i just keep quiet

Translation by the author).

Eugene Manyakaidze Simbo

Varakashi 4ED chavanyaradza izhara,vave kutoona kuti chicken dziya dzavaipiwa dzokufa dzega dzatopera nhai

(Varakashi 4ED are now quiet because of hunger. They now realise that the chicken that they were fed is no longer forthcoming) Translation by author.

Leon Mashayamombe

Blame the victim. Zimbabwe style

(See Appendix J for the rest of the responses).

The 19 responses to Hungwe Charles's post indicate a mixture of anger and insults from *Team Pachedu* sympathisers, alongside support from pro-ZANU PF interlocutors. The first comment in response to Hungwe Charles's post states, "*Varakashi 4ED chavanyaradza izhara. Vave kutoona kuti chicken dziya dzavaipiwa dzokufa dzega dzatopera nhai,*" which translates to "*Varakashi 4ED are quiet because of hunger. They now realise that the chickens they were fed are no longer forthcoming.*" This comment mocks ZANU PF supporters, referencing the distribution of food, particularly chicken and fries, at political rallies before the 2023 general election. This theme is frequently employed by opposition supporters to ridicule ZANU PF followers, suggesting that they are given mere crumbs while high-ranking politicians enrich themselves through state resources.

However, the debate lost momentum when two interlocutors ignored the insults and instead shifted the focus to advising others to concentrate on providing for their families rather than wasting time on political discussions. This shift prompted Hungwe Charles to adopt a more neutral stance, declaring himself a non-partisan analyst in the public sphere. Yet, sensing that the debate was losing its antagonistic edge, Hungwe Charles attempted to reignite the discussion by taunting a commenter, suggesting that they were "*feeling the pain right up to the tips of their hair.*" Despite this effort, the conversation gradually dissipated without any consensus being reached through meaningful engagement.

The debate initiated by Hungwe Charles bears similarities to that started by Aubrey Mpofu. Both figures praise ZANU PF—Aubrey Mpofu in relation to its policies and Hungwe Charles in support of *Varakashi*. However, neither discussion succeeds in generating balanced or constructive debate, as emotions run high and tempers flare. The result is an exercise in futile exchanges of insults and personal attacks. Online political discourse in Zimbabwe appears to exacerbate divisions rather than fostering meaningful engagement or constructive political

change. Instead of finding common ground, opposing factions use these platforms to entrench their existing beliefs and attack one another.

Dean (2010) observes that *“the ways that the extremes produced by the circulation of information themselves have effects on those of us captured in communicative capitalism”* (Dean, 2010, p. 19). The persistence of debates in an endless cycle of online discussions ultimately inhibits meaningful political change (Day, 2011). Rather than persuading others through rational argument, online interlocutors merely reinforce their own convictions, further entrenching political polarisation.

6.3.2 Anti-Government-Initiated Conversations

(a) Government of National Unity

Facebook discussions demonstrate how like-minded individuals use online platforms to amplify their political beliefs. An example of this is a Facebook post by BayeroMedia (2023), which presents speculation as breaking news, alleging that the ZANU PF government was considering establishing a Government of National Unity (GNU) with the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC).

BREAKING: Opposition folks are being told by ZANU PF that if the opposition drops Tendai Biti from parliament, they will be part of a GNU!

ZANU PF fears Biti in parliament because he has been the most effective MP in exposing corruption in there!



Fig 6.12. Tendai Biti who was one of Nelson Chamisa's deputies in the CCC.

(See Appendix J for the rest of the responses).

The responses to the post were predominantly opposed to the idea of a Government of National Unity (GNU) with ZANU PF, as CCC supporters expressed confidence that their party would win the elections and form a single-party government. The post by BayeroMedia received a response from a government critic who reposted it with an extensive comment, including the statement: *"You are being played by crooks and looters in ZANU PF who don't want Biti in Parliament because he has been the most effective MP in exposing corruption in there!"* (Hopewell Chin'ono).

Chin'ono's contribution elicited a response from Prince Benjamin Muchokoti, who commented: *"Keep warning those power-hungry folks, tell them that God, the Devil, and ZANU PF will never change."* Meanwhile, in response to the same post about ZANU PF's alleged attempt to exclude Tendai Biti from a future GNU, Paul Siwela posted a lengthy comment

expressing grievances against both ZANU PF and Nelson Chamisa's Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). Siwela's comment was overtly tribalist, stating: *"We have said it many times that Shona people have the DNA of theft, corruption, and witchcraft."*

However, in the comments section, one respondent showed a graphic portraying Tendai Biti as



a dog on a leash being led around by Uncle Sam.

The implication is that Tendai Biti is perceived as a puppet or a proxy of Western interests. The remainder of the posts consisted primarily of slogans and praise for the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). The discussion failed to generate a substantive debate on the merits of a Government of National Unity (GNU), as the responses quickly devolved into attacks on ZANU PF, highlighting the CCC's unwillingness to collaborate with the ruling party. Consequently, the dialogue fell into the category of *endless reflexivity* due to the lack of substantive engagement in the discussion.

This raises concerns regarding incivility in the digital information environment, particularly when hostile comments negatively impact dialogue that is central to democratic discourse (Anderson, Yeo, Brossard, Scheufele, & Xenos, 2018). The discussion became increasingly toxic and uncivil as interlocutors shifted from debating the issue at hand to attacking individuals, political parties, and ethnic groups.

(b) Chamisa being targeted for attack

The fourth example is a post on Twitter by Sekuru Gudo veku Dotito (2021), accompanied by a video depicting Nelson Chamisa's motorcade arriving in Makoni, a rural constituency in eastern Zimbabwe. The footage shows a large crowd of supporters welcoming Chamisa in what is traditionally considered a ZANU PF stronghold. In the post, Sekuru Gudo argues that *Varakashi* expend significant effort discrediting Chamisa while largely ignoring other

opposition figures, such as Douglas Mwonzora, leader of the MDC-T. He further asserts that Chamisa represents the only hope for those seeking political change.

Ndosaka Varakashi vari kuita tuna Space trying to discredit him. Yet to see Varakashi attacking Dougie at any given time but nanga nanga naChamisa. Every "normal" person on the ground in Zim now wants change and Chamisa is our only Hope

The post by Sekuru Gudo attracts 16 comments, the majority of which are characterised by sloganeering and praise for Chamisa from his supporters. However, two interlocutors raise a pertinent issue regarding whether the large crowds rallying behind Chamisa are, in fact, registered voters. Rather than engaging in this critical discussion, Chamisa's supporters avoid addressing the question of voter registration. Instead, they divert the conversation towards criticising ZANU PF and expressing unwavering support for Chamisa. This exchange exemplifies a missed opportunity for substantive political dialogue, as participants prioritise partisan rhetoric over meaningful and constructive engagement.

(c) Soldiers' Support for the Citizens Coalition for Change

The fifth example is a post on Twitter by Team Pachedu (2020), accompanied by a video featuring a man in military uniform. His face is partially obscured by a mask, and the upper portion is blurred to conceal his identity. In the video, the man asserts that the military is weary of the hardships caused by ZANU PF's misrule. He claims that the time for change has arrived and suggests that other military personnel share similar sentiments. According to him, they sympathise with the suffering masses and are therefore prepared to overthrow the government.

Share this powerful message from a patriotic soldier. "Our duty is to defend Zimbabwe, not ZANU-PF. We should not be following repressive unconstitutional orders. Let us not protect corrupt politicians." "The time to liberate Zimbabwe has come." [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#)

The 14 responses to the tweet and its accompanying video indicate that some individuals dismissed the man as an impostor. Rather than engaging with the substance of his message, the discussion primarily focused on his attire. The exchanges among commentators reveal that the intended purpose of the tweet—to stimulate debate on military involvement—failed to generate

any meaningful discourse. Some respondents ridiculed the man as a charlatan, arguing that military personnel do not communicate in the manner he does in the video.

Furthermore, the interlocutors linked the video to the broader issue of fake news, highlighting the prevalence of misleading online content. Some respondents expressed scepticism towards claims made by Team Pachedu, particularly the assertion that junior soldiers support opposition politics and calls for change. Consequently, the discussion shifted away from the video's message to debates over its authenticity, thereby undermining the potential for substantive political dialogue.

Endless reflexivity, characterised by circular and unproductive discourse, is often a result of deep-seated distrust among interlocutors (Bonner, 2016). For instance, when Aubrey Mpofu proposed the introduction of patriotism classes in the school curriculum, the responses were overwhelmingly hostile, largely due to widespread scepticism towards the ZANU PF government. Those opposing Mpofu's proposal reacted angrily to what they perceived as an attempt to reinforce ZANU PF's rhetoric on patriotism. The underlying implication of Mpofu's proposal was that young people oppose the ZANU PF government due to a lack of patriotism. Given that claims of patriotism are central to ZANU PF's political discourse, those outside the party remain deeply suspicious of its initiatives.

A similar level of distrust is evident in responses to a post by Charles Hungwe. For example, Leon Mashayamombe's comment, "*Blame the victim. Zimbabwe style,*" reflects the perception that the ZANU PF government consistently deflects responsibility for its actions. This sentiment helps explain the intense backlash against both Mpofu's proposal and Hungwe's comments on electoral results. Such posts, which exemplify endless reflexivity, are predominantly found on Facebook, likely due to its broader accessibility compared to platforms like Twitter/X and YouTube (Bosch, Admire & Ncube, 2020). The high cost of internet data and the slow speeds associated with uploading and downloading YouTube videos make activism on such platforms less feasible.

6.4. Performative Activism

Online petitioning constitutes a key element of performative activism. Academics, activists, and politicians, recognising their established credibility within the international community, engaged in lobbying efforts through online petitions. Meanwhile, government supporters

similarly leveraged social media platforms to petition the state for the expedited implementation of policies favourable to the ruling party.

6.4.1. Petitions Against and for the Government

(a) Petition for the Release of Job Sikhala

The arrest and subsequent incarceration of opposition politician Job Sikhala and his supporters prompted citizens to initiate online petitions demanding their release. Below is an example of a petition posted on Facebook by Shingirai Mapako (2022).

ZIMBABWE LET'S SHARE THIS EXTENSIVELY. PLAY YOUR PART AND HELP FREE ZIMBABWE FROM TYRANNY

Petition Over The Release of CCC legislators And The Nyatsime Political Prisoners



Fig 6.13. Job Sikhala in handcuffs getting off a prisons truck.

The first petition analysed originates from Shingirai Mapako's Facebook page. Initiated by Tsitsi Dangarembga on 13 September 2022, it was addressed to President Emmerson Mnangagwa. The petition sought to persuade the president to end the detention without trial of two opposition legislators, Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole, who were imprisoned alongside twelve others. The target was to collect 75,000 signatures, of which 62,244 were ultimately secured. However, despite this substantial support, the legislators and their co-accused were

not released as a direct result of the petition. Sikhala was eventually freed, not due to the petition, but because the courts could not justify his continued detention. Consequently, the petition proved ineffective, as activists focused on online lobbying rather than exerting physical pressure on the government to release the political detainees.

(b) Petition to the United Nations Organisation

Activists also sought intervention from intergovernmental organisations in Zimbabwe's political affairs. Below is an example of an activist lobbying the United Nations to intervene by urging the Zimbabwean government to release female opposition politicians who were under arrest. The petition was shared on Facebook by Yasmin Sheik (2020). It read as follows

Three Zimbabwean women activists were abducted by police then sexually abused and tortured in May 2020. Their only supposed crime was peacefully protesting in support of supplies for vulnerable people in Zimbabwe during its lockdown. They were then arrested on 10 June and remain in jail with a bail hearing on 26 June. Please sign this petition to bring more international attention to their case and shame the Zimbabwean govt into releasing them.

<https://www.change.org/.../united-nations-zimbabwe...>

Warning, the video testimonies which can be seen at the link above are shocking and distressing but we should know that even though Mugabe is gone this government continues to torture and terrorise its citizens.

<https://www.amnesty.org/.../zimbabwe-persecution-of.../>

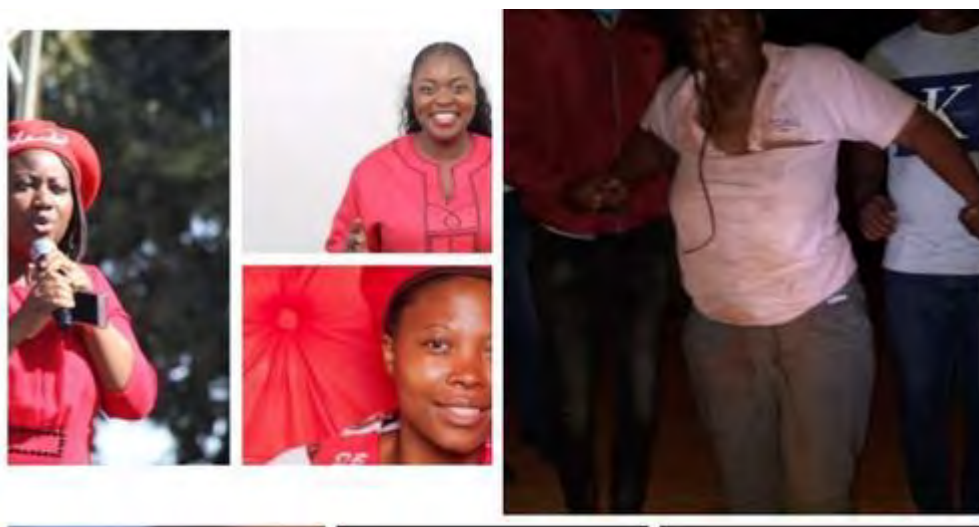


Fig 6.14. MDC three female activists abducted and tortured by state security agents.

The petition was directed at the United Nations Organization, urging intervention to influence the release of three female activists who were arrested for violating Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. The activists had staged a demonstration in support of frontline workers who were inadequately protected against the virus in their line of duty. Despite the petition, the UNO did not intervene to secure the release of the three individuals. Instead, the government released them at its discretion at a later time. Through petitioning the UNO online, the activists believed they could apply sufficient pressure on both the UNO and the Zimbabwean government to secure the release of the female activists. However, the petition ultimately failed to achieve its intended objectives.

(c) Petitioning the Broader International Community

The Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitoring Committee sought to engage several countries and international organisations in efforts to safeguard the rights of Zimbabweans under threat from an authoritarian state. For instance, human rights lawyers petitioned the international community to take action to protect Zimbabweans from the oppressive actions of the government. Below is an example of a petition posted on Facebook by Bigboy Sibanda (2020).

The people of Zimbabwe are suffering with no end in sight. Elections offer no hope as the process is always manipulated in favour of ZANU-PF and the results are always rigged. When citizens try to express their disapproval of the bad governance, through peaceful demonstrations the state resorts to violent repression. Apart from ordering the soldiers to shoot to kill, the state goes further way after demonstrations. It carries out a campaign of terror which sometimes entails the hounding of citizens through countrywide nocturnal door to door visits by state agents, soldiers and ZANU-PF youth brigade.



Fig 6.15. A Restoring Of Human Rights poster summarising human rights abuses.

On the 20th of July 2020, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitoring Committee petitioned several key international bodies, including SADC, the AU, the EU Parliament, the UK Parliament, the US State Department, and the UN Human Rights Commission, urging them to intervene with President Mnangagwa's government to halt the brutal repression of citizens, address poor governance, human rights violations, and corruption, and restore the rule of law. The petition, which was shared on Facebook by Bigboy Sibanda (2020), was accompanied by a video and photographic footage depicting acts of violence perpetrated by the police and military against unarmed civilians. However, despite the petition gaining signatures from citizens, the desired outcomes were not realised. The country proceeded to hold a general election without any significant reforms in governance, and the human rights situation showed no substantial improvement.

(d) Petitioning the SADC

Academics also sought to influence national politics by petitioning the subregional body, SADC, to intervene in electoral disputes. An example of such a petition was launched by Dr.

Mandaza in the aftermath of the 2023 general election. The petition, authored by Reeler and Mandaza (2023), is outlined below

[#zimbabwe](#) [#ZimbabweForEveryone](#) [#zimelection2023](#) Team Pachedu Nelson ChamisaCcczimbabwe
FRIENDS OF HOPEWELL CHIN'ONO CCC Zimbabwe 🇿🇼🇿🇼🇿🇼

Let's make some noise please sign and share this petition. Thanks 🙏



Fig 6.17. sapestrust petition poster.

The petition above, posted on the Zimbabwe Abuse Accountability Facebook page, was initiated by Tony Reeler and Ibbo Mandaza on 31 August 2023. It was directed to the SADC (Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security), with the objective of urging the establishment of an Eminent Persons Group tasked with negotiating a Transitional Government. Additionally, the petition called for SADC to initiate broad-based negotiations involving political parties, civil society organisations, churches, labour unions, women's groups, and other citizen organisations. The petition set a target of gathering 50,000 signatures, and ultimately, 40,088 individuals signed it. However, from August 2023 to April 2024, no action has been taken by the subregional body in response to the petition.

The online petitioning efforts, as seen in four of the five examples cited above, were ultimately unsuccessful, particularly when they were directed from the opposition to the government.

Such petitions typically culminated in the gathering of signatures, but without any tangible political outcomes. Notably, the President of Zimbabwe did not concede to the demands outlined in the petitions directed towards him. Furthermore, neither SADC nor the United Nations successfully pressured the government to call for fresh elections or facilitated any substantive electoral reforms following the disputed 2023 election. Consequently, petition signing appears to be an unproductive form of protest, often by those seeking change but unwilling to engage in the more risky physical actions required to bring about such change.

(e) Pro-Government Petition

Pro-government activists also engage in petitioning to support their cause. One such example is the Facebook post by EDhasmyVote Reloaded (2023), which is detailed as follows.

In April last year Varakashi petitioned the Attorney-General of Zimbabwe to expedite passage of the Patriotic Bill.

We are very happy that yesterday the Zimbabwe Senate passed the Bill. The Bill now awaits Presidential assent by President ED Mnangagwa.

Sanctions beggars like Nelson Chamisa, Tendai Biti, Fadzayi Mahere, Hopewell Chin'ono etc have been enjoying too much impunity. Its high time they face legal punishment for their unpatriotic acts of national sabotage through sanctions begging and collusion with hostile foreign powers.



Fig 6.16. Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi.

In April 2022, Varakashi petitioned the Attorney General to expedite the signing of the Patriot Bill into law. By June 2023, the Bill had been enacted. When the government finds it convenient, petitions are addressed promptly. However, petitions originating from the opposition and its allies are frequently disregarded by the authorities. The post associated with this petition contains elements of gloating and implicit threats, celebrating the success achieved through the Varakashi petition while simultaneously threatening politicians and journalists who are known for their vocal opposition to the government.

Online petitioning is a form of passive activism, as it does not require any physical exertion offline to instigate change. This form of activism aligns with the derogatory term "clicktivism," as it involves individuals engaging solely by clicking on their keyboards. Typically, this method is adopted by those unwilling to take physical risks, such as participating in street demonstrations. As evidenced by the government's indifference, online petitions prove to be an ineffective form of activism, as the government does not feel compelled to act or fulfil the demands of the petitioners. Moreover, online petitioning can be counterproductive for the causes pursued by activists, as participants often perceive their online signing as a meaningful contribution, despite taking no further action. This lack of follow-through ultimately weakens the cause and leads to inaction (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza, 2014). Thus, online petitioning is ineffectual and fosters complacency in activism.

6.4.2 Virtue Signalling

Activists and politicians frequently engage in performative activism to enhance their personal social capital. For instance, activists-turned-politicians such as Fadzai Mahere, Jones Musara, Tafadzwa Mugwadi, and Hopewell Chin'ono have been known to engage in digital activism, ostensibly in support of moral justice, but often for self-promotion. These individuals subsequently transitioned into political or business roles, leveraging the popularity they gained through online activism.

(a) Fadzayi Mahere

Fadzayi Mahere, a lawyer and one of the founding leaders of the social movement #ThisFlag, exemplifies the concept of virtue signalling. Initially, she built a social media profile as an advocate for social justice, presenting herself as a champion for society at large. However, after accruing significant social capital, Mahere transitioned into politics and began criticising rival

politicians, including other women in the political sphere. This shift stands in stark contrast to her earlier role as a continental icon promoting women's empowerment, a cause she championed through her leadership role in the Amujae Initiative. The initiative, established by former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, aims to support women and help them realise their full potential. Mahere's involvement in Amujae is highlighted in the YouTube post by EJS Center (2022), titled "Amujae Leader Fadzayi Mahere discusses the solution to Africa's leadership crisis."

Mahere's recognition grew as she ascended the leadership ranks of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) political party. Prior to her leadership role in the CCC, Mahere was a prominent figure within the #ThisFlag digital movement. She was appointed spokesperson for the party and later secured a parliamentary seat. Despite her success, Mahere faced criticism after making disparaging remarks about the appointment of a young female Minister for the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by President Mnangagwa following the 2023 general election. In a Facebook post by ZimSeen (2023), Mahere called for the publication of Minister Mavetera's Curriculum Vitae, implicitly questioning her qualifications for the role. This request was met with negative reactions, as it was perceived that Mahere's criticism suggested that Mavetera was unqualified for the position.

CAT FIGHT: ICT Minister Tatenda Mavetera has lashed out at Mt Pleasant MP Fadzayi Mahere for being “cruel” and “a bully” after the CCC politician asked for the new minister’s CV in a thinly veiled attack on social media. Mavetera blasted Mahere saying: “Shame on you.”



The Facebook post by Derek Gutu (2023) provides an explanation for the negative comments directed at Mahere in response to her request for the publication of Mavetera's CV. Gutu argues that Mahere herself gained prominence not through merit but due to the associations she cultivated with influential individuals. He further asserts that Mahere has a tendency to criticise young women of her age when they attain positions of prominence, a behaviour he attributes to what he describes as "generational envy." The criticism levelled against Mahere is that, while other young women in similar positions achieved success through merit, Mahere's rise was largely facilitated by the social capital she built through her presence on social media. Therefore, it is viewed as particularly ironic that Mahere, a woman in a leadership role within the Amujae initiative, would adopt a negative stance towards a young woman who has been entrusted with a position of authority and is in need of support, especially from fellow women. The post by Derek Gutu (2023) is reproduced below.

Several female activists from different political backgrounds have spoken out against recent misogynistic statements made by opposition leaders and members of the private media. These statements have targeted young female legislators and Cabinet Ministers, such as Honourable Ministers Tatenda Mavetera and Kirsty Coventry. The activists, including Fadzayi Mahere, Gift Ostallos, and Hopewell Chin'ono, are trying to discredit these ministers by suggesting they are not qualified for their positions.

It is important to recognise that Mahere, Siziba, and Chin'ono are displaying generational envy, a psychological phenomenon where someone undermines and attacks someone in their age group who has achieved more than they have. Mahere has a history of using connections to advance her career, while Chin'ono is bitter after failing to secure a position due to his involvement with regime change proponents. Siziba is similar to Nelson Chamisa in his disrespectful treatment of women, thinking it makes him popular among his peers.

Mahere and Siziba represent the youth opposition in Parliament, but instead of using their time in Parliament to engage in intelligent debates with their counterparts in the ruling party, such as Honourable Mavetera, Coventry, and Mugwadi, they resort to insulting and degrading them online. This behaviour shows their immaturity, and their constituencies will suffer because they bring no value to Parliament.

Interestingly, Mahere, Siziba, and Chin'ono seem to have forgotten that their leader, Chamisa, was once the Minister of ICT despite having minimal qualifications. In contrast, Honourable Mavetera is more qualified to be the ICT Minister than Chamisa was. Chamisa failed to create a national ICT policy during his tenure and falsely claimed to have developed one for Rwanda, which was denied by President Paul Kagame.

Furthermore, Mahere's attacks on Honourable Coventry over the years stem from her own insecurities and envy. Coventry has achieved great success in her field, bringing honour and pride to Zimbabwe. Mahere, on the other hand, has risen to prominence through connections rather than her own abilities. A comparison between Mahere and Honourable Coventry clearly shows who is the more successful individual.

Fadzayi Mahere's rise to prominence can largely be attributed to the publicity she garnered through social media, which she leveraged to further her personal advancement, as can be inferred from the posts discussed above.

(b) Activist in Virtue Signalling

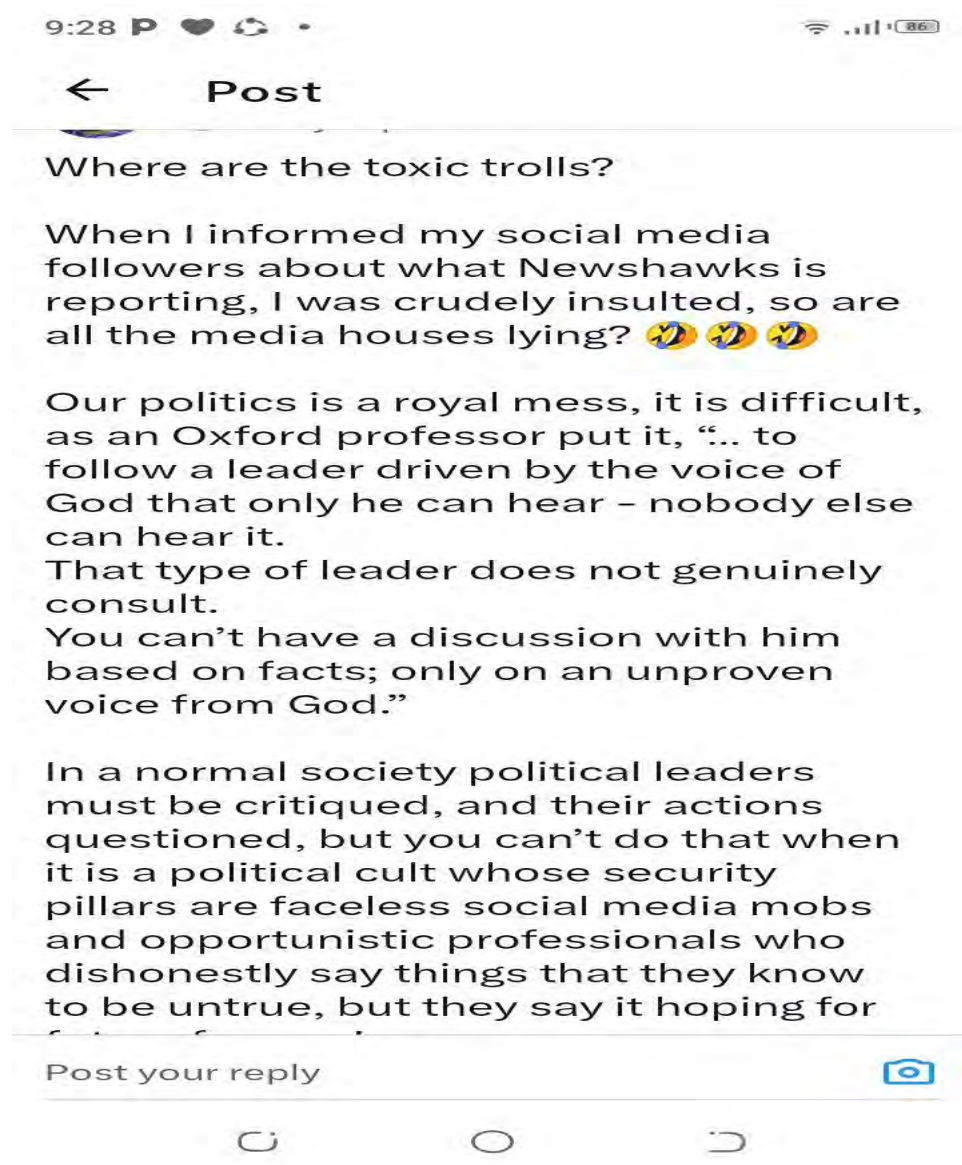
Hopewell Chin'ono, a journalist and vocal critic of the government, is widely recognised for exposing corruption among high-ranking government officials. His investigative efforts have earned him international recognition (Camerer, 2019). Despite being arrested and imprisoned multiple times by the ZANU PF government, Chin'ono is often referred to as a celebrity journalist or activist by critics. This status has led some to question the authenticity of his motives, with sceptics perceiving him as someone now pursuing fame and fortune rather than remaining a genuine advocate for social justice. The first tweet below from @NewsHawksLive (2023) highlights Chin'ono praising Chamisa as a popular leader of the opposition who demonstrates resilience in the face of an unjust adversary.

"This proves **Nelson Chamisa** is the most **POPULAR** leader in Zimbabwe. They put up roadblocks, harassed, arrested & ruthlessly beat up his supporters at Harare police station **on** Friday, but the citizens came out in massive numbers regardless of those hurdles." - **Hopewell Chin'ono**.

The tweet below is by @Tshelela (2023), a concerned citizen who expresses confusion regarding the actions of Hopewell Chin'ono, who appears to have turned against Chamisa following the 2023 general election.

Why is **Hopewell Chin'ono attacking Nelson Chamisa**?. Daddyhope you spoke to some CCC MPs. You didn't engage Chamisa on a 1 to 1 discussion. Now you are blaming Chamisa and God?. Why?. Being Professional right?

@Tshelela was responding to Hopewell Chin'ono's post below this tweet. The use of rhetorical questions by @Tshelela, along with the questioning of Chin'ono's professionalism, indicates that the communicator was critically examining the motives behind Chin'ono's attack on Chamisa.



The tweet below is from another concerned citizen, @Twinsisters, who expresses confusion over Hopewell Chin'ono's attack on Chamisa and his political party, even before the 2023 general election. @Twinsisters is particularly concerned about Hopewell's pressure on Chamisa to take action on behalf of Job Sikhala while he was in prison. @Twinsisters attached a tweet by Hopewell Chin'ono, in which he accused Chamisa of neglecting Job Sikhala and the struggling Sikhala family.

@Twinsis50497431 [Apr 11, 2023](#) War of words brewing between Journalist **Hopewell Chin'ono** and CCC opposition leader **Nelson Chamisa** what's your take is **Hopewell** overstepping **on** the narrative that CCC is doing little **on** Job Sikhala and also for calling CCC DODO? [@CCCZimbabwe](#) [@ChaibvaG](#) [@Ngonidz11311228](#)



@Atmos05 [Feb 13](#) There is nothing **Award** winning or journalistic about **Hopewell Chin'ono** these days He is now just a social media gossip monker shamelessly looking for anything negative about Nelson Chamisa so that he can post **on his** handles and most of the times end up embarrassing himself



Fig 6.19. Journalist Hopewell Chin'ono.

Hopewell Chin'ono demonstrates a degree of vacillation in his support for and opposition to Chamisa. Some critics argue that his tweets contribute to the fragmentation of the opposition. Given Chin'ono's international influence as a fearless journalist, there is concern that he may be prioritising the development of his personal social capital over the broader interests of opposition politics. Some commentators speculate that Chin'ono may be grandstanding in an attempt to position himself as morally superior to the politicians he is known for exposing. The tweet by @Atmos above exemplifies some of the criticism directed at Chin'ono's stance against Chamisa. This perspective aligns with the views of Levy (2020) and Hill and Fanciullo (2023), who critique digital activists for adopting a moral high ground, denigrating others in a bid to attract attention and present themselves as morally superior to their opponents.

(b) Jones Musara

ZANU PF social media activists also capitalised on the popularity they gained as Varakashi to further their personal ambitions. One such example is Jones Musara, who rose to prominence by supporting ZANU PF and President Mnangagwa on social media. He is often labelled one of the prominent Varakashi by the opposition. The Facebook post below illustrates the type of activism associated with Jones Musara (2024)

SADC NEWS:

In a few days time, Zimbabwe President Cde E.D Mnangagwa will be in charge of SADC for which Mr. Chamisa is crying for a response to his letter to SADC.

President ED Mnangagwa as the head of SADC will take charge of SADC region and handle Mr. Chamisa's issues as well.

So cry no more brother Chamisa. Your elder brother ED will assist you. Feel free to take all your issues to him since as President of Zimbabwe and SADC he will have the joint and enlarged mandate, power and influence to solve them without you having to go and cry to our neighbours in SADC.



Fig 6.18. poster of President Mnangagwa captioned VISIONARY LEADER.

Jones Musara is the author of a book titled *Zimbabwe's MugabeXit and EDPfee: The Power of Social Media*. He leveraged his status and popularity as a Varakashi in support of Mnangagwa to propel himself into authorship. Musara is not the only individual from the Varakashi camp to capitalise on the social capital influenced by social media

(d) Tafadzwa Mugwadi

Tafadzwa Mugwadi gained prominence in his political career as a staunch defender of ZANU PF and President Mnangagwa on social media. His support for the party led to his elevation as one of the party's spokespersons, and he is currently serving as a member of parliament, representing Buhera North. Tafadzwa Mugwadi defended the government against accusations of human rights violations during an interview on SABC (2021) reproduced on YouTube.

African Perspective | Discussing human rights crisis Zimbabwe

7:26

certainly not because there is no crisis in zimbabwe what we see is a crisis in opposition groups

7:32

some of whom have become quite very unfortunately legalists i see my brother jealous there just to

7:39

inform you that the former president of his political party

7:45

is now a full member of zampf and department of literacy the same with the gladiatoria them this

7:51

year split into various formations to the extent that we can hardly point out who is wrong in the opposition so that's

7:59

where the crisis is but we do not have a crisis as a country we have challenges with the coveted 19

the extract above is from YouTube. It is an example of Tafadzwa Mugwadi defending ZANU PF and President Mnangagwa across various platforms, both digital and mainstream media. He is now a ZANU PF legislator for Buhera North constituency.

6.4.3 Individual Advancement

Social media influencers often engage in performative activism. The rise of social media has led to the emergence of online celebrities. In this section, I analyse how these social media figures capitalise on digital activism for personal profit. These individuals become famous by creating and posting content on social media platforms (Hou, 2019). They are remunerated based on the number of views, likes, and subscriptions their content attracts. Consequently, they often post content designed to generate maximum engagement. Additionally, they frequently attach themselves to popular political movements to garner attention, even though they may not genuinely advocate for the causes they promote.

(a) Madam Boss' Political Posts

Social media influencer and comedian Madam Boss engages in performative activism. She has gained widespread popularity on social media, amassing considerable wealth from content that attracts a large following and viewership. Madam Boss is a brand ambassador for several manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe and has secured acting contracts in Nigeria and South Africa. To maintain her popularity, she capitalises on trending topics, posting content that aligns with current events to increase her viewer engagement. Ahead of the 2023 general election, she shared pro-Chamisa tweets, capitalising on the political climate. Below is an example of some of her posts (Madam Boss, 2023).

@nelsonchamisa [Aug 25, 2023](#) God has remembered ZIMBABWE Zimbabwe shall be the land of the happy and free. We will unite and build our nation great! Great God!! [#OnePeople](#)

Madam Boss reposted

nelson chamisa

@nelsonchamisa [Aug 25, 2023](#)

Fellow Citizens; Thank you for your courage, sacrifice and support. We witnessed the most challenging and abusive electoral environment on Wednesday. Despite all the impediments you stood your ground. No matter what they try to do, you have done it. We shall overcome!

Madam Boss reposted

nelson chamisa

@nelsonchamisa [Aug 18, 2023](#) FREEDOM IS COMING. Happiness is finally here. Oneness is loading. New things loading.... We will unite the people of Zimbabwe and it's very easy to unite. Blessed Friday fellow citizens! [#ForEveryone](#) [#Godisinit](#)

Despite reposting pro-Chamisa messages, Madam Boss demonstrated her lack of commitment to the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) cause by simultaneously expressing support for the ruling party. The comedian posted a message publicly endorsing ZANU PF during the same election. She later deleted the tweet, which was captured by the online newspaper *Zim Morning Post* (2023), as shown below.



Fig 6.21. Picture of a yellow dead bird used to mock the CCC after the political party was defeated in the 2023 General Election.

In the tweet, the comedian states, "Tomorrow that is the end of Chamisa. He should start a church and leave ED the honey of rebuilding the country. President ED has my vote." This is accompanied by a picture of a dead yellow bird, with yellow being the official colour of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) political party. These two conflicting scenarios illustrate the vacillation of a social media celebrity who attempts to appease her followers across the political spectrum. She prioritises the economic benefits of attracting viewers, irrespective of whether they support ZANU PF or CCC. Madam Boss personalises political content to gain attention, yet her posts reveal no genuine commitment to any particular political cause.

From Papacharissi's (2015) perspective, personalised content has the potential to evoke emotions and foster a sense of solidarity among the audience, potentially encouraging engagement with a cause. However, the case of Madam Boss' posts reveals that her political engagement is superficial. She does not demonstrate allegiance to any political cause, as evidenced by her shifting support between the two parties. Through the lens of communicative capitalism, Madam Boss's profit-driven approach leads her to prioritise content that appeals to a broader audience, ultimately marginalising minority and less mainstream groups. The controversy surrounding her simultaneous support for both Chamisa and Mnangagwa aligns with social media algorithms, which are designed to maximise user engagement and, consequently, profits, often at the expense of political consistency or expediency.

(b) Mai Titi's Political posturing

Mai Titi, another influencer, comedian, and social media personality, engages in performative activism. She has openly declared her staunch support for ZANU PF. While there is no inherent issue with artists or comedians expressing their political affiliations, Mai Titi's case is more complicated. After the 2023 general election, the ZANU PF supporter and businessman Wicknell Chivayo began gifting cars and sometimes money to celebrities aligned with ZANU PF. Some artists even resorted to requesting these gifts, citing personal financial struggles, despite their public loyalty to the party. Mai Titi has been critiqued for seeking to benefit from Chivayo's generosity by openly supporting ZANU PF. In contrast, other artists publicly declared their allegiance to ZANU PF before the elections, differentiating them from Mai Titi. A post on Facebook by Baby Jesus (2024) critiques Mai Titi's political posturing, highlighting the apparent opportunism behind her support.

Mai Tt says she supports ZANU PF

Socialite and comedian Mai Titi has revealed that she is a strong ZANU PF member who hold dearly the party's ideology. Posting on Facebook, Mai Tt said people should not force her to support opposition parties because its her right to choose any political party of her choice. She commended President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the [...]

The post Mai Tt says she supports ZANU PF appeared first on Gambakwe Media.

Youthful influential musicians also engaged in performative activism. For instance, musician Holy Ten publicly endorsed the presidency of Mnangagwa prior to the 2023 elections. He proclaimed himself a leader of patriotic youth and began attending ZANU PF rallies. A YouTube post by the *Sunday Mail* (2023) captured Holy Ten chanting ZANU PF slogans in the Midlands town of Shurugwi.

Hip-hop artiste Holy Ten is one of the musicians attending the ZANU PF rally at Tongogara High

[The Sunday Mail](#)

2.19K subscribers

Subscribe

10

Share

1,267 views Aug 19, 2023

Hip-hop artiste Holy Ten is one of the musicians attending the ZANU PF rally at Tongogara High School in Shurugwi

Holy Ten's case is unique in that most musicians typically remain neutral in terms of political affiliation, as they cater to a broader constituency beyond any particular political party. While others may subtly express their biases through the nuances in their lyrics, Holy Ten openly declared his allegiance to the ruling party.

(c) *Comic Pastor*

Social media comedian, activist, and social commentator known as Comic Pastor also engaged in performative activism. The comedian exhibits a tendency to vacillate between leaning towards ZANU PF and the opposition. The Facebook post below from *Daily Skinner* (2022) shows Comic Pastor wearing the trademark Mnangagwa scarf around his neck.

Zimbabwean comedian, Prosper Ngomashi is better known as The Comic Pastor has denied allegations that he joined the ruling ZANU PF.

He said some individuals were now targeting his workmates including Nijel Maritinyu better known as The Slick Pastor or Bamunini Nijo because of the allegations.

The allegations were made after a picture of himself with Collins Mnangagwa, the son of President Emmerson Mnangagwa was circulated on social media. Another picture of himself wearing a ZANU PF scuff was also shared.

The Comic Pastor, in a Facebook live said Collins was his fan and he sees nothing in taking photos with his fans. He said the picture in which he was wearing a ZANU PF scuff was taken in 2018 for a skit.

He said he had visited Vice President Constantino Chiwenga who had been flown to South Africa for medication. The pictures had resulted in some accusing him of joining the ruling party.

In Zimbabwe, artistes avoid publicly revealing their political allegiances for fear of losing fans.

A few, including exiled Thomas Mapfumo, and Sani Makhalima have openly criticised the ruling party.



Fig 6.22. Comedian Comic Pastor leaving the hospital where President Mnangagwa was hospitalised in South Africa.

The post above highlights the sensitivity surrounding the relationship between entertainers and political party affiliation. Entertainment is often associated with social commentary, and entertainers are expected to be the voice of the voiceless. However, individuals such as Comic Pastor tend to follow popular opinion to maximise views, likes, and subscribers on their social media accounts. He acknowledged this in a YouTube post shared by *iZim* (2022), where Comic Pastor explained that he does not discriminate in terms of whom he socialises with, given that his followers span the political divide.

Comic Pastor said: *"I SUPPORT CCC 🟡 HANDISI WE ZANU, THAT WAS JUST A PICTURE WITH COLLINS MNANGAGWA."*

In the YouTube video, the comedian denied any allegiance to ZANU PF. He openly stated that he does not support ZANU PF because his followers come from diverse political backgrounds. However, his actions, such as socialising with President Mnangagwa's son Collins and wearing ZANU PF colours, suggest an alignment with the ruling elite and the ruling party.

Prominent individuals often engage in performative activism primarily for self-promotion, seeking to build their personal or corporate progressive credibility (Thimsen, 2022). The actions of petitioners, prominent journalists, politicians, and social media influencers, which I have cited throughout this chapter, fall under the categories of performative allyship, virtue signalling, and slacktivism. These actions appear to be driven by a desire to elevate one's social image rather than a genuine commitment to promoting social justice. The issue of performative activism and virtue signalling is particularly apparent among social media influencers, who capitalise on serious political matters—such as electoral outcomes—purely for the engagement it generates on their social media platforms (Goodwin, Joseff, & Woolley, 2020). Pretending to engage seriously in important activism reveals insincerity. Influencers present false facades to attract social admiration and increase their profile engagement (Sudnick, 2023). Performative activism is hollow and undermines political or social justice causes. Through this form of activism, social media celebrities reduce serious issues to mere photo opportunities for publicity. For activism to yield meaningful results, it must transcend the digital sphere and be translated into real-life, offline efforts.

6.5 Summary and Conclusions

Social movements utilise symbols as rallying points or as signifiers for the causes they champion. The popularity of the Zimbabwean flag surged after it was adopted by the #ThisFlag movement, with other social movements subsequently incorporating it into their own campaigns. The raised fist symbol is universally recognised as a sign of resistance, representing power from below. However, in Zimbabwe, the raised clenched fist has become synonymous with ZANU PF, as the ruling party has used this symbol along with its slogans since the liberation struggle era. Opposition political parties and activists have adopted colours from the national flag, which were previously considered the preserve of ZANU PF. Activists staged demonstrations at sites of liberation and national unity, such as Mbuya Nehanda and Joshua

Nkomo, to demonstrate their resistance to the authoritarianism of the ZANU PF government. Online debates often degenerate into insults, with no change in perspective from the interlocutors—a phenomenon known as endless reflexivity. The challenge of performative activism, where individuals engage in digital activism primarily to build their personal credibility, is prevalent in Zimbabwe's digital public sphere.

Chapter 7: Interviews with digital youth activists

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the findings from interviews conducted with youth digital activists. The chapter is structured into various subsections, namely cyber optimism, challenges, dangers, and alternative narratives.

7.2 Cyber Optimism

The initial responses from interviewees indicate a cyber-optimistic perspective. These views are examined under the sub-themes of increasing access and success stories.

7.2.1 Increasing Access

Activists express differing opinions regarding access to social media platforms. Some assert that social media platforms are widely accessible, thereby facilitating activism. For instance, Interviewee I states that social media platforms are easily accessible and elaborates on the advantages, explaining: “Online activism is easy to execute as you can mobilise virtually, allowing people to participate without physically picketing, raising placards, or signing physical petitions.”

These sentiments are echoed by Interviewee J, who concurs that social media accessibility has revolutionised digital activism. Interviewee J elaborates: “The advantage of online activism is that it enables remote participation and fosters solidarity among communities in protest, extending beyond local boundaries to include support from other provinces, cities, and even from abroad.”

Interviewee B supports the perspectives shared by Interviewees I and J, further highlighting the accessibility and benefits of social media. Interviewee B explains:

Online activism has created opportunities for individuals who previously lacked a platform to voice their concerns. Moreover, it has empowered those who were once hesitant to criticise the government to do so openly.

However, Interviewee F expressed contrary opinions. Interviewee F argued that

The limitations are that the elderly cannot take part significantly due to technological challenges. Some elderly citizens do not even have smartphones or social media accounts. Online activism is

therefore popular with the younger generation who are, in most cases, limited due to the high cost of data, therefore they cannot easily access the internet.

In citing the challenges associated with accessing the digital communication space, Interviewee H argued that the cost of internet connectivity is prohibitively high. Consequently, the high expense of accessing online platforms effectively excludes economically disadvantaged individuals from digital communication.

The divided opinions among activists regarding access to social media platforms are reflected in the findings presented in Chapter Five of this study. Activists who perceive access to and use of social media with scepticism align with the findings of Last Moyo (2020), Chitanana (2019), Dendere (2019), and Mare (2020). While the literature identifies a broad range of challenges, including inadequate or poor infrastructure, poverty, lack of digital navigation skills, and a deficiency in critical analytical abilities, respondents in this study primarily cited demographic and economic factors. Conversely, the optimistic perspectives of activists who do not view access as a significant challenge are supported by the literature, including works by Kwenda (2019), Mare and Matsilele (2020), Matsilele, Mpofu, Tshuma, and Msimanga (2021), Nyoka and Tembo (2019), and Gukurume (2022). However, Interviewees I and J fail to acknowledge that the rural and urban poor lack the financial means to access these platforms due to the cost of the necessary digital devices and internet data. Given that civil society activities are often funded by foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Sibanda, 2022), activists who express optimism regarding digital access are likely to be beneficiaries of such funding.

7.2.2. Success Stories

Interviewees identified several successes achieved by activists using digital communication technologies. These successes, according to the interviewees, span both political and non-political domains.

In the political sphere, activists successfully garnered international attention to intervene on behalf of citizens following increased human rights abuses by the government in 2018. For example, Interviewee B stated: “As a result of the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter protests, the government of South Africa sent a delegation on a fact-finding mission regarding allegations of mistreatment of citizens by the Zimbabwean government.” Interviewee C supported this

claim, expressing the view that social media enabled activists to attract international attention. Interviewee C elaborated: “The protests of 1 August 2018 were witnessed by the entire world in real time, following the military’s shooting and killing of six protesters. The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaign successfully placed Zimbabwe on the global agenda.”

Interviewees regarded the use of social media platforms as instrumental in opening up the communication space. Interviewee J observed: “Online media has had a positive impact in Zimbabwe, particularly given that the mainstream media space had been inaccessible to civil society, thereby making activism difficult in such a restricted environment.” This perspective highlights the role of social media in providing marginalised communities with a platform for communication, given their exclusion from traditional print and broadcast media.

In the non-political realm, interviewees highlighted the successes of digital activism in advancing women's and children's rights, promoting education, and advocating for affordable transportation. For instance, referring to the impact of digital activism in child protection, Interviewee B explained that...

A Johane Marange old man married off his 14-year-old daughter to another old man. Activists made a lot of noise about the issue and the police ended up intervening and rescued the child. The United Nations office in Harare also released a statement condemning the child marriage custom.

The success of digital activism in education was cited as an example by Interviewee D. Interviewee D explained that...

There were online protests against the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) after the council increased examination fees higher than parents could afford. The fees were reduced after the protests. Another example of a success story was of demonstrations after network providers had increased data charges exorbitantly. The data tariffs were reduced after the protests.

A positive outcome of online activism advocating for improved transportation for women was provided by Interviewee G, who explained that...

Advocacy work by Tsitsi Patience Mashiri for faster and convenient transport for women in Zimbabwe has gained traction. People are now listening to Mashiri. Mashiri has done those activities in Harare where she hired buses to transport women and as they travel, she engages the women in conversation about the toll the transport challenges in Zimbabwe have on women. Women open up and share a lot of vital information. The authorities are paying attention to women’s issues through Mashiri’s advocacy work which started online.

Another example related to transport issues was provided by Interviewee I, who also expressed the view that social media use was effective. Interviewee I explained: “The public transport sector revised its *modus operandi* after a video of an elderly woman being harassed by *touts* (young men who load passengers onto buses at bus ranks and *termini*) went viral, prompting an intervention to regulate such wayward behaviour at bus *termini*.”

Social media platforms bring activists closer to communities. The comments sections on these platforms facilitate interaction between activists and their constituencies more effectively than mainstream newspapers, where letters to the editor typically occupy only half a page, or radio, where phone-in programmes are limited in time. Television does not adequately highlight the views of ordinary citizens, as it primarily engages specialists in talk shows. Notably, the South African government dispatched a delegation on a fact-finding mission following the disturbances in Zimbabwe. However, the delegation was unable to identify the leadership of digital activist movements with whom to engage in discussions. Consequently, they could not negotiate similar to those that resulted in the Government of National Unity in 2009. The social movements thus missed an opportunity to negotiate governance reforms with the international fact-finding mission.

Digital activism prompted a governmental response to broader calls for child protection, given the government's commitment as a signatory to United Nations policies on child protection. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) comprises 54 articles dedicated to the protection of children (Atkinson, 1989). The provisions of the UNCRC require governments to fulfil children's basic needs and ensure they reach their full potential (Lansdown, 2014). Participants in this study were particularly interested in advocacy for children's rights, acknowledging the role of both the state and the UN in protecting vulnerable children against harmful cultural practices, such as early child marriages. Interviewee H cited the example of advocacy against early child marriages leading to the introduction of policies aimed at protecting children.

Mashiri's activism represents a type that the ZANU PF government may endorse or encourage, as it aligns with government initiatives, such as improving public transport services. Supporting such causes allows the government to divert attention from critical issues such as the rule of law, corruption, and broader socio-economic and political challenges. Activists continuously exert pressure on the government. For instance, the January 2019 demonstrations were triggered by fuel price increases and the resulting rise in the cost of living. The problem of

touting at bus termini and the illegal dropping off and picking up of passengers at undesignated locations is a persistent challenge for municipalities in urban areas across the country. This example demonstrates that online activists do not necessarily conform to the conventional textbook definition of an activist as someone engaged in political struggle. Instead, digital activists highlight the interconnectedness of political, social, and economic issues that directly impact people's daily lives.

Interviewee H provided a success story of online lobbying, stating: "Online lobbying by the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association resulted in a bill being tabled in Parliament for the formulation of environmental policies." The efforts of the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association complement those of the government's Environmental Management Agency. As such, the government supports this form of advocacy. This illustrates another dimension of Zimbabwean digital activism, which does not necessarily align with the Western notion of activism as an oppositional force. Instead of prioritising political confrontation, local digital activists value advocacy that supports and enhances government initiatives, such as environmental protection.

7.3 Challenges

In this subsection, I analyse digital activists' perceptions of the challenges and pitfalls associated with digital activism. The discussion is structured around key sub-themes, including safety, privacy, security, and mobilisation.

7.3.1 Safety, Privacy, and Security

Some activists perceive the digital space as a secure environment for activism. For example, Interviewee D asserted that social media platforms offer protection for activists, explaining: "Online activism is now the only form of activism left due to the heavy-handedness of the authorities." She characterised digital platforms as "safe havens" for besieged activists, elaborating: "The main difference between online activism and the physical protests we used to organise in the past is that physical protests were met with violence." Interviewee D recounted experiences of state brutality against activists, underscoring her belief that the internet provides refuge for those previously targeted by police under the pretext of dispersing demonstrations. However, other activists recognised the inherent dangers of digital activism.

Activists who expressed concerns about digital activism cited state surveillance, tracking, and the hacking of their social media accounts. Interviewee A explained: “Government spies track all individuals who speak against the government. They monitor movements, locations, messages, interactions, motivations behind activism, the devices used to disseminate information, and even places of residence.” Interviewee B added: “The rise of fourth-generation online media has created problems for online activists, as it has become much easier for the state to track them.” Interviewee C noted: “Activists are vulnerable, as they can easily be tracked and abducted by state agents. For example, the comedians known as the Bus Stop TV Crew and others I cannot mention.” Similarly, Interviewee F stated: “The state also monitors activists’ online activities and arrests them.” Interviewee F further highlighted the persecution of known activists, explaining that due to vague legislation governing online communications, the state often charges activists with treason.

Concerns regarding state agents hacking into private communication accounts were raised by Interviewees B and J. Interviewee B explained: “The devices used by activists are vulnerable to hacking, making it easier for state agents to track their activities, communications, and posts.” Interviewee J elaborated: “There is also the risk of having one’s account hacked, with state agents planting fabricated information suggesting foreign sponsorship, which could then be used as grounds for treason charges.” Interviewee J highlighted the threat of digital communication crimes, where state actors manipulate online information to incriminate activists.

The perception held by Interviewee D that online platforms provide a safe space for activism overlooks the reality that state agents can infiltrate digital spaces to monitor and suppress dissent, as noted by Mare (2020). The response by Interviewee B underscores that while ICT advancements enhance activists' ability to communicate and mobilise, they also facilitate government surveillance. The paradox of digital technology, as a tool of both empowerment and oppression, is evident in Interviewee B’s response, which acknowledges the inclusivity of ICTs while recognising the risks posed by state monitoring. The belief that the state lacks the capacity to monitor every online activist is no longer valid, given the government's access to more sophisticated surveillance equipment than individual activists can afford (Hove & Chenzi, 2020). Thus, while ICTs offer liberation and connectivity, they also serve as instruments of state control. Interviewee C illustrated this by citing examples of activists who had been targeted, revealing that while the government leverages online spaces for intelligence

gathering, it executes oppression in the offline realm through physical intimidation and violence against activists.

7.3.2. Dissonance

The digital activism community is highly fragmented. Interviewees expressed the view that digital activists need a unified agenda. For example, Interviewee D stated: “Online activists lack unity of purpose as they tend to pursue divergent agendas. Zimbabweans ought to speak with one voice.” Interviewees identified disorganisation and inconsistency in the messages communicated by different activists as key weaknesses. Interviewee C explained: “Online activists sometimes post haphazardly and are neither systematic nor consistent. As a result, they fail to command a credible following.” Interviewee C lamented the inconsistency of online activism, arguing that it is characterised by a lack of organisation in both message dissemination and overall purpose. The implication is that such inconsistencies are more likely to fragment followers rather than unite them behind a common cause.

Interviewee D further identified the fragmentation of online communities as a genuine challenge (Moore-Gilbert, 2018). The absence of central leadership and organisation in digital activism results in the pursuit of multiple, often conflicting, agendas. Interviewee H highlighted several related issues, including activists' failure to agree on a common agenda, their underutilisation of digital platforms for activism, and the dilution or depoliticisation of key issues due to excessive diversity of opinions among participants. The implication of these views is that activism, when belonging to everyone, effectively belongs to no one. Activists post content without cohesion, leading to a lack of substantive engagement with fellow activists. Consequently, it becomes irrelevant whether the content is meaningful or not.

Furthermore, Interviewee H identified the government's ability to stifle activist momentum by simply ignoring online petitions. This suggests that inaction can be a deliberate strategy to neutralise activism. The inability to elicit a response from the government can thus paralyse activist efforts. Previous research has established that governments frequently seek to control narratives through various means (Mazango, 2017). Interviewee H's observation confirms the extent to which the government can render opposition voices ineffective. A lack of government response may also create confusion among activists' followers, undermining the movement's

cohesion and effectiveness. The authorities' deliberate disregard for activist voices can be linked to a colonial legacy of epistemic injustice and knowledge erasure (Shingade, 2022). Valuable knowledge relevant to specific groups is marginalised and ultimately consigned to obscurity by a government intent on controlling the national discourse. This practice mirrors the colonial state's strategy of controlling knowledge production and dissemination to suppress dissent, thereby ensuring the continued dominance of the ruling elite, who benefit politically, socially, and economically from the status quo (Crabtree & Durand, 2017). If activism fails to provoke a response from the government, mobilisation for further action is compromised. Consequently, the masses are likely to feel discouraged when their actions yield neither tangible results nor even a simple reaction from the government.

7.4 Dangers

This subsection presents interviewees' responses concerning the safety of online activism. Most participants expressed the view that the state poses significant threats to digital activists, although one respondent considered such threats exaggerated.

7.4.1 Physical Violence

The government seeks to silence critics through arrests and detentions without trial. Interviewee A stated: "If you mobilise people against the government using social media, you get arrested and spend several weeks without trial." Interviewee E supported this claim, asserting: "The arrests and incarceration of activists by state security agents in Zimbabwe constitute the most dangerous aspect of online activism in the country." Similarly, Interviewee F described digital activism in Zimbabwe as a perilous endeavour, stating: "The danger associated with online activism is that most activists are targeted by the authorities, as evidenced by Hopewell Chin'ono's frequent arrests by the Mnangagwa regime."

Interviewee D elaborated: "The state sponsors violence against protestors, with the Zimbabwe Republic Police attacking them with baton sticks, tear gas, and arbitrary arrests." Instead of upholding the rule of law and protecting citizens' rights, the police force is perceived as a principal violator of both. Interviewee D further highlighted the role of repressive legislation, which is often not well understood by the public. The implication of this observation is that the government operates in an autocratic manner, using state instruments to suppress public aspirations and enforce ambiguous legal frameworks to instil fear and confusion among

citizens. Interviewee E underscored the dangers inherent in the state's instrumentalisation of its security apparatus for oppression.

Although the interview participants spoke extensively about state threats to digital activism, none recounted personal experiences of arrests, detention without trial, or torture at the hands of state agents. The uniformity of their responses, including repeated references to “constant arrests,” “detentions,” and “targeting,” suggests that much of this information may be drawn from secondary sources rather than direct personal experiences. This raises the possibility that the perceived dangers are widely disseminated within activist communities to instil fear, despite limited empirical evidence of activists personally experiencing such threats. Thus, one could argue that the perception of danger is, to some extent, more an illusion than a reality. The belief that activism in Zimbabwe is inherently dangerous may be rooted in the historical legacy of authoritarian governance and a generalised fear among activists regarding state security agents' potential threats.

7.4.2 Epistemic Violence

The government intimidates digital activists into silence by labelling them as terrorists. Interviewee A explained: “To legitimise the victimisation of activists, all those who speak out against the government are branded as terrorists. When activism is equated with terrorism, anything can happen to activists.” Interviewee A further suggested that the government silences opponents by levelling fabricated charges against them and categorising anti-government activists as digital terrorists. Interviewee F corroborated this claim: “Activists are often accused of attempting to unlawfully overthrow the government. Due to the lack of legal clarity regarding online communications, arrested activists frequently languish in remand prison without being formally charged.” This statement implies that the government weaponises the law against activists, using it as an instrument of repression rather than protection.

Furthermore, the government engages in cyberbullying to undermine online activists. Interviewee A elaborated: “Cyberbullying is another significant danger associated with online activism in Zimbabwe. State agents use ghost accounts to troll activists and disrupt their efforts.” The government's ability to deploy bots to respond immediately to activist posts and harass those deemed most threatening further exacerbates this issue (Tshetu, 2023). Interviewee D confirmed the existence of this threat, stating: “Trolling presents a major challenge to online activism.” Interviewee E added: “Online activists frequently receive threats

when they post material opposing the regime.” Interviewee F concurred: “Activists are regularly trolled and harassed online.” Interviewee J specifically highlighted the plight of female activists, stating: “Activism comes with risks; in Zimbabwe, Varakashi trolls frequently target and bully female activists.” These responses suggest that, rather than protecting citizens from cybercrime, the state is complicit in victimising vulnerable individuals.

Labelling political opponents as terrorists has deep colonial roots. During the colonial era, liberation forces were branded as terrorists and, when arrested, were not recognised as political prisoners but prosecuted as terrorists or treasonous bandits (Ghosh, 2017). Those convicted often faced the death penalty. Consequently, the contemporary use of the “terrorist” label remains an effective strategy to silence activists who are acutely aware of the potential consequences of such charges.

7.4.3 Fear

Some activists regarded the perception that the Zimbabwean digital public sphere was fraught with danger as an exaggeration. For example, Interviewee H was sceptical about the extent of the risk, arguing that:

There is exaggeration when it comes to dangers for online activists. I would rather use 'challenges' than 'dangers'. The biggest challenge associated with online activism is harassment, either from the state or other state-sponsored stalkers or online bullies.

Interviewee H appeared to accuse those activists expressing fear of seeking attention from the international community, possibly to solicit funding (Last, 2019). Given that some interviewees indicated that the Cyber and Data Protection Act is not well understood by most activists, it is highly probable that activists may inadvertently breach the law.

Many activists lack awareness of the legal frameworks regulating digital communication. For example, Interviewee D explained that:

The other danger associated with online activism is that one might get into trouble, especially with the Cyber Act, of which most online activists are ignorant.

Interviewee D’s claim was substantiated by Interviewee F, who noted that:

Laws on or against online activism are not clear; therefore, anyone can be targeted, arrested, and spend long periods in remand prison because the state does not have clear legal instruments with which to charge online activists.

The legal framework appears vague to activists who do not invest time in studying or interpreting the law. Activists who fear victimisation due to ambiguous legislation should prioritise legal literacy to mitigate the risk of unnecessary arrests. A clear understanding of the law would enable activists to exercise their freedoms without undue concern over ambiguous regulations.

In repressive environments, activists adopt survival strategies. Interviewee B indicated that activists employ self-preservation measures when they feel threatened, explaining that:

Many activists have been threatened with violence online, and they ultimately resort to self-censorship.

According to Habermas, the essence of the public sphere is the exercise of freedom of expression, where individuals freely contribute ideas to political debates to improve the political status quo. However, self-censorship among digital activists undermines this purpose, as it effectively curtails the right to freedom of expression. By engaging in self-censorship, communicators yield to external pressures, diminishing the democratic potential of online activism.

7.5 Alternative Narratives

In this subsection, alternative forms of digital activism are analysed, focusing on the subthemes of misinformation and Varakashi.

7.5.1 Misinformation

The digital communication space is plagued by unethical practices. For example, Interviewee I remarked that:

Online activism in Zimbabwe has its own challenges, such as misinformation, fake news, exaggeration, and the sensationalisation of news, which is often shared without verification.

Interviewee I identified spin as a significant online threat. Traditionally, accusations of spin and propaganda were primarily directed at the state (Mungwari and Ndhlebe, 2019). However, with the proliferation of digital platforms, even pro-democracy activists are implicated. Misinformation spreads rapidly online, as most users engage with false content unknowingly due to the absence of effective gatekeeping mechanisms on many platforms.

Interviewees also highlighted the role of individuals with hidden agendas who hire activists to champion particular causes. Interviewee D stated that:

A lot of online protests are ineffective because some activists are paid to maintain an online presence and do not genuinely advocate for a serious agenda.

The literature on paid activism typically focuses on government-sponsored activists engaged in counter-narratives rather than anti-establishment activists receiving financial backing. Interviewee D's observation provides insight into why some online activism appears weak and directionless. Paid online activists, commonly referred to as astroturfers, manipulate digital discourse (Al-Rawi and Rahman, 2020). This phenomenon has origins in the Chinese model of paid digital activism, known as the Internet Water Army (Lian, Dong, Chi, Tang, and Liu, 2019).

Paid activists are not necessarily driven by moral or political convictions; rather, their primary motivation is financial gain. They aim to influence public opinion by creating the illusion of widespread public support or opposition to specific causes or political agendas. Astroturfing undermines the credibility of online activism, as it distorts the authenticity of debates and discussions (Rohlinger and DeLucchi, 2021). Furthermore, paid activism can marginalise grassroots movements, as financial incentives overshadow genuine commitment to social or political causes. Consequently, the impact of authentic grassroots activism is weakened, reducing the potential for meaningful socio-political change.

7.5.2. Varakashi

In this section, I present interviewee perspectives on activism that offer a counter-narrative to the liberal democratic activism aligned with the West. *Varakashi* serve as an example of this alternative form of activism.

However, *Varakashi* are regarded with suspicion by pro-democracy activists. For instance, Interviewee H stated that,

There is the challenge of infiltration or dilution of the activist agenda, for example by *Varakashi*; pro government agitators who dilute activism by producing counter narratives. By diluting the online anti-Government activist content, they kill the momentum the activists will be nursing and building online.

With this assertion, Interviewee H conveys a perception of *Varakashi* as disruptive. The use of terms such as "infiltration" and "dilution" reflects the negative connotations with which Interviewee H regards *Varakashi* activities within the digital public sphere. However, he also acknowledges that the government's deployment of *Varakashi* is an effective strategy for reclaiming control of the digital narrative from the opposition and its allies. He observed that:

In the next 10 years, I foresee online activism still being in the same state as it is today. It is because the more activists participate online, the more the government invests in the technology of digital authoritarianism in order to counter the online narratives by the opposition. Already the government is funding counter narratives online. There may be changes but they would not be effective enough to bring much change in the next 10 years.

The assertion made by Interviewee H above highlights how digital platforms are not designed with the intent of promoting democratization or emancipation, as earlier cyber optimists had once believed (Snake-Beings, 2013). Rather, it demonstrates that these platforms are available for any user, regardless of whether they advocate for democratic or authoritarian governments. The statement by Interviewee H provides an example that the primary concern of platform providers is not the political content of communications. Their main focus is the ongoing creation of content and the continuous flow of communications. As the interviewee remarked, "Chin'ono, Mahere and Kubeko reported *Varakashi* to Twitter seeking them to be sanctioned. Fortunately for *Varakashi*, Twitter could not find them guilty of any offence or violations of Twitter policies." This indicates that digital communication platforms are primarily interested in the generation of content and the unimpeded flow of communication, allowing *Varakashi* to freely exercise their form of activism online.

Varakashi can be seen as engaging in a type of digital activism that contrasts with the Western pro-democracy model. Unlike the pro-Western civil society and advocacy-aligned activism, they align with a government typically characterised as authoritarian. However, as noted by

Interviewee H, they are not independent of the West, given the ownership of digital platforms and the control of digital content by Western capitalists. The interviewee's comment about pro-democracy activists' failed attempts to have Varakashi sanctioned on Twitter underscores the fact that digital platform owners do not necessarily advocate for democratization in authoritarian regimes. Their primary concern is not political ideology but the consumption of their products. The continued communication and content generation are paramount, as the more information flows, the more data is created, captured, and harvested for commercial purposes (Pistor, 2020). It is irrelevant whether this information is generated by Varakashi, who are opposed by pro-democracy liberal activists. The platforms are not designed to promote political perspectives; their goal is to maximise content production for monetisation.

7.6. Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter Seven, I presented the findings from interviews with online youth activists. The responses from the interviews revealed a division of opinion among activists regarding access to social media platforms. This divide reflects the findings of the critical literature review presented in Chapter Five. Interviewees identified both political and non-political successes achieved through digital activism. Politically, digital activism has helped attract international attention to intervene on behalf of citizens whose human rights were violated by the government. On a non-political level, successes include the protection of children's rights, affordable education and data, affordable transport, and the safeguarding of the environment.

The interviewees also highlighted the challenges faced by digital activism, including a lack of coordination and dissonance within the community. They discussed the risks faced by digital activists, including abductions, arrests, intimidation, and threats of physical violence. Additionally, they recognised the threat posed by unethical practices such as misinformation and astroturfing. Furthermore, they expressed concerns about the activities of Varakashi, pro-government activists, who they perceive as a threat.

Chapter 8: Discussion of the findings

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to limited access to the Zimbabwean online public sphere. I also discuss the type of online communication, political action and alternative online activism.

8.2 The Zimbabwean online public sphere

The Zimbabwean digital communication space is characterised by several challenges. Such challenges are limited access, restricted access and state surveillance.

8.2.1 Limited Access

The concept of a digital public sphere assumes universal access to the internet. In reality, access is not universal. Access to the digital public sphere is limited. With the concept of the public sphere, Habermas had universal accessible public sphere in mind. Data cost, for example, prevents many Zimbabweans from accessing the digital public sphere. One of the criticisms against Habermas is that he did not consider issues such as socio-economic, gender and other types of distances. Habermas's focus was on free and accessible public space. The internet, contrary to the ideals of public sphere, is controlled by private corporations. Even Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are companies which work with the government and they can shut down online spaces any time they like. Habermas had public squares in mind where people could always go to and they could not be closed down. The internet is different from public squares.

Activists have a biased perspective of access to online public sphere. They think that online activism is the only and viable option left to the activism community. They emphasize how access to digital platforms has revolutionised democratic participation. In reality, it is not everyone who has the resources to have ready access to the digital communication platforms. However, some of the activists belong to well-funded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), where access is not an issue, given the availability of requisite resources. The fact that activists are part of the privileged few who easily access the digital public sphere make them part of the elite. Their position as true representatives of the under privileged is therefore compromised. They cannot be part of the elite and remain the voice for the voiceless.

Academics, by contrast, approach the question of access through empirical research, gathering data from a broad cross-section of society to scientifically assess how citizens from both rich and poor, urban and rural communities access digital platforms. Thus, while activists tend to consider access based on their personal experiences, academics' views are grounded in national-level data concerning resource availability. For example, Moyo (2020), Chitanana (2019), Dendere (2019), and Mare (2020) highlight challenges associated with inadequate telecommunications infrastructure, poverty, a lack of knowledge, and limited skills among both actual and potential users.

Official statistics suggest that internet access is widespread in Zimbabwe, leading activists and some scholars to conclude that digital platforms are easily accessible. However, that is not the reality. For example, Moyo (2020) argues that meaningful and sustained access is limited to relatively few citizens, primarily due to affordability challenges, which renders internet-mediated communication largely elitist. This observation is shared by other activists; for example, Interviewee H highlighted protests in 2019 against the high cost of data. High data costs also influence the platforms that activists and their followers use, with recent scholarship and interview data indicating a preference for WhatsApp and Facebook, as these consume relatively little data in comparison to platforms such as YouTube. Interviewee H identified WhatsApp as the most frequently used platform by activists due to the relatively low cost of data for accessing it. In Zimbabwe, mobile data bundles are sold separately. Mare (2020), for example, explained that such pricing structures affect the type of engagement facilitated. Indeed, an analysis of online content reveals that Twitter (now X) typically features posts containing pictures and short text messages, resulting in brief, often superficial exchanges. As noted in Chapter 6, this phenomenon creates room for multiple and contradictory interpretations of the same message, thereby diminishing symbolic efficiency, as proposed by Dean (2014).

The high cost of data is related to third-level access issues (chapter 3 subsection 3.2.2 access and benefits). High data costs demonstrate the deliberate exclusion of activists from the online space through state surveillance and internet shutdowns. The government weaponises high data costs to control access to the online public sphere. For example, Mare (2020) critiques the high data costs and the stringent regulation of Internet service providers, which are used to control the online space. The activists interviewed attributed high data prices to a covert strategy aimed at curbing mobilisation, particularly during the August 2018 and January 2019 demonstrations

that were organised through social media. As highlighted in section 6.1 of Chapter 5, Interviewee H pointed out the exorbitant cost of internet access. The state uses data pricing to deny activists affordable or free internet access. Connecting with the international community and members of the diaspora is crucial for activists, as discussed in section 7.1 of Chapter 7. This connection is vital for activists, explaining the government's efforts to limit such interactions by controlling international gateways. In extreme cases, internet shutdowns are enacted to sever activists' communication with the outside world and with each other (Mare, 2020). However, this extreme measure has negative consequences for the government and is therefore employed sparingly, with more subtle forms of control preferred. High data costs serve to exclude economically disadvantaged individuals from participating in the digital public sphere.

8.2.2 Restricted access

The concept of an ideal digital public sphere assumes a digital communication space that is freely accessible at any time and is not controlled by anybody. Internet shutdowns contradict the ideals of a digital public sphere because they represent a way of closing the digital communication space and controlling it at will. The government harvests information from the activists' online posts. The government therefore uses the digital communication space to stifle the digital public sphere. For example, Mugari (2020) labels the online communication space an open source for the intelligence sector. The government therefore wants targeted activists to post as much as they can so that it knows their plans. However, activists respond in various ways. Some stay away from the internet totally. Others continue with online activism using pseudonyms. Some exercise self-censorship and continue with caution. Interviewees explained that the government prevented mobilisation through digital platforms by shutting down internet provision during the economic hardship induced demonstrations of January 2019. The claim by activists is substantiated by academics. For example, Mare (2020) indicates that, post Mugabe, the state used its power over companies that provide mobile networks to enact forced shutdowns of the internet, thereby denying activists access to the digital communication space for mobilization during times of crises. The state uses vague legislation to suppress oppositional digital activism. Many activists fall victim to this legislation due to their lack of understanding of the legal framework governing Zimbabwe's cyberspace. Furthermore, Mugari (2020) and Sango, Malik and Sumertha (2022) indicate that the state introduced restrictive legislation that further denies activists access to the digital public sphere. Further

restrictive legislation such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) were introduced to control the digital public sphere. Activists resorted to digital activism because of the Covid-19 lockdowns which restricted gatherings and movement. For example, in May 2020 three female activists presented in chapter 6, sub section 6.4.1 (b), mobilised online to protest the government's negligence by not providing Personal Protective Equipment to health workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. After arresting the activists, the government failed to charge the activists due to lack of proper legislation governing the activists' contact and they were released. The introduction of the Cyber and Data Protection Act in 2021 was for correcting such an anomaly. Where some academics perceive potential in social media platform use for mobilisation for offline action, others see internet shut down legislation as threats to freedom of expression in the digital communication space. Practices such as shutdown of the internet is action directly opposed to the ideals of a digital public sphere.

8.2.3 Surveillance of the Digital Communication Space

State surveillance has a detrimental effect on participation in the digital public sphere. The ideal public sphere is characterised by freedom of speech and freedom of association. The awareness of being monitored leads to self-censorship, which weakens the impact of activism. The state imposes significant restrictions on access to and participation in the digital public sphere. These restrictions are often subtly enacted through surveillance, monitoring, and the tracking of online activists. Surveillance and monitoring influence how activists access the public sphere and what they feel free to do with it. Interview findings revealed that many youth digital activists fear government agents who monitor their online communications. Activists are aware that state surveillance of the digital space in Zimbabwe has grown increasingly sophisticated, as the government capitalises on advancements in communication technology to spy on its opponents. For example, Interviewee B (Chapter 7) attributes the government's heightened surveillance potential on digital activism to technological developments. That observation by activists is substantiated by academics such as Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove, and Saki (2023), as well as Munoriyarwa (2022). They highlight the enhanced capabilities of state surveillance and the emotional distress and paranoia it causes activists, as their personal and social lives are undermined by distrust. This presents a challenging situation for activists, who rely on mobilisation through publicity and visibility to raise awareness. The impact of

surveillance and subsequent self-censorship diminishes the potential for vibrant debate within the digital public sphere.

Surveillance is effectively carried out by the ZANU PF government, both online and offline, as emphasized by activists. State surveillance of the digital public sphere further reduces the likelihood of online activism transitioning to offline activism. For example, Interviewees A, B, and C identified challenges to digital activism arising from surveillance within the digital communication sphere. Interviewee B pointed out that digital communications facilitate surveillance of the activism community by state agents. These challenges are characterised by government agents spying, monitoring, and tracking anti-government activists both online and offline. The claims of the participants are substantiated by Gukurume (2022), who asserts that "For some activists, the CIOs have become part of their everyday encounters. They are under constant surveillance from the state security and CIO" (p. 171). Gukurume also highlights the detrimental effects of state surveillance, stating that "Surveillance is the *modus operandi* of the ZANU PF government to deal with dissent. This surveillance not only involves monitoring activists' movements and plans but also remote surveillance of their private telephone calls and mobile messages" (2022, p. 172). Scholars argue that surveillance of the digital space has intensified in the post-Mugabe era. Gukurume (2022) notes that "The Mnangagwa government has doubled surveillance with the deployment of military intelligence in addition to the CIO's traditional role. State surveillance is now jointly carried out on civil society actors by these two organisations, aimed at suppressing dissent and silencing opposition voices" (p. 173). The implication is that civil space has contracted further since Mnangagwa assumed office in 2017. These findings reflect the third level of digital exclusion (see levels of digital exclusion in chapter three, subsection 3.2.2 Access and benefits). Interviewee B identified self-censorship as a strategy adopted by digital activists to mitigate the impact of state surveillance. Activists also adopt other survival tactics, such as refraining from offline activism, in addition to self-censorship.

The government fosters an environment of intimidation to suppress dissent in the digital public sphere. For example, Interviewee D highlighted the use of the judiciary and hostile legislation as mechanisms for intimidating online activists. To substantiate the claims by activists, Gukurume elaborates on the state's use of intimidation, stating that "The state deploys its apparatus for intimidation and silencing dissent. The fear of ZANU PF and the state has been reproduced over generations, becoming ingrained in the people's psyche, fostering a culture of

silence and self-censorship" (2022, p. 171). Segments of the online activism community engage in self-censorship as a protective measure. This self-censorship is induced by the awareness of legislation that the government could use to charge them if arrested for their activism. Such self-censorship undermines the principles of free and rational expression, which are central to Habermas's idealised vision of the public sphere. In Chapter 2, this study explored the legislation designed to restrict activism, including the Cyber and Data Protection Act of 2021, which is perceived as a threat to online activists. The restrictive nature of such legislation is corroborated by the critical literature, which highlights how acts like the Cyber and Data Protection Act 2021 and the Patriot Act criminalise negative portrayals of ZANU PF. However, online content analysis reveals critical comments directed at the ZANU PF government, with interlocutors freely expressing their political beliefs. This suggests that activists and scholars may overstate the level of fear instilled by the introduction of such legislation.

Digital activists live in fear of detention without trial and torture if arrested by the authorities for perceived hostile participation in the digital public sphere. The intimidation present within the online activism environment is explained by Interviewee C in Chapter 6, subsection 6.2.1. Interviewee C outlines how the fear and intimidation among online activists stem from the arrests and abductions of known activists by the state. Literature confirms activists' perceptions, illustrating that the digital communication space is fraught with fear, induced by experiences of arrests and detentions without trial. According to Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove, and Saki (2023), the Zimbabwean online activism community lives in constant fear of the state due to the intimidating political environment. Gukurume provides specific examples to demonstrate the severity of the threat of abductions within the digital activism community.

He explains that

Social movement and civil society activists in Zimbabwe have been victims of abductions by alleged state security apparatus. Examples are the abductions of Itai Dzamara, leader of the #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare movement in 2015, two #Tajamuka activists who were abducted in 2016, Tawanda Muchehiwa a student activist and three MDC female activists, Joanna Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiru and Netsai Marowa, who were also abducted and tortured by state security agents after they raised concerns about the suffering of the people due to lack of social support and security from the state during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns (Gukurume, 2022, p. 173).

Gukurume provides a stark illustration of the dangers faced by activists in Zimbabwe, recounting an incident in which comedian Samantha Kureya was abducted by state agents in August 2019. Kureya had posted a comedic skit on YouTube, mocking traffic police corruption. The authorities responded by abducting her, subjecting her to physical abuse, stripping her naked, and forcing her to drink raw sewage. Kureya was warned that she was too young to mock the government and its leadership (Gukurume, 2022, p. 174). This is one of the numerous examples cited by interviewees in this study, highlighting the extreme measures taken against those engaged in online activism, including espionage, arrests, and abductions. Such government-instigated intimidation, coupled with an environment characterised by fear, severely inhibits the potential for robust engagement in digital activism.

The digital communication environment is fraught with distrust which is opposed to the tenets of the ideal public sphere. For example Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove, and Saki (2023) point out that the fear generated by state surveillance leads to the breakdown of relationships, including those between activists and their families and friends. This pervasive mistrust makes it exceedingly difficult for digital activists to participate openly or engage with others, particularly strangers. Surveillance forces activists to remain constantly vigilant, fearing that they are being watched. This precautionary behaviour undermines the very essence of activism, which thrives on openness, interaction, and the free exchange of ideas. From a Habermasian perspective, this state of affairs hampers the kind of rational, uncensored communication that is vital to a healthy and democratic public sphere. As such, the lack of trust among activists diminishes the possibility for the type of deliberative engagement that underpins the concept of the public sphere.

In the context of academic research, the lack of trust in participant confidentiality is not without justification. State intelligence agencies can exploit academic publications to extract valuable information, potentially identifying weaknesses in their methods of repression. Such findings can then be used to refine their strategies, further constricting the public sphere. Munoriyarwa (2019) provides evidence that the Zimbabwean government acquires surveillance technology from China. Both governments, he suggests, have little regard for the protection of citizens' rights to freedom of expression and digital participation. Similarly, Mugari (2020) suggests that ethical conduct by digital activists may help mitigate the arbitrary internet shutdowns often imposed by authoritarian regimes. This is especially pertinent given that such shutdowns are

typically justified by claims of preventing incitement to violence during periods of political unrest.

The Zimbabwean government has its own brand of authoritarianism. For example, Reisboard (2022) challenges the assumption that Zimbabwe's surveillance apparatus is solely the result of Chinese political influence. While acknowledging that Chinese technology plays a significant role in Zimbabwe's surveillance operations, Reisboard argues that the Sino-Zimbabwe surveillance relationship is primarily characterised by collaboration, rather than the export of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, both Munoriyarwa (2019) and Reisboard (2022) agree that the availability of surveillance technology from China has been instrumental in the repression of Zimbabweans' rights to free expression and participation in the digital public sphere. As Munoriyarwa (2019) contends, the Zimbabwean government benefits from the relative lack of scrutiny surrounding technological purchases from China, as Chinese suppliers do not question the intended use of the technology, in contrast to Western suppliers (Reisboard, 2022, p. 17). The result is the creation of a panoptic system that stifles dissent and undermines the vibrancy of the digital public sphere.

The Zimbabwean government has been effective in instilling a pervasive climate of fear within both the academic and activist communities. The belief in surveillance, though not always supported by concrete evidence, is widespread. Activists do not always provide specific instances of being monitored, abducted, or arrested, but the general consensus is that the government has the capacity to spy on everyone, with severe consequences for those who attract its attention. While only a small number of activists have been targeted and subjected to arrest or abduction, these examples have proven to be highly effective in deterring the broader public from engaging in online activism. The mere fear of such repercussions curtails potential opposition and limits the scope for meaningful digital engagement.

The government's systematic extraction of information on marginalised digital activist communities through surveillance constitutes digital colonialism. By preying on digital activists online, the government acts at the same level as capitalist entities which extract and commodify marginalised cultures through digital platforms. The result is jurisdiction over behaviours, cultures and traditions whilst the marginalised communities lose power and control of their own narratives. Government therefore indulges in coloniality of power while simultaneously data corporates pursue communicative capitalism.

8.3 Type of online communication

8.3.1 Misinformation

Digital communication platforms are designed for profit generation. They are therefore not democratic tools. The digital communication space is therefore exploited for profit generation and the Zimbabwean online space is not an exception. Digital activists however exhibit a belief that social media platforms are tools for democratization. For example, Interviewee B explained that mobilizing the masses for offline action has become easier due to activists' use of social media platforms. In critiquing the capitalist capture of online activism (chapter 3, section 3.3) scholars Dean, Zuboff and Fuchs argue that sensational and emotional content is prioritized over rational political deliberation online. Social media celebrities who engage in performative activism (see chapter 6, section 6.4) to attract traffic to their social media accounts for personal gain rather than for advancing social justice or political causes. For example, social media influencer Madam boss (chapter 6, subsection 6.4.3 (b)) latches on to post controversial political content for personal gain and not for promoting specific political affiliation.

The digital communication space is characterised by disinformation and misinformation campaigns. Activists associate misinformation in the digital communication sphere with pro-government activists whom they accuse of disseminating false information. Online content analysis further reveals that individuals with similar political views tend to engage in conversations where they either affirm or agree with the original post. An example of this is the debate over the composition of an imaginary government of national unity, discussed in Chapter 6, sub-section 6.3.2 (a). This finding aligns with existing literature on filter bubbles and the echo chamber effect in social media. In cases where there are contradictions, exchanges frequently devolve into hostile arguments characterised by political insults. This pattern is indicative of the Varakashi phenomenon, as discussed by scholars such as Mavengano (2023). On Facebook, there are few instances of constructive exchanges between individuals from different political parties; instead, lengthy discussions often fail to result in any change of opinion, resolution, or consensus. This suggests that activists become embroiled in fruitless debates without any potential for a meaningful outcome, a situation that Dean (2014) describes as a trap of endless reflexivity.

There is division among scholars regarding the effectiveness of digital platforms in political communication. The fall of Mugabe in 2017 sparked hope for the potential of social media in

political mobilisation, as evidenced by the movements such as #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and #ThisFlag, which garnered attention for their role in pressuring Mugabe to resign. Scholars such as Kwenda (2019), Nyoka and Tembo (2022), and Gukurume (2022) reflect such optimism. However, the fall of Mugabe was not a result of online activism but rather a military operation. Less than a year later, the post-Mugabe government implemented repressive measures to restrict social media mobilisation, particularly during protests triggered by fuel price increases and election results. Other scholars contend that social media platforms are not very effective in political communication in the post-Mugabe era. For instance, Mare (2020) argues that the state leveraged its control over mobile network providers to implement forced internet shutdowns, thereby denying activists access to digital spaces for mobilisation during times of crisis. Furthermore, Mugari (2020) and Sango, Malik, and Sumertha (2022) note that restrictive legislation, such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), was enacted to regulate the digital public sphere. Activists, in turn, resorted to digital activism during the Covid-19 lockdowns, which restricted public gatherings and movement. For instance, in May 2020, three female activists (discussed in Chapter 6, sub-section 6.4.1 (b)) mobilised online to protest the government's failure to provide Personal Protective Equipment to health workers. After their arrests, the government failed to charge them due to a lack of appropriate legislation governing activists' online activities, leading to their release. The introduction of the Cyber and Data Protection Act in 2021 was designed to address such legal loopholes. While some academics perceive potential in social media platforms for mobilisation, others view the state's imposition of internet shutdowns and restrictive legislation as threats to freedom of expression in the digital space.

Discussion of political issues within the digital sphere tends to exacerbate political divisions rather than foster change. Literature by Moyo (2020) highlights exclusion in terms of the ability and motivation to participate meaningfully in digital debates. Through the analysis of online content, I identified numerous instances where discussions degenerated into insults and accusations, such as in responses to posts by Hungwe Charles and Aubrey Mpofu, as described in Chapter 6, sub-section 6.3. Social media platforms often reinforce individuals' existing political convictions rather than challenging them to reconsider their views. The literature supports this view, highlighting the polarising nature of social media use, which aligns with my findings of the significant divides that emerge from digital communication among interlocutors with differing political perspectives. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature, including by scholars such as Moyo (2019), Chenzi (2021), Chitanana (2019),

Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu (2022), and Mavengano and Moyo (2023). Digital exclusion is not only a result of high data costs but also of the lack of requisite skills and knowledge necessary to sustain an online presence and engage meaningfully in democratic debate—what is referred to as the second-level digital divide (Moyo, 2020). Having access to digital platforms is insufficient if users lack the skills or knowledge required for meaningful engagement (Chitanana, 2019). Furthermore, Chitanana (2019) notes that rural populations, who predominantly support ZANU PF, primarily access political information via traditional media controlled by the government. Given the aging rural population and the prevalence of indigenous languages, these communities are often excluded from online debates conducted in English. Television and radio programmes cater to these non-English-speaking groups by offering content in indigenous languages. Under such conditions, the supposed democratizing potential of digital spaces remains an illusion.

8.3.2 Drowning out dissent

The nature of digital communication platforms allows more resourced participants to dominate the online communication space. For example, the pro ZANU PF and government sponsored social media activists easily inundate the social media space to shut out opponents' voices. The implication is therefore that the government permits participation in the digital public sphere but simultaneously renders the digital communication space ineffective by drowning opposition voices. This is achieved through the deployment of *Varakashi* who intentionally introduce confusion within the digital sphere by posting contrary or pro-government messages. As an example, Interviewee H laments that *Varakashi* infiltrate the digital space, diluting and disempowering online debate. This observation mirrors the argument put forth by Gukurume (2022), who contends that the government has weaponised social media to undermine the opposition. Gukurume (2022) explains that “The state has also deployed and used social media to attack civil society and opposition. This has been done through the deployment of ‘cyber spies’ and ‘cyber critics’ (*Varakashi*) of opposition opinion makers and other government critics” (Gukurume, 2022, p. 172). Gukurume views the use of youth in the digital communication space by the government to counter opposition voices as a highly effective strategy employed by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent.

He explains that

The emergence of *Varakashi* demonstrates the regime's transition to appropriating similar technology tools and platforms utilised by its critics and opponents. The success of *Varakashi*

pro-government trolls to intimidate opposition voices and shutting down civic space shows how authoritarian regimes have also used social media to silence critical voices and entrench political hegemony (Gukurume, 2022, p. 172).

Due to the deployment of *Varakashi*, “social media has widened the repressive capacity of the authoritarian state, becoming an instrument of state control and a space for political distortions” (Gukurume, 2022, p. 175). Social media has, therefore, been utilised by African dictators to reinforce the status quo. The government has seized control of the digital communication space in much the same way it took control of mainstream print and broadcast media at independence. It is evident that the government is using the digital communication space for the same nefarious purposes that characterised the mainstream media before the digital era. Gukurume argues that “in Zimbabwe, social media has been used to promote the regime's propaganda and the spread of fake news, as well as becoming a conduit for state surveillance and electoral manipulation. As such, digital authoritarianism in repressive regimes like Zimbabwe has increased simultaneously with the popularity and growth of social media” (Gukurume, 2022, p. 175). Gukurume’s views align with the perspectives of my study participants, who regard the government’s appropriation of the digital communication space as a usurpation of the people’s freedom of expression, akin to its historical monopoly over mainstream print and broadcast media. Scholars and activists who blame *Varakashi* for disrupting the digital public sphere suggest that social media platforms should primarily serve anti-government voices. However, the aggressive trolling of ZANU PF and civil servants by anti-government digital activists such as *Nerrorists* is often overlooked as a factor that triggers retaliation by *Varakashi*. Consequently, the digital public sphere has become toxic, with both opposition and *Varakashi* digital activists contributing to negative discourse.

The ideal practice is that the public sphere should provide a platform for diverse voices from different political backgrounds to come together and discuss in a civil manner. The main purpose is for the contestants to hear each other, agree or disagree reasonably. However, in the Zimbabwean digital communication space, interlocutors from across the political divide seek to silence and dominate their opponents. That is made possible by digital communication platforms which thrive on maximum content production and sharing at the expense of the quality of the communication generated and shared. The result is that digital activists end up trapped in unproductive exercises such as endless reflexivity and virtue signalling. Findings from interviews, online content analysis, and literature by scholars such as Moyo (2019) and

Gukurume (2022) all reveal this phenomenon. The insults directed towards Aubrey Mpofu and Hungwe Charles following their pro-ZANU PF content illustrate that even pro-democracy communicators in the online space also attempt to drown out opposing voices. Thus, the degeneration of online exchanges into insults cannot be solely attributed to *Varakashi* inundating the digital public sphere to suppress opposition voices. Both sides are equally culpable. These findings suggest that, far from the Habermasian vision of a fair, reasonable, and respectful public sphere where consensus is sought, the digital public sphere in Zimbabwe is toxic and divided, leading to political polarisation. Moyo (2020) highlighted the abuse of the internet and social media platforms by activists, who use threatening language against those opposed to their political positions. In Chapter 6, Subsection 6.4.2, a ZimSeen (2023) Facebook post reveals online humiliation between women. Interviewee H in Chapter 7 notes that women are particularly targeted for harassment and name-calling by both pro-democracy and pro-government online activists. One of the characteristics of the ideal Habermasian public sphere is intolerance towards violence (Stolze, 2019). A context where discussions turn toxic to the extent of leading to offline violence fails to provide a healthy digital space for rational democratic deliberation. Matsilele, Mpofu, Msimanga, and Tshuma's (2021) study captured intimidation as one of the tactics employed by the government to silence online dissent. Abuse, harassment, and threats deny citizens the opportunity to exercise freedom of expression due to fear. The ideal public sphere thrives in an environment free from intimidation (Parkinson, 2012). However, scholars such as Chenzi (2021), Marima (2021), Mavengano, and Moyo (2023), who critique *Varakashi*, often present a biased analysis of the digital public sphere. Their articles tend to be partisan, rather than offering a balanced view that educates readers on the causes of toxicity in digital interactions. Instead, their critique is overtly focused against pro-government *Varakashi*. The polarisation evident in their academic writing is mirrored in digital communications, thereby negatively impacting society. Tendai Marima (2021), like Chenzi (2021), adopts a biased stance on trolling. These scholars do not provide a balanced exploration of the issue but instead selectively present evidence that tarnishes the reputation of pro-government digital activists. *Varakashi* were created as a response to taunts, name-calling, and trolling of ZANU PF and government officials by opposition activists. It is, therefore, misleading to suggest that trolling began with *Varakashi*. Marima (2021) and Chenzi (2021) paint the picture that digital activism is only legitimate if it opposes the government, irrespective of whether it is ethical. Gukurume (2019) shares similar views to Chenzi and Marima, asserting that activism is legitimate if it is aimed at opposing the government.

Consequently, harmony and reason do not prevail in the digital public sphere, which remains characterised by deep political divisions.

8.3.3 Wide chasms in the digital public sphere

Digital platform owners realise profits from continuous content production and sharing by online communicators. People post haphazardly so long as they have access to digital platforms. People end up posting similar or contrary content even when they are pursuing similar goals. The result is that the digital activism community is disunited and pursue diverse agenda sometimes. When a community is fractured like that it lacks unity of purpose and direction. However, with the case of pro-government *Varakashi*, the case is different. The government deploys these activists to pursue the specific agenda of disrupting oppositional voices online. This is possible because of the communicative capitalism nature of online communication which is open to use by anyone for any purpose so long they generate and share content that is harvested by corporations for sale.

The *Varakashi* phenomenon has further deepened the divisions within the political sphere. The political environment has become profoundly divided due to ideological differences. The trolling introduced by the government's deployment of *Varakashi* has exacerbated this polarization. These findings are supported by existing literature on *Varakashi* activism. An example of the women-on-women trolling is highlighted in Subsection 6.4.2 (a) of this study, with the labelling of Tatenda Mavetera by Fadzayi Mahere discussed in Chapter 6. Tshuma, Tshuma, and Ndlovu offer a critique of the polarising nature of *Varakashi* posts on social media, further emphasising how these digital tactics have intensified societal divisions.

They posit that

It is important to identify what is foregrounded (remembered) and also backgrounded (forgotten) in these cyber-wars. Mnangagwa's sordid past such as his role in the Gukurahundi genocide and gaining power through the November 2017 coup are exclusive in the *Varakashi* narrative. However, Mnangagwa's loyalists are using epideictic/ceremonial rhetoric to focus on his 'present actions' and call for his 'admiration' while when describing Chamisa, they use the forensic/ legal rhetoric which mainly 'condemns his past.' (Tshuma, Tshuma and Ndlovu, 2022, p. 10).

Moyo (2020) also characterises *Varakashi* posts as profoundly disruptive to the digital public sphere, asserting that

Their job is clear cut: disrupt online debates, stymie criticism of Emmerson Mnangagwa and his government...the Varakashi are on call 24 hours a day...New Twitter accounts with deceptive avatars- are registered in under two minutes, then the disruption begins. Chat threads are spammed, and eventually slowed, with a barrage of hyperlinks. Or they are driven off topic by volleys of disingenuous interjections (Moyo, 2020, p. 16).

The portrayal of *Varakashi* type digital activism is viewed as polarising and unethical communication by both interviewees and academics whose literature was reviewed for this study.

Online communication is highly polarised. The polarisation is of positions based on political affiliation. People do not listen to each other to seek agreement or solutions. It is communication characterised by fake news and use of offending language. Online communication is trapped in capitalist capture. That is the unproductive traps of symbolic efficiency, endless reflexivity and performative activism. These are actions detrimental to digital activism and only beneficial to the industry that harvests user data from continuous online communications.

8.4 Political (In)action

In this section, I discuss the findings of the study related to political action—or the lack thereof—resulting from online activism. The discussion is structured according to the sub-themes of competing priorities and organisational challenges.

Digital engagement and online activism can constitute a springboard to a political career in both the ruling party and opposition political parties. Theory postulates that social media is harnessed to mobilise the masses for political action such as rallies and demonstrations. The implication is therefore that established politicians harness social media for mainstream political activities. However, from analysis of online content, it emerged that it is working in reverse, that unknown activists are rising to political prominence through online activism.

Activists are of the perception that the youth have demonstrated a successful transition from online activism to offline, practical political involvement. Interviewees I and J, for example, noted that social media has made mobilising for offline actions more straightforward. The same activists argued that it has also facilitated the organization of remote protests by activists in different provinces who share similar objectives. However, the use of online platforms for

mobilisation for offline actions are limited to urban areas. The platforms are therefore indeed platforms of the elite. Study findings suggest that young people are actively engaging in mainstream political party activities. Evidence from the online critical literature review, content analysis, and interviews indicates that youth involved in digital social movements have subsequently entered national politics. For instance, Fadzayi Mahere, Promise Mkwanzani, Takudzwa Ngadziore, and Tafadzwa Mugwadi are examples of individuals who transitioned from online activism to prominent political positions. The online content analysis reveals that Fadzayi Mahere, initially a leader of the #ThisFlag social movement, ascended to the position of spokesperson for the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). Following the 2023 elections, she became a Member of Parliament for Mt Pleasant constituency. Similarly, Tafadzwa Mugwadi, initially a key figure in the *Varakashi* movement, was elected a Member of Parliament for Buhera North constituency on behalf of ZANU PF after the same elections. From the findings of the systematic literature review (Gukurume, 2022), it is evident that Takudzwa Ngadziore, former president of the Zimbabwe National Students' Union (ZINASU), also transitioned into politics, becoming a Member of Parliament for the CCC post-2023 elections. Interview findings further highlight how Promise Mkwanzani, who rose to prominence through the #Tajamuka/Sesijikile social movement, joined mainstream politics, becoming spokesperson for the CCC, replacing Fadzayi Mahere shortly before the 2023 elections. These findings suggest that young activists are successfully bridging the gap between online and offline political engagement, transitioning from digital activism to broader political spheres.

8.4.1 Competing Priorities

Some individuals began their political journey as activists, advocating for social justice, but over time, they accrued sufficient influence and power to either join mainstream political party structures or attract recognition from global entities. The first category of these individuals is discussed in Chapter 6 under the concept of virtue signalling. In Chapter 6, section 6.4, Mahere's virtue signalling is exposed as hypocritical when she criticises Tatenda Mavetera for her appointment as a cabinet minister in President Mnangagwa's government. Mahere demands to see Mavetera's curriculum vitae, implying that her appointment was not based on merit but on other, unspecified reasons. Despite her criticism, Mahere herself ascended to a Member of Parliament position through the Citizens Coalition for Change. She also became a leader in the Amujae programme, a position secured through her connection to online activism. Mahere's

actions reflect a form of hypocrisy, as she preaches values she fails to embody, thereby displaying moral inconsistency.

Virtue signalling is often driven by the desire for recognition—individuals engage in grandstanding expressions to publicly display their moral values in hopes of being perceived as morally respectable. Such moral grandstanding is evident in Chapter 6, section 6.4, through various Twitter (now X) posts by @NewsHawks (2022), @Tshelela (2024), @Twinsisters (2023), and @Atmos (2024). These tweets suggest that the actions of journalist, filmmaker, and digital activist Hopewell Chin'ono also reflect characteristics of virtue signalling. The posts claim that Chin'ono's attacks on both allies and adversaries demonstrate a degree of moral grandstanding, with the pursuit of personal glory seemingly overtaking the pursuit of social justice for the common good.

Regarding Jones Musara and Tafadzwa Mugwadi, analysed in Chapter 6, subsections 6.4.2 (b) and (c) respectively, their acts of virtue signalling appear motivated by the desire to achieve higher personal status. Musara leveraged his popularity as an online activist to launch a career as an author. Similarly, Mugwadi used his status as a digital activist to propel himself into mainstream politics, where he was elected a Member of Parliament for Buhera North constituency as a member of ZANU PF.

In contrast, some social media influencers create content purely for social capital and financial benefit, rather than for genuine political or social justice activism. These individuals are not engaged in political activism per se; rather, they opportunistically latch onto any situation that provides them with content to post, share, or forward in order to attract attention and gain financial rewards from platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), or YouTube. These influencers are primarily motivated by the monetary compensation derived from views and subscriptions to their content, rather than by any ideological commitment to social or political causes.

The analysis of online content revealed that such influencers post content that suggests political engagement when it aligns with the mood of their audience. For example, in Chapter 6, subsections 6.4.3 (a), (b), and (c), personalities like Madam Boss, Mai Titi, and Comic Pastor are identified as social media opportunists. Their political engagement appears to be superficial, marked by vacillation between supporting ZANU PF and the Citizens Coalition for Change, or backing presidential candidates such as Mnangagwa and Chamisa. Mai Titi's

support for ZANU PF became more evident after a wealthy ZANU PF supporter, Wicknell Chivayo, began donating cars and money to entertainers who publicly supported the party. In this context, Mai Titi's support for ZANU PF seems motivated by the prospect of benefiting from Chivayo's generosity.

From the perspective of communicative capitalism, the profit motive behind influencers like Madam Boss and Comic Pastor results in their prioritisation of content that appeals to a broad audience, potentially sidelining minority or marginalised groups. Their shifting political allegiances—supporting both Chamisa and Mnangagwa—are consistent with the algorithms of social media platforms, which are designed to maximise user engagement and, consequently, profits. This dynamic often undermines the political integrity of their posts, favouring audience engagement over consistent political principles.

8.4.2 Authenticity Challenges

Activism can sometimes be undermined by paid activists who lack grassroots involvement and pursue social justice causes primarily for financial gain. For instance, Interviewee D in Chapter 6, section 6.4.1 describes these paid activists—individuals hired to post content online for a cause, not out of genuine belief in the cause itself, but rather to make a living. These individuals are employed by either individuals or political organisations to spread misleading or false information to influence public opinion on various social or political events. Their contributions to online discourse are typically negative, distorting the narrative in favour of a particular agenda.

In contrast, a true activist is typically motivated by a moral obligation to address injustice, with a commitment that goes beyond financial compensation. The presence of paid activists thus complicates the efforts of genuine activists in repressive environments like Zimbabwe, where the ZANU PF government views activists as enemies of the state. Intellectual activists such as Professor Lovemore Madhuku have been accused by the government of inciting unrest and protests, often dismissed as mercenaries seeking foreign funding from Western donors. The government perceives activists who receive external funding as serving the interests of imperialism, rather than advocating for authentic social justice causes. In response, the government has taken steps to curtail external financial support to activists, civil society organisations (CSOs), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through legislative measures such as the Non-Government Organisation Act and the amendment of the Private

Voluntary Organisations Act. These laws are designed to limit foreign funding of activism, which the government views as a destabilising influence on the country's politics.

8.5. Online Activism and Liberation

This section explores the influence of the Global North on activism in Zimbabwe, particularly the idea that digital platforms offer a potential avenue for the liberation of countries under authoritarian rule. It also examines activists' views on digital activism, which differ from the Western-centric perspectives commonly portrayed.

8.5.1 Influence of the West

Digital activists are perpetual colonial subjects of Northern Global corporates which own digital communication platforms. The reality of that status quo is termed data colonialism by Couldry, among other scholars (chapter 3, sub section 3.4.1 Digital activists as colonial subjects). Couldry and Scott criticize the way digital activists knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly surrender their data rights to Western corporates which own digital communication platforms. That relationship between Southern activists and Global conglomerates renders activists perpetual colonial subjects to the West. Despite the realities of data colonialism, activists view and critique the Zimbabwean activism, political and communication situation through Western critical lenses. That is even though communications patterns and political structures of Zimbabwe are totally different from those of Western democracies. Transplanting solutions that are relevant to Western democratic systems to the challenges bedeviling Zimbabwe apparently is proving to be futile.

Some members of the digital activism community view online platforms as playing a positive role in facilitating communication and mobilising support for social movements. This aligns with the literature on digital activism, such as Moyo's (2018) assertion that "Through social media, social movements in Zimbabwe have managed to open an online democratic space in terms of freedom of expression and association; important values of democracy" (Moyo, 2018, p. 141). From a cyber-optimist perspective, social media enables activists to counter government propaganda by disseminating information that exposes corruption and poor governance. Interview findings also suggest that some activists believe social media has the

potential to spur political transformation. For example, Interviewees B, D, and G in Chapter 7, section 7.1.2 highlighted examples of success in online media activism.

However, despite these optimistic views, mobilisation via social media has not led to substantial results. For instance, although prominent figures such as filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga have used their platforms to attract international attention, efforts to mobilise global pressure against the Zimbabwean government have been largely ineffective. The government's ability to neutralise offline threats through arrests and detentions has curtailed the influence of digital activism. The arrest of figures like Evan Mawarire and Tsitsi Dangarembga demonstrated the state's disregard for global public opinion and its capacity to maintain control through repressive measures.

In addition, the online efforts of pro-democracy movements are often disrupted by *Varakashi*, individuals who flood digital platforms with confusing or misleading messages. These individuals use social media to undermine the legitimacy of social movements by focusing on trivial issues, as evidenced by the manipulation of narratives surrounding MDC leadership after the death of Morgan Tsvangirai. This highlights the strategic use of online platforms by pro-government actors to dominate the digital public sphere and dilute the messages of pro-democracy activists.

Despite these challenges, activists continue to draw hope from the possibility of international intervention. Interviews indicated that some activists believe that online campaigns can attract attention from external actors, as seen when the South African government sent a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe in 2018 in response to the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter movement. However, such activism, which seeks international attention, is viewed by some as perpetuating colonial power structures, with activists accused of inviting Western intervention in the politics of the Global South. This raises ethical concerns, as activism should ideally aim to shift public opinion within the political system and rally support for local change. In the case of Zimbabwe, the focus should be on convincing the ZANU PF government to engage in democratic reforms and combat corruption, rather than relying on external powers to intervene.

The notion of slacktivism is also relevant in the context of Zimbabwe's digital activism. Interviewee I in Chapter 7, section 7.1. refers to slacktivism as a form of digital activism that is ineffective in achieving real political change. Merely engaging with online content, such as clicking 'like' or sharing posts, does not translate into tangible action in authoritarian contexts.

Moyo (2018) argues that digital activism in Zimbabwe has failed to produce meaningful results, particularly due to the military's role in quelling protests. The military's ability to suppress mobilisation through force during incidents such as the 1st of August 2018 riots demonstrate the limits of social media activism, which cannot replace organised political activity on the ground.

Some scholars critique the reliance on digital platforms for activism, suggesting that these platforms may be counterproductive. For instance, Hodzi and Zihnioglu (2024) present an argument that challenges cyber-optimism, highlighting the limitations and potential harms of online activism in an authoritarian political environment.

Hodzi and Zihnioglu state that

While mass revolutions birthed on social media contributed to the fall of long-standing authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, in sub-Saharan African countries such as Burundi, Cameroon and Zimbabwe social media activists have struggled to cross the abyss between cyber-activism and mass revolutions – raising concerns that these movements are networks of individuals rather than collective agents of social and political change (Hodzi and Zihnioglu, 2024, p. 44).

The observation suggests that social media platforms are utilised by activists for a variety of purposes, leading to fragmentation of voices and, consequently, diverse agendas. This fragmentation results in the inability of activists to speak with a unified voice, hindering their capacity to transition to offline action as a united front. Hodzi and Zihnioglu attribute the failure of online activism to successfully shift to physical activism to “constant fluidity, which, to a greater extent, is a symptom of the lack of organisational structure within internet-based movements” (Hodzi and Zihnioglu, 2024, p. 45). The authors identify several factors contributing to the failure of the #ThisFlag movement to transition offline, including the lack of proper leadership structures and ownership of the project, rendering it a movement based on clicktivism. For instance, they argue that #ThisFlag failed to resonate with the urban poor and rural constituencies in Zimbabwe. Hodzi and Zihnioglu also view online activists as elitist and dismissive of grassroots activists, stating, “Social media activists in Zimbabwe looked with disdain on conventional social movements, making it difficult for the old and the new to gel together in couching new counter-hegemonic narratives to construct counter-power so as to democratize the state and expand opportunities for citizens” (Hodzi and Zihnioglu, 2024, p.

55). Furthermore, Hodzi and Zihnioglu (2024) highlight the challenges associated with importing Western activism philosophies and technologies into the Zimbabwean context. Western approaches to protest and democratization are not easily applicable in Zimbabwe, as they ignore the vast differences in the underlying dynamics of activism. For example, the culture of digital activism conflicts with the traditions of grassroots, offline activism in Zimbabwe, resulting in a disharmonious interface. Reconciliation and coordination between these old and new forms of activism are thus difficult to achieve, impeding a concerted effort.

8.5.2 Alternative Forms of Activism

Two aspects of digital activism in Zimbabwe contradict the Western canon. The first of these is revealed through interview findings. Activism in Zimbabwe, according to these findings, is far broader than the politics of regime change. It extends beyond the narrow focus of Western perceptions of activism and encompasses everyday challenges such as child marriages (Interviewee B), data costs, examination fees (Interviewee D), and transport for women (Interviewee G), as discussed in Chapter 6, subsection 6.1.2. This broader perspective aligns with the causes behind protests such as the January 2019 unrest, which were driven by fuel price hikes and increased living costs (Mare, 2020). Consequently, activism in Zimbabwe is political in a wider sense, encompassing issues of everyday survival, not merely limited to regime change. Responses from interviewees indicate that activists do not strictly adhere to the Western textbook definition of activism. They conceptualise activism at the local or neighbourhood level, differing from the larger-scale challenges to authoritarianism, corruption, inequality, and austerity that are often emphasised in global social justice movements. Zimbabwean activists, therefore, view their actions as part of the broader struggle for children's rights, better transport, and affordable education, rather than solely focusing on regime change. This form of activism represents power in practice at the grassroots level. The interview responses suggest that digital activists in Zimbabwe are primarily concerned with everyday issues rather than regime change. The government's heavy-handed response and accusations that activists are pawns of the imperial West underscore the hypocrisy of a state unresponsive to the needs of its people. These activists are fighting for better living conditions for their families and communities, not playing at global power politics.

An alternative form of activism challenges the Western pro-democracy model, represented by the *Varakashi* pro-government activists. *Varakashi* can be seen as a form of digital activism that contrasts with the Western pro-democracy model. They diverge from the pro-West Civil

Society and advocacy-aligned forms of activism by supporting the government, which the opposition typically characterises as authoritarian. However, as identified by Interviewee H (Chapter 7, subsection 7.4.2), *Varakashi* are not independent of the West, due to the control of digital content by Western capitalists. The power to censor content deemed unacceptable by Western standards diminishes *Varakashi*'s influence. Interviewee H notes that they are forced to exercise self-censorship to avoid falling out of favour with the authorities of digital platforms. As a result, *Varakashi* cannot effectively counter Western-prescribed digital activism while remaining dependent on platforms owned and controlled by the West. Interviewee H further points out that pro-democracy activists unsuccessfully attempted to have *Varakashi* sanctioned on Twitter, illustrating that digital platform owners are not necessarily concerned with promoting democracy in authoritarian regimes. They are more interested in ensuring the consumption of their products, that is, the flow of communication and the generation of data, which can be captured and sold in the market. The political views of *Varakashi*, despite being perceived as anti-democratic by pro-democracy activists, do not alter the platforms' focus on maximising content production.

The *Varakashi* concept, promoted by ZANU PF, has effectively divided the younger generation along political lines. While the opposition also exploits the digital space for its own purposes, the ruling party's direct involvement in dirty tactics has aggravated the situation. Instead of fostering dialogue among youth for nation-building, political elites have sponsored youth to engage in digital confrontations, intensifying political polarisation. The *Varakashi* concept, therefore, continues to contribute to the divisive dynamics in Zimbabwe's digital public sphere. Social media platforms, rather than facilitating constructive engagement, serve as spaces for the youth to magnify their differences, with the ruling elites benefiting from the fragmentation and distraction that ensues.

8.6 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter I discussed the study's findings derived from three data collection methods: systematic literature review, analysis of online posts, and interviews with online activists. Access to the digital public sphere in Zimbabwe is minimal due to high data cost. Access to the digital public sphere is restricted directly through government deployment of legal instruments against oppositional voices online. Access is also restricted indirectly through surveillance of the digital communication space which leads activists to exercise caution. Fear and distrust characterize the digital public sphere. The digital communication space is disrupted

by the spread of misinformation. Activists from across the political divide are culpable for the misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Wide chasms exist within digital activism communities because anyone can post anything on any subject because online platforms thrive from maximum content production and sharing. Digital activism has produced mainstream politicians from across the cross section of the political spectrum.

Some activists abandon the pursuit for social justice after making names for themselves through digital activism, to pursue personal glory. Social media influencers also capitalize on digital political activism posturing to generate personal wealth. Digital platforms are neither liberatory nor tools for democratization due to data colonialism. Alternative activism is emerging in the mould of *Varakashi* and non-political activism.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I conclude my study by summarising the research findings and reflecting on the methods employed in data collection and analysis. The overarching goal of the study was to critically examine the role of digital media as a tool for democratising political change in Zimbabwe, set against a backdrop of historical struggle, increasing digital penetration, robust engagement, and an evolving, technologically advanced repressive apparatus. The study addressed three primary objectives: (i) to understand how activists perceive the exclusionary and/or repressive potential of digital media; (ii) to explore how they view the relationship between online activism and political action; and (iii) to investigate forms of digital activism that challenge the Western canon. This chapter synthesises these findings and offers recommendations for future research on this topic, while also clarifying the contribution made to the field.

9.2 Reflections on the Process

Prior to conducting the study, my expectations were shaped by the theoretical perspectives and success stories of social media activism, particularly from the MENA region and Western movements such as Occupy and Blackberry. I entered the study with the assumption that social media activism was the solution to opening the democratic space in Zimbabwe. However, after engaging in interviews and analysing academic literature, my perspective was significantly altered. Initially, I assumed that activists were uniformly anti-government and pro-West, yet I was surprised to encounter participants whose analyses were pragmatic and largely free from political biases. These individuals demonstrated that there are, indeed, genuine activists whose primary goal is to improve the well-being of their communities, rather than adhering to a partisan agenda. This led me to realise that the term 'activist' cannot be narrowly defined as either pro-democracy or anti-government, as activists often display non-partisanship, driven solely by the desire for societal change.

I encountered responses from digital activists, who criticised 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism.' I had anticipated they would defend their own brand of digital activism, yet many highlighted its futility. An analysis of activist posts across three digital platforms revealed a much deeper level of political polarization than I had anticipated, with such polarization evident both online and

offline. The toxic nature of the exchanges protagonists from the digital activism community exposed a highly polarized political communication environment. I found that some academics, having fled persecution under the ZANU PF regime, or others still residing in Zimbabwe and subject to its political and economic hardships, write not merely as scholars but as activists themselves. As such, their works reflect deeply personal perspectives that are difficult to divorce from the political reality they endure.

9.3 Recommendations

For future research, I recommend further exploration of the relationship between policy implementation and online oppression. Future researchers could do systematic investigation of policies and understand in what sense the policies are vague and how they are being applied, how they are perceived and the aura of uncertainty characterizing them. The methods to use would be document analyses and multiple case studies of high-profile cases.

I recommend future researchers to carry out a decolonial analysis of the *Varakashi* phenomenon to establish the links of what happens when a liberation movement becomes a party/government, and how the party employs guerrilla tactics to run government or a country.

For future research, I recommend study focusing on female activism and patriarchal attitudes within the online activism movement. The studies could establish the role of women within online activism in Zimbabwe. The methods to employ could be using the three methods of systematic literature review, online content analysis and interviews with female online activists to understand their perspective of gender inequalities and gender oppression within the online activism movement.

I recommend that future researchers investigate the plight of those who are digitally excluded such as old people, rural farming communities to establish how they understand online activism. They obviously know about the online space, for example the existence of social media platforms such as Facebook, etc. the studies would seek to establish what they know about it and how they feel about it. The studies would employ in-depth interviews.

Future researchers could carry out study deliberately comparing Zimbabweans in the diaspora and Zimbabweans living in Zimbabwe to see how the material physical context of living under an authoritarian regime affects people's perception of the potential of digital and social media activism. Researchers could employ interviews.

Future researchers could do a context analysis of online activism WhatsApp chats.

Future researchers could do a cyber ethnographic study of online activists in Zimbabwe through participant observation.

9.4 Key Findings

The research involved a systematic review of literature on digital activism in the post-Mugabe era, analysis of online content posted by digital activists on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and interviews with youth digital activists residing in Zimbabwe. This qualitative study sought to explore the perceptions of youth digital activists regarding the role of digital communication platforms in facilitating political change in Zimbabwe. These youth are operating within a state increasingly adept at managing opposition voices through heightened surveillance and monitoring of digital spaces.

Through this study, I also sought to establish how home-based digital activists perceive the relationship between online and offline activism. The gap this study aimed to address was to capture the views of digital activists' realities of existing and operating in an environment characterized by increasing repression by an authoritarian government. I sought to establish voices of home grown and home-based activists who do not have the advantage of being cushioned against the authoritarian government by distance like the diaspora based digital activists.

Exploration of forms of activism beyond the Western model. Existing literature suggests that digital platforms play a significant role in the democratization of the Zimbabwean political landscape. However, the study's findings revealed that activists view social media platforms as a means to open up democratic spaces, allowing marginalized communities to communicate and bypass the state's control over mainstream print and broadcast media. Furthermore, the findings revealed that digital activists use social media platforms to drive positive social change in their communities, not only for activism aimed at regime change.

9.4.1 How do activists make sense of the exclusionary and/or repressive potential of digital media?

Activists largely believe that the digital communication space offers opportunities for the execution of the activism mandate. Some activists expressed the opinion that social media

platforms are easily accessible, contributing positively to the democratization of the political space. These activists argue that the accessibility of digital media allows communities marginalised by mainstream media to find a voice. However, other activists acknowledge that certain communities, particularly those in rural areas and the urban poor, face significant barriers to internet access and, consequently, to participating in the digital communication space. These perspectives align with systematic literature reviewed for this study, including works by Moyo (2020), Chitanana (2019), Dendere (2019), and Mare (2020).

Regarding the repressive potential of digital media, activists highlight the detrimental effects of state surveillance and repressive legislation on the digital public sphere. However, an analysis of online content suggests that activists and other users of digital platforms do, in fact, express themselves freely on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X). The tone and content of some posts, including those targeting prominent ZANU PF and government officials, suggest a degree of freedom of speech online. The findings indicate that while some perceive the digital space as unsafe, reflected in studies by scholars such as Stevens, Fussey, Murray, Hove, and Saki (2023), activists cannot provide examples of them being direct victims of the surveillance and brutality they talked about.

9.4.2 How do activists perceive the relationship between online activism and political action?

Activists generally perceive online activism as safer than offline activism, due to the anonymity provided by social media accounts. Some activists noted that offline activism, such as protests, often result in violent repression by the police, who use weapons such as water cannons, rubber bullets, or baton sticks to disperse crowds. This view is supported by the systematic literature review, which includes findings by Nyoka and Tembo (2022) on the challenges faced by activists in transferring online influence to offline mobilisation efforts. These findings revealed that activists are often arrested and imprisoned for organising demonstrations, which serves to neutralise the impact of such protests.

Nevertheless, some individuals have successfully transitioned from influential online activists to political figures. For example, although Pastor Evan Mawarire, initially involved in the #ThisFlag movement, contested for political office as an independent candidate and failed, others, such as Fadzayi Mahere, Takudzwa Ngadziore and Tafadzwa Mugwadi, were successful. Mahere, who was once part of Mawarire's movement, joined a political party,

contested, and won a parliamentary seat. Ngadziore evolved from a student activist to a parliamentarian. Similarly, Mugwadi, a former member of the Varakashu cyber troops, ascended to become a ZANU PF legislator. These examples demonstrate a connection between online activism and political action.

9.4.3. Which forms of digital activism challenge the Western canon?

The study findings reveal that activism in Zimbabwe is multifaceted, which contrasts with the view in the literature that suggests social media platforms are primarily used either to promote democratization or to defend the ZANU PF government narrative. Interviewees highlighted that some activists align with Western notions of liberal democracy, viewing digital communication technologies as key to democratizing the political sphere. Others occupy a middle ground, focusing on social justice issues such as the protection of children and women's rights, environmental protection, or providing affordable transport for vulnerable communities. These activists can be seen as passively protesting the government's failure to fulfil its responsibilities.

On the extreme end of the spectrum are government-sponsored cyber troops, who defend the ZANU PF government narrative. However, through the study I also found that the type of activism pursued is often influenced by the sponsors behind the various activist groups. These sponsors, with their own agendas, shape the direction and nature of the activism being carried out. Thus, the activism observed is not solely grassroots, but rather shaped by the interests of external funders.

This study contributes to the understanding of digital activism in Zimbabwe by illustrating the complex relationship between digital media, activism, and political change in the country. The findings offer a nuanced perspective that challenges simplistic dichotomies and highlights the multifaceted nature of digital activism in the Zimbabwean context.

One of my key findings is that a characteristic of the Zimbabwean authoritarianism is backed up by legislation. There therefore is legal backing for arbitrary decisions for dictatorial tendencies for digital and online oppression. Digital/online oppression is aligned with legislation.

Another one of the key findings from my study is that the government intentionally employs vague legislation to govern the online communication space. The legislation is intentionally vague so that it can be applied at the government's discretion. The vague legislation therefore serves the government well.

My main contribution is to provide a multi-theory and multi-method description of online activism under authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe. Some of the theories are new to me and I have not yet mastered them fully. I therefore could have done a more thorough in-depth analysis of my subject.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

Interview questions

1. May you please tell me about how you became an online activist?
2. What have you benefitted from being an online activist so far?
3. What changes have you influenced as a result of such?
4. How fulfilling is online activism at a personal level and to your community in the prevailing situation in the country?
5. Are there any support structures for online activists in Zimbabwe and in what form do the support come?
6. Is there any coordination with other activists or yours is solo effort?
7. How has been your experience with the police and other state agencies from your activism?
8. May you outline the dangers associated with online activism in Zimbabwe?
9. Is there any intervention on behalf of activists in the event of crack down on activists by state agents?
10. How does the community of online activists survive in the Zimbabwean political environment?
11. Activism has come in all forms and from all quarters: civil, church and political organizations but there are no substantial changes in the socio, political and economic fortunes of the country. How does online activism differ from other forms of activism experienced in Zimbabwe before?
12. Why continue with activism and what exactly is the way forward?
13. Where do you see online activism in Zimbabwe in the next 10 years?

Appendix B: Interview schedule

- a) Interviews will be conducted every Thursday afternoon, or any other day and time that individual participants will be free and comfortable with.

Focus area	Examples of questions and probes
Study and participant introduction	- What do you understand the study to be about? - In your own words, can you describe the relationship you have with this research?
History of activism	- Tell me a little about the nature of your online activism. - At the moment, what are your main objectives as an online activist? - Who provides you with resources to enable you to be active online? - Who provides you with security against the government?
Nature of activism of civil society group	- Tell me about how you became an online activist. - What have you benefitted from being an online activist? - What positive change have you brought to society since you became an online activist? - How has the government reacted to your posts since you started posting? - How safe is it to be an online activist in Zimbabwe?
Future of activism for the group	- What plans do you have for the future as an online activist?
Perceptions of current and past online activism in Zimbabwe	- How did the government react to online activism in the past? - How are online activists treated by the government in the present? - How does society react to online activism now?

Appendix C: Petitions

RELEASE MPS JOB SIKHALA AND GODFREY SITHOLE, AND 14 OTHERS FROM NYATSIME FROM DETENTION



Started
13 September 2022
Petition to
President of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa

Why this petition matters

Started by [Tsitsi Dangarembga](#)

Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole and twelve other residents of Nyatsime, Zimbabwe, have been detained by the Zimbabwean government for months without trial and without bail. Two more residents were detained later.

A petition has been made to His Excellency the President of Zimbabwe on 9 September 2022 to stop the unlawful detention of Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole without bail and without trial, and also more broadly to ensure that the judiciary is not used as a political weapon in which differential treatment is given to those apprehended by the state depending on real or perceived political affiliations and intentions, but that the law is empowered to take its proper course professionally, fairly and without favour so that justice and the rule of law are upheld in Zimbabwe in accordance with the Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013.

We, the originators of the petition Dr Ibbo Mandaza - Tony Reeler, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Musa Kika, Phillan Zamchiya, Dr Frances Lovemore and Briggs Bomba, - ask all Zimbabweans and defenders of democracy in the world to sign this petition, which was delivered to the President of Zimbabwe along with the first signatories, in order to stop the illegal incarceration of Job Sikhala and his companions, to put an end to the unjust use of the judiciary as a political weapon and to promote the rule of law and democracy in Zimbabwe. Here is the petition, below. Detained Job Sikhala and Gordon Sithole along with 14 others need you to sign this petition, too.

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned, are citizens and persons who care about Zimbabwe.

We petition Your Excellency to bring to your consideration, a most unusual situation obtaining in the arrest and detention of MPs Honourable Job Sikhala and Honourable Godfrey Sithole, and 14 residents of Nyatsime, Chitungwiza following the violence of 14 June 2022 in Nyatsime. Our duty to Zimbabwe constrains us from maintaining silence.

The multiple denials of bail these two have endured, multiple times in the Magistrates Court and multiple times in the High Court, makes for an unusual and unprecedented situation. We cannot think of any prosecution in recent times where one has been denied bail for such numerous times, for offences of inciting public violence and obstruction of justice, which Honourable Sikhala is charged with, and inciting public violence, which Honourable Godfrey

Sithole is charged with. MPs Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole have now spent 85 days in pre-trial incarceration at Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison.

When this is juxtaposed to the timely and little-resisted granting of bail to high profile politically exposed persons accused of serious corruption, and they being flight risks, questions about the equal treatment of persons before the courts arise. There appear to be targeted differential treatment of those arrested and detained for charges emanating from political circumstances.

During their incarceration, Honourable Sikhala and Honourable Sithole have been subjected to leg irons; their lawyers have in some instances been denied access – in once instance prompting a court application; and other concerned individuals have been prevented from visiting them. Honourable Sikhala's health has deteriorated.

While we all noted the political violence that occurred in Nyastime, it is curious that arrest and detention was targeted at members and perceived supporters of the political opposition. No one associated with any other formation was arrested. Among the 14 residents currently in detention are victims of arson who were arrested upon presenting themselves to a police station to report the arson.

In the case of Honourable Sikhala, he has been arrested over 60 times, and has never been convicted. He has no record of escaping justice. To then deny him bail on the basis that he has the propensity to offend the law, is curious. This is in spite of the Constitution providing for bail as a right only to be denied in exceptional circumstances.

When the actors in the justice system appear to act in ways wholly contrary to their sworn duty and oath to uphold and implement the law without fear or favour, inferences of external hands in work of the judiciary are bound to arise.

The offences that Honourable Sikhala, Honourable Sithole and the 14 residents of Nyastime are facing, have not had this kind of treatment visited upon anyone charged of them in recent times. This treatment, we are aware, was commonplace during the times of the liberation struggle. In those days, such kind of arrests and detentions were known to be political, and many including those currently in public office, suffered those and are well aware of their evils. An observer witnessing these developments cannot help but draw parallels. Our belief is that law must maintain its supremacy and moral high ground above politics.

The injustice is too visible to ignore, and we would be unfaithful in our devotion to the country if we remain silent.

The law must have moral content, and its enforcement must have humanity. The Constitution of Zimbabwe is moral in both substance and process. The enforcement thereof is robbing the law and legal process that gives it authority, respect, recognition and supremacy. Judicial authority itself derives from the people, per section 162 of the Constitution.

Your High Office is charged with the sacrosanct duty per section 90 of the Constitution to ensure that the Constitution and all other laws are faithfully observed, in particular, to ensure protection of the fundamental human rights and freedoms and the rule of law. Of the many rights, liberty and human freedom is a cornerstone right, a right that many Zimbabweans so reverently and fervently fought for.

The unusual trajectory that these cases have taken cannot be ignored. These cases, in our view, warrant an inquiry into how the justice system has come to this. The consequences of ignoring this will be too dire for Zimbabwe's young democracy to bear.

The criminal justice system was never created as a platform to silence or punish political dissent or holding of divergent views. When that happens, as is happening to Honourable Sikhala, Honourable Sithole and the 14 residents of Nyatsime, it erodes the value and essence of the criminal justice system and diminishes public confidence and trust in the justice system. That should not be allowed to happen. Where the criminal justice system is weaponized against dissent, there are no victors. The justice system, the accused and the generality of Zimbabweans derive no benefit from this. Should there be cause, by all means the law must take its course. But doing so without cause erodes confidence in the justice system.

We expect a resolution to this abuse of law and process.

Signed:

Ibbo Mandaza
Tony Reeler
Simba Makoni
Tsitsi Dangarembwa

Frances Lovemore
Philani Zamchiya
Dzikamai Bere
Briggs Bomba
Musa Kika
Adebayo Olukoshi (Nigeria)
Ahmed Rajab (Global Pan African Movement)
Alexander Rusero
Ambassador Bruce Wharton (USA)
Ambassador Michelle Gavin (USA)
Ambassador William Bellamy (USA)
Anastacia Lynne Mudonhi
Arthur Mutambara
Auxilia Kwirirai
Baroness Chalker
Baroness Hoey of Lylehill and Rathlin
Batsirai Jambwa
Brian Kagoro
Brian Makwarara
Brian Raftoupoulos
Briggs Bomba
Brooks Marmon (USA)
Bruce Grobbelaar
Byron Black
Caleb Dengu
Charles Ngwerume
Cheryl Grills (Global Pan African Movement)
Chipso Chung
Chirikure Chirikure
Chिताuro Shambamuto
Chofamba Sithole
Dan Ngwenya
Daves Guzha
David J Mpofu
David Johnson (Caribbean)
Dominic Benhura
Dudu Manhenga
Dzingai Mutumbuka

Eldred Masunungure
Elinor Sisulu
Emily Renard (USA)
Frances Lovemore
Gamu Murerwa
Geoff Nyarota
Gerrard Marshall
Gladys Kudzaishe Hlatywayo
Global Governance Africa: Chris Maroleng (SA)
Gorden Moyo
Grace Dembetembe
Hasu Patel
Helge Rønning (Norway)
Henry Olonga
Hope Masike
Hopewell Chingono
Ibbo Mandaza
Jackie Nelson
Jameson Timba
Jestina Mukoko
Jethro Mpofu
Judith Todd
Justice Ebrahim
Kenneth Mufuka
Kubi Chaza-Indi
Leslie Chironga
Lord Alton of Liverpool
Lord Hayward
Lord McNally
Lord Oates
Lord Purvis of Tweed
Lord St John of Bletso
Luke Tamborinyoka
Lysias Sibanda
Mandivavarira Taruvinga
Marcia Cannon
Marcyline Mubika Cannon
Margaret Dongo

Maud Blair
Maureen Kademaunga
Mavis Jackson Antoine
Max Jamela
Mbita Chitala
Mudiwa Mundawarara
Musa Kika
Mutumwa Mawere
Namatai Kwekweza
Nancy Mini
Napoleon Abdulai (Global Pan African Movement)
Naran Kala
Neo Simutanyi
Nick Chouhan
Nick Price
Nicole Wilett (USA)
Nivard Vaz
Norman Nyazema
Onalena Selolwan (Botswana)
Owen Sichone (Zambia)
Pastor Brian Nyamadzawo
Patricia Rodney (Caribbean)
Pedzisai Ruhanya
Peter Ndoro
Pfefferere Mudambo
Philian Zamchiya
Priscilla Ann D'Almeida
Prof. George Chovuchovu (SA)
Raymond Suttner (SA)
Rejoice Ngwenya
Rene Mushayahama
Reward Mushayabasa
Richard Goss
Ross Harvey (SA)
Ruth Ndoro-Slade
Sam Shakong (SA)
Shingirai Mushawedu
Shonhe Toendepi

Simba Chikanza
Simba Makoni
Simblisios Chihambakwe
Sir Peter Bottomley MP
Solomon Guramatunhu
Sophie Mokoena (SA)
Strive Masiyiwa
Sybeth Musengezi
Tapiwa Maswela
Tatenda Taibu
Tendai Dumbutshena
Tendai Mbofana
Tendayi Mundawarara
Teresa Beyns
The Earl of Sandwich
Themba Dhlodhlo
Themba Ndebele
Thomas Mapfumo
Todd Moss (USA)
Tony Reeler
Trevor Ncube
Tsitsi Dangarembga
William Nyemba
Yemi Katerere
Yvonne Maponga
Zandile Hodgson

Signatures: 62,244Next Goal: 75,000

62,244

75,000

Signatures

Next Goal

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Peterborough, PE1

United Kingdom

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Appendix D: A Call For Political Settlement in Zimbabwe!



Started
31 August 2023
Petition to
SADC (Organ on Politics, Defence and Security)

Why this petition matters

Started by [Tony Reeler & Ibbo Mandaza](#)

Once again a **Zimbabwean election fails the test of credibility**. However, the **2023 Harmonised Elections** have failed the test so comprehensively that even the reputable regional and international observers are for once in agreement that this election has

failed. The main opposition and many civil society organisations have **condemned the election, as have many ordinary citizens.**

The only response can be to declare the elections null and void, but then what should be done?

By any measure the Zimbabwean government since 2017 has shown no ability to reform, either politically or economically, and to create the conditions that could lead to an election that is free, fair, and credible. **The coup in 2017 did not usher in a new dispensation but a continuation of the kind of governance that has led to the 2023 result.**

There **needs to be new way to resolve the crisis** that this election has now deepened further, and not in the way that the crisis of 2008 was managed.

The way forward must be bold and innovative, recalling the manner in which the Rhodesian crisis was dealt with. This must require the following:

- o The **establishment of an Eminent Persons Group**, tasked with negotiating the establishment of a Transitional Government, composed of political parties and other major citizen groupings.
- o The **negotiations must be broad-based**, including political parties, civil society, churches, labour, women, and other citizen groupings.

The Transitional Government should set up with a clear and specific set of reforms that must be achieved, which should include:

- o The **resolution of the coup and the amendment to the Constitution allowing untrammelled military interference in civilian affairs.**
- o Full **adherence to constitutionalism, the rule of law, and human rights.**
- o The **reform of critical state institutions.**
- o The **stabilising of the economy, with a pro-poor emphasis.**
- o The **establishment of a sovereign fund** to ensure the country benefits from Zimbabwe's bountiful resources.
- o **Complete overhaul of all the election machinery and legislation** to ensure that the election that follows the period of the

Transitional Government will lead to an election that meets regional and international standards.

This is the only way forward to resolve the crisis, and we call on **ALL Zimbabweans, in the country and in the diaspora to support this petition, and we call on SADC - through the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security - the AU, and the international community to support and scaffold this.**

Ibbo Mandaza & Tony Reeler

Appendix E: Free Job Sikhala



Started
13 March 2023

Why this petition matters

Started by [John Burke](#)

Summary: This petition is by the Zimbabweans Citizens in the Diaspora pleading with the *International Community* to stop the Zimbabwe government from systematically conducting gross violations of human rights against members of the opposition party and in this particular case *Job Sikhala who was arrested on 14th June 2022*.

Job Sikhala is a Member of Parliament, Vice Chairperson of the opposition party Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) in Zimbabwe, a lawyer and a family man who has been unlawfully incarcerated in Chikurubi maximum prison for the past nine months without trial. HE IS STILL THERE!

This is gross violation of a citizen's human rights perpetrated by the government because of his choice to affiliate with a political party of his choice and conducting his professional duties of representing victims of political violence.

This action by the government of Zimbabwe constitutes violation of the Zimbabwean Constitution and the International Convention on Human Rights, therefore we petition the British government to find ways to stop this kind of brutality by a government upon its own citizens.

In the United Kingdom the Manchester Branch of CCC has initiated a Petition to the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak at 10 Downing Street. [This is imminent for the 16th March 2023.](#)

Petition Delivery
2:00pm 16th March 2023*
10 Downing Street
Free Job Sikhala from Jail



model.p@ccc-diaspora.com and thomas.m@ccc-diaspora.com
SUPPORTED BY THE ZIMBABWE DIASPORA

** Provisional Time and Date:*
awaiting confirmation from Downing Street Liaison Team.
Meet at 12:00 noon at Zimbabwe Embassy, London



<https://ccc-diaspora.com> and <https://zhro.org.uk>

In addition, from the House of Lords, [Lord Jonathan Oates](#) [Co-Chair of "The All Party Parliamentary Group for ZIMBABWE"] is organising an event at Parliament for the **300 days in {illegal} detention of Job Sikhala**. This will occur on the 10th April 2023, however there is a Parliamentary Holiday at this time, so a *Provisional Demo on 17th April 2023 is proposed at this time {subject to confirmation}*

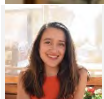
**Appendix F: DEMAND FOR FRESH ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE BY JUNE 2024-
SUPERVISED AND MONITORED BY UN**



Started
13 February 2024
Petition to
[United Nations](#) and [4 others](#)

Top supporter voices





Sign and share why you care!

Why this petition matters



Started by [ZVARINGENI SAMUEL CHASI](#)

RE: DEMAND FOR FRESH ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE BY JUNE 2024 - SUPERVISED AND MONITORED BY UNITED NATIONS

Harmonized Elections conducted 23 August 2023 in Zimbabwe are not in accordance with Electoral Act or Constitution of Zimbabwe. Furthermore, Standards to Principles and Guidelines Governing to Democratic Elections from SADC, AU and UN which Zimbabwe is a full member state were not adhered.

Representative and Reflective to the will of 16 mil Zimbabweans, 1 Petition and Demand Free and Fair Elections be held in Zimbabwe by June 2024 , supervised and monitored by the United Nations with extra-ordinary session nullification of 23-24 August 2023 Fraudulent Elections. 4.5 mil Zimbabweans are refugees worldwide with 2mil in SADC states over gross violations to -International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Main Opposition was infiltrated to recall legislators and split the party in a matrix to frustrate and create vacuum for talks and potential GNU with ZanuPf currently on internal splits to 'impeach' their leader in theatrical succession. Electoral Commission is conducting numerous

By- Elections, which is now fortnightly business in autocracy by ZanuPf to Maintain 2/3 Majority from 2023 Illegitimate elections.

ZanuPf Regime reigns with terror from Land Invasions, Company Seizures, Money Laundering by Central Bank, Electoral Fraud, Operation Murambatsvina, Coup d'état 2017 Operation Restore Legacy, 2018 Military Shootings are accumulative to 2008 human butchering's, lest we forget 20000 plus victims from 1987 Gukurahundi with additional mass graves uncovered and daily assassinations, incarcerations, abductions, tortures and arson. 95% of Population is in a 2.6 % fatality rate of 12000 plus case with over 300 deaths - undergoing Electricity and Water Shedding 24-96hrs in a Cholera Outbreak -not limited to Hospitals, Prisons, Morgues, Schools, Courts, Industry, etc.

Gross Human Rights Violations in Zimbabwe undermine the fundamental principles of democracy with Law enforcement agencies adopting an unsettling approach to crackdown on opposition with denial on rights of freedom to association, peaceful and expression. Article 20 of the African Union Charter on Human and People's Rights states that colonized or oppressed people shall have the right to free themselves from the bonds of domination by resorting to any means recognized by international law.

ELECTORAL REFORMS

Reference is given to formal submission made on Electoral Reforms and decision to Boycott the 23 August 2023 Harmonized. Arms of State are captured by ZanuPf which has passed draconian laws against democracy to revamp 2013 Constitution by Referendum. Legislation has without shame, received hefty packages to overnight constitution amendments and Bills without inclusivity of Citizens - from Patriotic Act, Cyber Act, Electoral Act, Law and Order.

Key Reforms to 2023 Elections and 2024 Fresh Elections are Disbandment of Polls from Presidential, Parliament, Council with Abolishment to Senate without compromise to principles of transparency, accessibility and legal certainty. Rights of Assembly, Association, Expression are infringed to orchestration of gross human rights violations.

VOTER REGISTRATION

ZanuPf Regime channels resources to electoral fraud with unconstitutional deployment of state personnel to circumvent the process and rules guiding to democratic elections on winner grabs all harmonized election. Biometric Voter registration introduced 2017 was anti-rigging

measure to curb cases of deceased voters, ballot stuffing, multiple voting, alien and unregistered voters from hazardous manual voters register of 1980.

Data Entry captured by ZEC was shared to ZanuPf to target citizens against their rights to privacy and political affiliation. Protocol to registration in rural areas was based to ZanuPf affiliation with Forever Associates of Zimbabwe – Arm of the state mobilizing citizens with ZanuPf Identity Cards on a polling station-based system while opposition members were turned away on fictitious insufficient documents not satisfactory to captured commission.

CIVIC AND VOTER EDUCATION

Electorate was not conscientized to understand their rights, roles and obligations in the electoral process with reverse arms on 23 – 24 August 2023 to militarized 24hr delayed voting, lack and shortages of voting material, disfigured ballot papers not matching candidates or party symbols, missing names on voters roll and systematic shift of such to unknown boundaries. Zimbabwe Electoral Commission conduct to supervision, accreditation to voter education service providers was neither transparent nor in accordance to Section 239 of the Constitution.

NOMINATION COURT

ZanuPf Regime merged with Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), a group of parties from 2018 Disputed Elections in Elimination Tactic to Introduce Exorbitant Nomination Fees prior to 2023 Elections.

There was no fair representation to women, youth and persons with disabilities but rather monopoly to retired citizens incorporated mostly from ZanuPf and Ceremonial Senate introduced to derail direct impeachments to Head of State.

Opposition Candidates were disqualified on purpose by the Electoral Commission to aide ZanuPf maintain 2/3 Majority in Parliament with By -Elections as aftermath. Captured judiciary assured the court processes will not overturn judgement to such candidates contesting from Presidential, Parliament and Council with nomination fees being none-refundable to none participants.

DELIMITATION

Final Delimitation and Voters Roll were not issued to with repercussions of bogus polling stations and voters roll, leading to vote rigging and ballot stuffing. Delimitation Exercise was initiated and conducted by Zanu pf not ZEC to alignment of its support base with neutralization to opposition strongholds

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT AND VOTING PROCEDURE

ZanuPf used coercion, force and intimidation to capture polling stations in calculated move to manipulate the voting process with specific candidates assured victory out of reach of observers. Polling Agents drawn from opposition and independent candidates were in tragedy ousted from polling stations alongside Chief Election Agents being abducted before, during and after elections to rectification of manipulated results from V11s and V23s Forms.

Rural Areas face night parades and roll calls in sequence of voting which were used on 23-24 August 2023 with Electorate under intimidation to absenteeism with instructions on reporting to Joint Operations Command deployed personnel 100m from Polling stations nationwide, in addition to irregularities on forced Voter Assistance to aided literate voters alongside PW ds with no democratic right to choose their preferred candidates.

Opposition Activists died in action, while others incarcerated with state enforcing curfews during overnight voting of 23-24 August 2023 while Postal Voting was supervised by Joint Operations Command and conducted twice with initial stage as mock exercise on atmosphere within the system, in both instances without supervision from polling agents or observers.

Online Systems to Voter verification were not accessible on 23-24 August 2023 with electorate advised their names not in given provinces, constituencies and polling stations whilst ZanuPf Bused electorate with a fixed voter's roll displayed outside of supposedly voters from unknown origins with under siege citizens being arrested for no apparent reason.

There was No Declaration to Quantity of Printed Ballot Papers inclusive of serials and security features in a rigging mechanism without a voters roll to stakeholders in time.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Constitution and Guidelines to Principles Governing of Democratic Elections including protocols on Gender by SADC, AU and UN not adhered. Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has mandatory obligation to managing, supervising, collation and announcement of election results in a transparent and non-partisan manner to which the current ZEC Board of

Commissioners comprises immediate relatives of High Ranked ZanuPf Officials with same Board Chaired by the Defence Forces Commissioner.

Electoral Commission lacked Independence with Temporary Staff recruited being Presiding Officers from Joint Operations Command including trained teachers, nurses assumed to be civilians with court martial consequences to divulge such operations. Guidelines and Protocols to democratic Elections were not followed with direct breach of the constitution by ZEC in all instances. ZanuPf fielded current serving ZEC Commissioners and Ex-Officio on 23-24 August 2023 Elections in several constituencies as their candidates from Local Authority, Parliament, Senate, etc. Plagiarism was done to 2018 harmonized elections results, with inflating of figures on minority contenders

OBSERVER MISSIONS

ZanuPf publicly threatened H.E Dr Nevers Mumba, Chairperson of SADC Electoral Observer Mission on their independent reports towards the fraudulent 23-24 August 2023 Elections among other observers with 39 Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network Staff Incarcerated and their materials confiscated during raid by the Joint Operations Command.⁶² Observer Missions from 30 countries deployed conclusively report elections, were in breach of Constitution of Zimbabwe and Electoral Act and were not made in accordance with regional or international standards. Random 201 Polling Stations were at least covered from potential 10970*, with Final Delimitation and Voter Roll not declared. The state constantly interfered with independent observers to avoid exposure of actual narrative. The stakeholders were not prepared to hold credible elections without electoral reforms.

CONCLUSION

United Nations Security Council must hold virtual extra -ordinary session and nullify the events of 23-24 August 2023 Fraudulent Elections, in uniformity with Southern African Development Community and African Union.

Evidence and Reports point out to widespread irregularities in the lead-up to and on election day, including voter suppression and manipulation of results, number of candidates disqualified and withdrawing from the race.

Dialogue does not work in Zimbabwe, all processes in preparatory of Fresh Elections must be conducted outside of Zimbabwe as the case of 1979 Lancaster House Agreements, for a neutral and free environment without victimization. Citizens shall not be drawn to battle lines

of theatricality and deception of ZanuPf succession rivalry for any potential GNUs or Transitions.

The political crisis must be resolved with urgency and without partiality, its millions of lives at stake we talking about with bottled citizens on promenade. Zimbabwe is undergoing economic meltdown with majority of citizens being exploited by the regime. We taking democratic routes in the quest for our freedoms as peaceful citizens. We Demand for Free and Fair elections into be Held in Zimbabwe by June 2024 and totally reject the outcome of results which were announced by Zimbabwe Electoral Commission.

I am fighting the oppressive system to be crushed and do not care if I will be part of the top echelon or not

Sincerely

Zvaringeni Samuel Chasi

Republic of Zimbabwe

Appendix G: Interviewee findings

Interviewee A: 29-year-old male

On the dangers associated with online activism in Zimbabwe, the respondent said that political activism is not that easy in Zimbabwe chiefly because the ZANU PF government does not want to listen to different views and it does not want its modus operandi questioned or challenged

On the realities of the dangers of arbitrary arrests, the activist said that the government of Zimbabwe is targeting government critics. If you happen to mobilize the people against the government using social media, you get arrested and spend several weeks without trial.

On abduction and victimization, he explained that Government spies track all people who speak against the government. They monitor all the movements, location, the message, people that interact with the activists, motivation behind the activism, the gadgets being used to disseminate information and places of residence. This makes it easier for them to abduct or threaten activists.

The activist said that, in order to legalize the victimization of activists, all those who speak out against the government are labeled terrorists. The government of Zimbabwe is quick to label online activists terrorists. When activism is equated to terrorism, it means anything can happen to the activists. There are stories of people who are alleged to have been kidnapped, tortured or murdered simply for being activists who dared to challenge the government of Zimbabwe.

He also explained on his experiences saying that cyber bullying is also another danger associated with online activism in Zimbabwe whereby people with ghost accounts will troll online activists in an attempt to halt their efforts.

Interviewee B: 31-year-old male

The activist said he understands online activism as entailing agitating or pushing for issues affecting a particular community or group in society via online means such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. In Zimbabwe, activists have been given an opportunity to air their grievances to the authorities because the media space has always been restricted through censorship and tight control by the state.

The rise of 4th generation online media has created problems for online activists because it is now much easier for the state to track down activists. The gadgets used by activists are susceptible to hacking so it is easier for to follow up on their activities, who they communicate with and what they post. Many activists have been threatened with violence online and the activists end up exercising self censorship. Activists are now more in danger because tracking them down is much easier.

Online activism is making it possible for people who previously did not have an opportunity to speak out to voice out their concerns. It also allows those who used to be scared to speak out against the state to do so. It also allows people outside Zimbabwe to communicate about issues

happening in the country to those inside and outside the country. However, online activism can be limited to clicktivism whereby people just make noise online and the noise does not translate to physical street demonstration action. On the other hand, it allows for the mobilization of numbers for protests.

There are successes of note from online activism. The activist cited the example of online protests against a Johane Marange old man who married off his 14-year-old daughter to another old man. Activists made a lot of noise about the issue and the police ended up intervening and rescued the child. The United Nations office in Harare also released a statement condemning the child marriage custom. The activist also cited another example of the #zimbabwelivesmatter which led to the government of South Africa sending a delegation on a fact finding mission on the allegations of ill-treatment of citizens by the government of Zimbabwe. He said as Zimbabwean activists, they were inspired by the events and results of the protests in Eswatini against the monarch there. He however said at the moment, online activism is not evidently translating to street protest in Zimbabwe. He said that the positive outcome is that voices that used to be silent and salient are now speaking out and are getting heard.

Online activists should speak with one voice. At the present moment, online activists have not reached that stage of communicating a message that speaks to the ordinary man in the street. Another issue is that of the high cost of data which prohibits the majority of citizens from accessing the Internet and therefore the messages communicated online do not reach the greater majority of the citizenry. Online activists therefore need to speak with one voice, lobbying for issues like free access to the Internet by the citizens or lobbying for cheaper and accessible data by the population. Otherwise online activism is the way to go. What is needed is for activists to be more organized and establish a virtual community to speak out serious issues that concern the citizenry. Voices that have been denied the opportunity to speak out can now do so online.

Interviewee C: 30-year-old female

The younger generation; the youth resort to social media to express their frustrations at the failures of the regime. Social media and online activism is still very much the preserve of urbanites as it has not gained much traction with the majority especially of the rural populace due to poor Internet connectivity in the rural areas as well as the prohibitively high costs of data. However, the few that are active online, especially university students, have shaken the regime and the state security agents are paying a lot of attention to their online activities. The regime is now trying to put restrictions on online activities as evidenced by the proposed bills and regulations by parliament and the POTRAZ.

There are dangers to online activism in Zimbabwe. For instance, activists are vulnerable as they can easily be tracked and abducted by state agents. For example, comedians known as Bus stop TV crew and others I cannot mention by name. For activism, it is not quite effective to just post online and it ends there because you might not have enough traction with followers, therefore your message ends up just as good as lost as no one would have read it. Online activists at times post haphazardly and are not systematic and consistent; therefore they might fail to command a credible following.

Online activism is a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe and is different from mobilization for mass rallies and demonstrations. With online activism, people express their views on the Internet using multimedia to send messages across. Protestors no longer need to gather under the tree then march holding placards and the physical signing of petitions. They now can sign petitions electronically and the events are no longer limited to once off action. Online videos can be reshared to the extent of going viral globally. Online activism can be sporadic and therefore is not easy for state security agents to put them down unlike with physical protests where the authorities unleash violence to disperse the protestors, hence putting a stop to the demonstration.

There are tangible achievements through online activism such as those by #thisflag, #tajamuka and #zimbabwelivesmatter. With these online actions, they were successfully complemented by street protests, hence the successes such as the release of Pastor Evan Mawarire from custody. The ZCTU has also tapped into mobilization online when they organized a stay away in protest against fuel price increases. The result was stay always and street protests even though the state responded with heavy handedness. The 1st of August 2018 protests were witnessed by the whole world instantly after the military shot and killed 6 protestors on the spot in cold blood when they were protesting the late release of presidential election results. That was a demonstration of the power of social media against tyranny. The #zimbabwelivesmatter achieved the purpose of putting Zimbabwe on the agenda globally and the pressure resulted in some policy changes in the country.

Online activism is the way to go especially in Zimbabwe where the younger generations are afraid to use the traditional methods of activism and protest. People now just need a gadget such as a smart phone or a laptop that allows them to share on the Internet. In future, hopefully, online activism and street protest will complement each other. However, in Zimbabwe where human rights are not promoted or protected, we are most likely to see more ruthless crackdowns on online activism. For instance, with the Patriotic Bill, the regime will not allow people to say anything against their country. Zimbabwe might follow the example of China of blocking some of the online social media platforms used by online activists. In the January 2019 protests, the regime simply switched off the Internet so in future the regime may even go beyond mere Internet shutdowns in cracking down on online activists.

Interviewee D: 29-year-old female

The female activist said online activism is now the only form of activism left due to the heavy handedness of the authorities in the country.

She went on to say there have been achievements through online activism such as online protests against the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) after the council increased examination fees higher than parents could afford. The fees were reduced after the protests. She went on to cite another example of a success story after network providers had increased data charges exorbitantly. The data tariffs were reduced after the protests. She said during her days of online activism with Tajamuka, together with the #thisflag movement, their online protests led to the resignation of Mugabe from the presidency. She said, however, a lot of the online protests are useless because of some activists who are paid to be present online

and therefore do not really have a serious agenda. She also said that online activists lack unity of purpose as they tend to pursue variant agenda. She says Zimbabweans ought to speak more with one voice online.

The female activist went on to say that the main difference between online activism and the physical ones that they used to do in the past is that the physical protests were met with violence, she said that the state sponsored the violence against protestors in the form of the Zimbabwe Republic Police descending upon the protestors, beating them up with baton sticks, tear gassing them and arresting them. With online activism, a lot of people come in with their hash tags and the message spreads faster and reaches a lot of people within a short space of time. She also said that it is easier to mobilize online and that it is easy to influence people or connect with like minded people online. She also said that it is easier to gather a lot of people for action through online mobilization as compared to physical mobilization.

She said the danger associated with online activism is that one might get into trouble especially with the Cyber Act of which the majority of online activists are ignorant. She said that people need education on the content of that law. She said that the other danger of online activism is trolling which has the negative impact on the online activists.

She also said that activism in Zimbabwe has been positive and yielded results in the past five years. She says the results are evident from #tajamuka's active days. She says during their days in Tajamuka, they would send messages to the relevant authorities in real time and would receive responses in real time. She said they would reach out to citizens in all corners of the country as well as to Zimbabweans in the diaspora in real time. She says during the protests to oust Mugabe, mobilization was done primarily online. Activists have been progressively protesting against government and the private sector and the results have been positive.

Interviewee E: 29-year-old female

The 29-year-old female activist's perspective of online activism in Zimbabwe is that it had a huge impact during Mugabe's time when #thisflag mobilized big numbers to protest against Mugabe. She says that, however, presently, it is no longer the case as people no longer respond overwhelmingly to calls for protests via online platforms.

She identified the arrests and incarceration of activists by the state security agents in Zimbabwe as the most dangerous aspect to online activism in the country. She gave the example of the persecution of Evan Mawarire by the Mugabe regime and the current constant persecution of Hopewell Chin'ono by the Mnangagwa regime. She says that online activists receive threats online when they post contrary or material opposing or exposing the regime.

She said that online activism is different from other kinds of activism in the sense that it goes beyond the borders of Zimbabwe during protest action. She went on to say that more participants are now involved in protest action in Zimbabwe as compared to the past which was characterized by physical street protest. She says activists are now organizing online conferences which involve Zimbabweans in the diaspora and these conferences are yielding

results. She says online activism is therefore impactful. She also said that the use of online platforms for protest is increasing in Zimbabwe.

She said that tangible results of online activism are evident in #thisflag and Evan Mawarire's efforts which received recognition in Zimbabwe and abroad. She also cited the example of posts by journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, particularly when he exposed corruption by the minister of health who eventually was fired by president Mnangagwa for corruption related to tenders for procuring equipment for combating Covid-19.

The 29-year-old female activist said that she foresees online activism significant growth in the next 10 years as people will have established themselves in the systems of online communication. She also said that the trends have been set due to Covid-19 restrictions which limit or prohibit gatherings, therefore people are getting used to online communications.

Interviewee F: 25-year-old female

The 25-year-old female activist explained that her perspective on online activism is that online activism in Zimbabwe has grown over the years with activists like Hopewell Chin'ono, Namatai Kakweza, among others, expressing their views more and more online. She said that a lot of people are now participating online, criticizing the situation in the country more and more.

She said the danger associated with online activism is that most activists are targeted by the authorities such as Hopewell Chin'ono's frequent arrests by the Mnangagwa regime. She also said that activists are frequently trolled and harassed online. She said that laws on or against online activism are not clear therefore anyone can be targeted; arrested and they will spend long periods of time in remand prison because the state does not have clear legal instruments with which to charge online activists. She went on to say that the state also spies into activists' online activities and arrest them. She said usually activists are accused of crimes related to attempting to unlawfully overthrow the government and because of lack of clarity of laws governing online communications, arrested activists languish in remand prison without being charged.

She said that online platforms allow citizens to participate anonymously or from anywhere in the world. She said however the limitations are that the elderly cannot take part significantly due to technological challenges. She explained that some elderly citizens do not even have smart phones or the social media accounts. She said online activism is therefore popular with the younger generations who are, in most cases, unfortunately limited due to the high cost of data, therefore they cannot easily access the Internet.

She said that there are some achievements through social media protests in Zimbabwe although posts online have a limited impact. She elaborated that something gets posted online today, tomorrow it is forgotten. She went on to say that the fact that when mobilization is started online, state security agents flood the streets of city centers on the day of the proposed action. She says this shows that the authorities are taking note of the impact of social media. She went on to say, also, the authorities arrested purported leaders who post mobilization messages and

that is proof of the effectiveness of social media as communication platforms. She also said that online activism played major role in the overthrowing of the Mugabe regime in 2017. She said we have seen changes in policy and the fact that government is being kept on its toes serves to show how social media is proving to be effective.

She said that in the next 10 years, we are most likely to see a social media mediated revolution in Zimbabwe due to technological developments as well as due to the increase in technological uptake by citizens. More people are most likely to have access to the Internet and smart phones are getting cheaper. However, she said, in the next 10 years, more stringent measures will be put in place by the Zimbabwe government following the example of China which banned Facebook and WhatsApp. This will therefore limit citizens' free participation online.

Interviewee G: 33-year-old female

The 33-year-old female activist said that online activism is the only option left for individuals who work in advocacy. She said that activism elsewhere has taken a grind due to Covid-19. She said that people now spend most of their time online. She said advocacy work is now done mainly online and activists in Zimbabwe have resorted to online space for advocacy work.

She went on to say that the dangers associated with online activism in Zimbabwe are similar to those of activism everywhere else. She said with online activism, the danger is that it is all speech or activism online but the one advocating just stays online with no tangible action on the ground.

She also said that online activism now as compared to the past is that activists are now reaching more people as compared to physical advocacy. She said if you sponsor your page, it pops up on many people's pages and the activist can reach more people even demographically.

She said online activism has scored successes in Zimbabwe. She elaborated with the example of advocacy work by Tsitsi Patience Mashiri who is advocating for faster and convenient transport for women in Zimbabwe which she says has gained traction. She said people are now listening to Mashiri. She said Mashiri has done those activities in Harare where she hired buses to transport women and as they travel, she engages the women in conversation about the toll the transport challenges in Zimbabwe has on women. She said women open up and share a lot of vital information. She says the authorities are paying attention to women's issues through Mashiri's advocacy work which started off online.

The female activist said that online activism in Zimbabwe in the next 10 years is most likely to see growth because a lot of activities are being done online so more and more people are going to get involved in online activism.

Interviewee H: 27-year-old male

The 27-year-old male activist's perception of online activism in Zimbabwe is that it is a broad phenomenon understood by the people but narrows down to digital interactivity to platforms affordable to the activists. He said in the Zimbabwe online activism context, the most affordable platform is WhatsApp. He says some also use Facebook and Twitter. He elaborated

saying that the influx of Android phones allows for most users to have access to WhatsApp. He says Facebook and Twitter are a bit elitist due to the high costs of data. He says, however, screenshots from Twitter are also shared on WhatsApp. He says the levels of online activism in Zimbabwe are not as vibrant as to meet the expectations of those activists who seriously want to push the advocacy agenda online.

The activist said that there is an exaggeration when it comes to dangers for online activism. He says he would rather use challenges rather than dangers. He says the biggest challenge associated with online activism is harassment either from the state or other state sponsored stalkers or online bullies. He says activists are arrested or state agents mine information of activists' previous acts of misdemeanor or crimes then unleash them online for all and sundry to read therefore damaging the reputation of the targeted activists. He said the other challenge is that of the high cost of data which makes it difficult for citizens to have access to the Internet. He went on to say that the other challenge is that of infiltration or dilution of the activist agenda, for example by Varakashi; pro government agitators who dilute activism by producing counter narratives. He says that by diluting the online activist content, they kill the momentum the activists will be nursing and building online. He went on to say that there is also the challenge of bandwagonism where other people might join and follow activism online without fully comprehending the full aims and goals of the activism agenda. He says this may end up leading to the depoliticization or deradicalization of the activism agenda. He also identified the challenge of limited platforms. He gave the example of the majority in Zimbabwe who can only access WhatsApp as the other platforms are expensive to access, such as Twitter and Facebook. He says the expensive platforms are patronized by those with the money for data bundles therefore rendering them elitist. He says this limits variety in creativity.

The activist said that in the past, the government used to respond directly to protests via mainstream media. He says the difference now is that the government does not respond directly to online activism. He says it therefore is now difficult to tell where the government stands regarding issues advocated for online.

The activist also said that there are some achievements of note from online activism such as the national boycott called for by the leader of the #thisflag in July 2016 where the government lost revenue. He said that was a demonstration of people power. He also said that online activism exposed corruption in the ministry of health in the procurement of Personnel Protection Equipment (PPE) for combating COcid-19 (the scandal known as Druggate in Zimbabwe). He said as a result, the minister of health was fired from office. He went on to say that online activism has worked in advocacy for children's rights and yielded the results of the enactment of the Child marriages Act which protects children from early child marriages. He also gave another example where social media effectively exposed acts of immorality by vice president Kembo Mohadi who later resigned from office as a result. He also said online lobbying by the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Agency Association resulted in a bill being tabled in parliament for the formulation of environmental policies.

The 27-year-old male activist said that in the next 10 years, he foresees online activism will still be in the same state as it is today. He says it is because the more activists participate online,

the more the government invests in the technology of digital authoritarianism in order to counter the online narratives by the opposition. He said already the government is funding creation of counter narratives online. He said there may be changes but they would not be effective enough to bring much change in the next 10 years.

On his understanding of data colonialism, the interviewee said it is the extension of Western domination due to the word colonialism. He said data colonialism is in relation to the use of modern ways of communication to entrench dominance of the West over the subservient South which is not producing or reproducing any issues to do with data. He said no success stories in computing or any strides have been made in AI, for instance, by the South. Therefore, as far as data colonialism is concerned, his view is that it is a sophisticated way that is being used by the West to entrench its capitalist appetite and increase the dependence of the South, especially Africa, when it comes to issues of technology development and innovation. He said what it means primarily is that as colonialism was a violent process, it tries to ensure that the mind of the colonizer and the mind of the colonized are in tandem with the objectives of the colonizer. He said so with colonialism instituted, historically, through violence, this one is being instituted through modern gadgets such as computers. Therefore, it is a continued dependence by the South on the Western system that try to exploit information and biometrics for the detriment of the South which remains subservient, dependent and dominated by the West.

In response to the question on the impact of data colonialism on activism in Zimbabwe, he said that the platforms used by activists are not owned by the South. He said during colonialism, people offending the authorities were arrested and detained under the Unlawful Organizations Act or other related laws. He said the same applies to online activism which is regulated somehow so that someone avoids being banned from certain platforms using their original names unless they go underground to change identity. He went on to say that for Varakashi, the likes of Chin'ono, Mahere and Kubeko reported them to Twitter seeking them to be sanctioned. He said fortunately for Varakashi, Twitter could not find them guilty of any offence or violations of Twitter policies. He said such threats are a disadvantage. He said data colonialism is therefore a replica of the old colonialism whereby rules, regulations and policies once violated will lead to the curtailment of activism. He said this leads to self-censorship as Varakashi avoid offending the owners of the digital platforms.

Interviewee I: 35-year-old male

The activist said that his general perspective of online activism in Zimbabwe is that the majority of participants are the technologically savvy younger people who are active on social media because they have social media accounts. He went on to say that online activism in Zimbabwe is mainly about politics more than any other issues.

The activist said that online activism is easy to execute as you can mobilize virtually and people can participate virtually without physically picketing, raising placards or signing physical petitions. He also said that activists from across the country can mobilize and make noise corporately online. He said that, for instance, activists in Harare can join forces with advocacy compatriots who have an issue in Bulawayo and can even rope in other activists based in the diaspora without congregating in Bulawayo physically.

He said online activism in Zimbabwe has its own challenges such as misinformation, fake news, exaggeration, sensationalisation of news which gets shared without verification.

The 35-year-old male activist said that with online advocacy, messages can be quickly relayed, for example to government officials where you can circumvent bureaucracy by tagging the officials. He went on to say Webinars, zoom, etc can be used for conferences with fellow activists in real time from wherever they might be. He says that the public transport sector revised its modus operandi after a video of an old lady being harassed by touts went viral and there was an intervention to normalize such wayward touting behavior at bus termini.

Interviewee J: 26-year-old

The 26-year-old male activist said that online activism in Zimbabwe, generally, is largely the use of social media and other digital platforms such as podcasts, skits that are coming in following the generation of content on social media platforms. He said that online media has come into Zimbabwe as partially positive considering that the mainstream media space had been closed to civil society therefore making activism difficult in such a closed environment. He said, however, on the other hand online media has hampered the efficacy of advocate activism as organizations just make noise about shares, reshares, likes, forwards, etc without paying particular attention to how policy makers are responding to the issues being advocated for.

The activist said online activism comes along with some dangers for example in Zimbabwe the Varakashi trolls can make life uncomfortable for online activists as they bully especially women. He said you can be arrested or hacked. He went on to say that there is also the danger of having your account hacked and the government agents can plant some information that will show that you are being sponsored by a foreign government so that they can arrest you and charge you with treason or for being a foreign agent.

The activist says the advantage with online activism is that online activism allows for remote participation and that there is easy solidarity for communities in protest from other communities even from other provinces, cities and even from abroad. He went on to say that there is collaboration between online actions and physical protest activities based on the ground, for example work by #tjamuka.

The activist said there have been achievements in Zimbabwe through online activism and the biggest came from the #zimbabwelivesmatter and the authorities were too harsh in clamping down on the protests to the extent that the international community decided to intervene and the result was the government of South Africa sending a delegation on a fact finding mission. He however said that it was difficult for the government of South Africa to broker any talks like they did prior to the 2009 Government of National Unity because there was no clear leadership on the part of the online activists. He says it was therefore impossible to establish who to involve in talks to broker mediation for democratic reforms that were advocated for online.

The 26-year-old male activist says that within the next 10 years, we are most likely to see more and more people using online platforms for activism due to technological evolutions globally

and Zimbabwe has a robust techno savvy younger generation. He said, however, there has to be an evolution in remodeling online activism because technology in itself cannot activate protest action so there has to be different approaches so that technology can facilitate activism better.

Appendix H Coding of interviewee findings

1. Notions of emancipation and liberation through digital technology

Interviewee B

Online activism is making it possible for people who previously did not have an opportunity to speak out to voice out their concerns. It also allows those who used to be scared to speak out against the state to do so. It also allows people outside Zimbabwe to communicate about issues happening in the country to those inside and outside the country. However, online activism can be limited to clicktivism whereby people just make noise online and the noise does not translate to physical street demonstration action. On the other hand, it allows for the mobilization of numbers for protests.

There are successes of note from online activism. The activist cited the example of online protests against a Johane Marange old man who married off his 14 year old daughter to another old man. Activists made a lot of noise about the issue and the police ended up intervening and rescued the child. The United Nations office in Harare also released a statement condemning the child marriage custom. The activist also cited another example of the #zimbabwelivesmatter which led to the government of South Africa sending a delegation on a fact finding mission on the allegations of ill-treatment of citizens by the government of Zimbabwe. He said as Zimbabwean activists, they were inspired by the events and results of the protests in Eswatini against the monarch there. He however said at the moment, online activism is not evidently translating to street protest in Zimbabwe. He said that the positive outcome is that voices that used to be silent and salient are now speaking out and are getting heard.

Interviewee C

For those active online, especially university students, have shaken the regime and the state security agents are paying a lot of attention to their online activities.

Online activism is a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe and is different from mobilization for mass rallies and demonstrations. With online activism, people express their views on the Internet using multimedia to send messages across. Protestors no longer need to gather under the tree then march holding placards and the physical signing of petitions. They now can sign petitions electronically and the events are no longer limited to once off action. Online videos can be reshared to the extent of going viral globally. Online activism can be sporadic and therefore is not easy for state security agents to put them down unlike with physical protests where the authorities unleash violence to disperse the protestors, hence putting a stop to the demonstration.

There are tangible achievements through online activism such as those by #thisflag, #tjamuka and #zimbabwelivesmatter. With these online actions, they were successfully complemented by street protests, hence the successes such as the release of Pastor Evan Mawarire from custody. The ZCTU has also tapped into mobilization online when they organized a stay away in protest against fuel price increases. The result was stay always and street protests even

though the state responded with heavy handedness. The 1st of August 2018 protests were witnessed by the whole world instantly after the military shot and killed 6 protestors on the spot in cold blood when they were protesting the late release of presidential election results. That was a demonstration of the power of social media against tyranny. The #zimbabwelivesmatter achieved the purpose of putting Zimbabwe on the agenda globally and the pressure resulted in some policy changes in the country.

Online activism is the way to go especially in Zimbabwe where the younger generations are afraid to use the traditional methods of activism and protest. People now just need a gadget such as a smart phone or a laptop that allows them to share on the Internet. In future, hopefully, online activism and street protest will complement each other. However, in Zimbabwe where human rights are not promoted or protected, we are most likely to see more ruthless crackdowns on online activism. For instance, with the Patriotic Bill, the regime will not allow people to say anything against their country. Zimbabwe might follow the example of china of blocking some of the online social media platforms used by online activists. In the January 2019 protests, the regime simply switched off the Internet so in future the regime may even go beyond mere Internet shutdowns in cracking down on online activists.

Interviewee D

The female activist said online activism is now the only form of activism left due to the heavy handedness of the authorities in the country.

She went on to say there have been achievements through online activism such as online protests against the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) after the council increased examination fees higher than parents could afford. The fees were reduced after the protests. She went on to cite another example of a success story after network providers had increased data charges exorbitantly. The data tariffs were reduced after the protests. She said during her days of online activism with Tajamuka, together with the #thisflag movement, their online protests led to the resignation of Mugabe from the presidency. She said, however, a lot of the online protests are useless because of some activists who are paid to be present online and therefore do not really have a serious agenda. She also said that online activists lack unity of purpose as they tend to pursue variant agenda. She says Zimbabweans ought to speak more with one voice online.

The female activist went on to say that the main difference between online activism and the physical ones that they used to do in the past is that the physical protests were met with violence, she said that the state sponsored the violence against protestors in the form of the Zimbabwe Republic Police descending upon the protestors, beating them up with baton sticks, tear gassing them and arresting them. With online activism, a lot of people come in with their hash tags and the message spreads faster and reaches a lot of people within a short space of time. She also said that it is easier to mobilize online and that it is easy to influence people or connect with like minded people online. She also said that it is easier to gather a lot of people for action through online mobilization as compared to physical mobilization.

She also said that activism in Zimbabwe has been positive and yielded results in the past five years. She says the results are evident from #tjamuka's active days. She says during their days in Tjamuka, they would send messages to the relevant authorities in real time and would receive responses in real time. She said they would reach out to citizens in all corners of the country as well as to Zimbabweans in the diaspora in real time. She says during the protests to oust Mugabe, mobilization was done primarily online. Activists have been progressively protesting against government and the private sector and the results have been positive.

Interviewee E

The 29 year old female activist's perspective of online activism in Zimbabwe is that it had a huge impact during Mugabe's time when #thisflag mobilized big numbers to protest against Mugabe. She says that, however, presently, it is no longer the case as people no longer respond overwhelmingly to calls for protests via online platforms.

She said that online activism is different from other kinds of activism in the sense that it goes beyond the borders of Zimbabwe during protest action. She went on to say that more participants are now involved in protest action in Zimbabwe as compared to the past which was characterized by physical street protest. She says activists are now organizing online conferences which involve Zimbabweans in the diaspora and these conferences are yielding results. She says online activism is therefore impactful. She also said that the use of online platforms for protest is increasing in Zimbabwe.

She said that tangible results of online activism are evident in #thisflag and Evan Mawarire's efforts which received recognition in Zimbabwe and abroad. She also cited the example of posts by journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, particularly when he exposed corruption by the minister of health who eventually was fired by president Mnangagwa for corruption related to tenders for procuring equipment for combating Covid-19.

The 29 year old female activist said that she foresees online activism significant growth in the next 10 years as people will have established themselves in the systems of online communication. She also said that the trends have been set due to Covid-19 restrictions which limit or prohibit gatherings, therefore people are getting used to online communications.

Interviewee F

The 25 year old female activist explained that her perspective on online activism is that online activism in Zimbabwe has grown over the years with activists like Hopewell Chin'ono, Namatai Kakweza, among others, expressing their views more and more online. She said that a lot of people are now participating online, criticizing the situation in the country more and more.

She said that online platforms allow citizens to participate anonymously or from anywhere in the world. She said however the limitations are that the elderly cannot take part significantly due to technological challenges. She explained that some elderly citizens do not even have smart phones or the social media accounts. She said online activism is therefore popular with

the younger generations who are, in most cases, unfortunately limited due to the high cost of data, therefore they cannot easily access the Internet.

She said that there are some achievements through social media protests in Zimbabwe although posts online have a limited impact. She elaborated that something gets posted online today, tomorrow it is forgotten. She went on to say that the fact that when mobilization is started online, state security agents flood the streets of city centers on the day of the proposed action. She says this shows that the authorities are taking note of the impact of social media. She went on to say, also, the authorities arrested purported leaders who post mobilization messages and that is proof of the effectiveness of social media as communication platforms. She also said that online activism played major role in the overthrowing of the Mugabe regime in 2017. She said we have seen changes in policy and the fact that government is being kept on its toes serves to show how social media is proving to be effective.

She said that in the next 10 years, we are most likely to see a social media mediated revolution in Zimbabwe due to technological developments as well as due to the increase in technological uptake by citizens. More people are most likely to have access to the Internet and smart phones are getting cheaper. However, she said, in the next 10 years, more stringent measures will be put in place by the Zimbabwe government following the example of China which banned Facebook and WhatsApp. This will therefore limit citizens' free participation online.

Interviewee G

The 33 year old female activist said that online activism is the only option left for individuals who work in advocacy. She said that activism elsewhere has taken a grind due to Covid-19. She said that people now spend most of their time online. She said advocacy work is now done mainly online and activists in Zimbabwe have resorted to online space for advocacy work.

She also said that online activism now as compared to the past is that activists are now reaching more people as compared to physical advocacy. She said if you sponsor your page, it pops up on many people's pages and the activist can reach more people even demographically.

She said online activism has scored successes in Zimbabwe. She elaborated with the example of advocacy work by Tsitsi Patience Mashiri who is advocating for faster and convenient transport for women in Zimbabwe which she says has gained traction. She said people are now listening to Mashiri. She said Mashiri has done those activities in Harare where she hired buses to transport women and as they travel, she engages the women in conversation about the toll the transport challenges in Zimbabwe has on women. She said women open up and share a lot of vital information. She says the authorities are paying attention to women's issues through Mashiri's advocacy work which started off online.

The female activist said that online activism in Zimbabwe in the next 10 years is most likely to see growth because a lot of activities are being done online so more and more people are going to get involved in online activism.

Interviewee H

says the levels of online activism in Zimbabwe are not as vibrant as to meet the expectations of those activists who seriously want to push the advocacy agenda online.

He went on to say that there is also the challenge of bandwagonism where other people might join and follow activism online without fully comprehending the full aims and goals of the activism agenda. He says this may end up leading to the depoliticization or deradicalization of the activism agenda. He also identified the challenge of limited platforms. He gave the example of the majority in Zimbabwe who can only access WhatsApp as the other platforms are expensive to access, such as Twitter and Facebook. He says the expensive platforms are patronized by those with the money for data bundles therefore rendering them elitist. He says this limits variety in creativity.

The activist said that in the past, the government used to respond directly to protests via mainstream media. He says the difference now is that the government does not respond directly to online activism. He says it therefore is now difficult to tell where the government stands regarding issues advocated for online.

The activist also said that there are some achievements of note from online activism such as the national boycott called for by the leader of the #thisflag in July 2016 where the government lost revenue. He said that was a demonstration of people power. He also said that online activism exposed corruption in the ministry of health in the procurement of Personnel Protection Equipment (PPE) for combating Covid-19 (the scandal known as Druggate in Zimbabwe). He said as a result, the minister of health was fired from office. He went on to say that online activism has worked in advocacy for children's rights and yielded the results of the enactment of the Child marriages Act which protects children from early child marriages. He also gave another example where social media effectively exposed acts of immorality by vice president Kembo Mohadi who later resigned from office as a result. He also said online lobbying by the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Agency Association resulted in a bill being tabled in parliament for the formulation of environmental policies.

Interviewee I

The activist said that his general perspective of online activism in Zimbabwe is that the majority of participants are the technologically savvy younger people who are active on social media because they have social media accounts. He went on to say that online activism in Zimbabwe is mainly about politics more than any other issues.

The activist said that online activism is easy to execute as you can mobilize virtually and people can participate virtually without physically picketing, raising placards or signing physical petitions. He also said that activists from across the country can mobilize and make noise corporately online. He said that, for instance, activists in Harare can join forces with advocacy compatriots who have an issue in Bulawayo and can even rope in other activists based in the diaspora without congregating in Bulawayo physically

The 35 year old male activist said that with online advocacy, messages can be quickly relayed, for example to government officials where you can circumvent bureaucracy by tagging the officials. He went on to say Webinars, zoom, etc can be used for conferences with fellow activists in real time from wherever they might be. He says that the public transport sector revised its modus operandi after a video of an old lady being harassed by touts went viral and there was an intervention to normalize such wayward touting behavior at bus termini.

Interviewee J

said that online media has come into Zimbabwe as partially positive considering that the mainstream media space had been closed to civil society therefore making activism difficult in such a closed environment. He said, however, on the other hand online media has hampered the efficacy of advocate activism as organizations just make noise about shares, reshares, likes, forwards, etc without paying particular attention to how policy makers are responding to the issues being advocated for.

The activist says the advantage with online activism is that online activism allows for remote participation and that there is easy solidarity for communities in protest from other communities even from other provinces, cities and even from abroad. He went on to say that there is collaboration between online actions and physical protest activities based on the ground, for example work by #tjamuka.

The activist said there have been achievements in Zimbabwe through online activism and the biggest came from the #zimbabwelivesmatter and the authorities were too harsh in clamping down on the protests to the extent that the international community decided to intervene and the result was the government of South Africa sending a delegation on a fact finding mission. He however said that it was difficult for the government of South Africa to broker any talks like they did prior to the 2009 Government of National Unity because there was no clear leadership on the part of the online activists. He says it was therefore impossible to establish who to involve in talks to broker mediation for democratic reforms that were advocated for online.

The 26 year old male activist says that within the next 10 years, we are most likely to see more and more people using online platforms for activism due to technological evolutions globally and Zimbabwe has a robust techno savvy younger generation. He said, however, there has to be an evolution in remodeling online activism because technology in itself cannot activate protest action so there has to be different approaches so that technology can facilitate activism better.

2. The dangers associated with online activism

Interviewee A

On the dangers associated with online activism in Zimbabwe, the respondent said that political activism is not that easy in Zimbabwe chiefly because the ZANU PF government does not want to listen to different views and it does not want its modus operandi questioned or challenged

On the realities of the dangers of arbitrary arrests, the activist said that the government of Zimbabwe is targeting government critics. If you happen to mobilize the people against the government using social media, you get arrested and spend several weeks without trial.

On abduction and victimization, he explained that Government spies track all people who speak against the government. They monitor all the movements, location, the message, people that interact with the activists, motivation behind the activism, the gadgets being used to disseminate information and places of residence. This makes it easier for them to abduct or threaten activists.

The activist said that, in order to legalize the victimization of activists, all those who speak out against the government are labeled terrorists. The government of Zimbabwe is quick to label online activists terrorists. When activism is equated to terrorism, it means anything can happen to the activists. There are stories of people who are alleged to have been kidnapped, tortured or murdered simply for being activists who dared to challenge the government of Zimbabwe.

He also explained on his experiences saying that cyber bullying is also another danger associated with online activism in Zimbabwe whereby people with ghost accounts will troll online activists in an attempt to halt their efforts.

Interviewee B

The rise of 4th generation online media has created problems for online activists because it is now much easier for the state to track down activists. The gadgets used by activists are susceptible to hacking so it is easier for to follow up on their activities, who they communicate with and what they post. Many activists have been threatened with violence online and the activists end up exercising self censorship. Activists are now more in danger because tracking them down is much easier.

Interviewee C

There are dangers to online activism in Zimbabwe. For instance, activists are vulnerable as they can easily be tracked and abducted by state agents. For example, comedians known as Bus stop TV crew and others I cannot mention by name.

Interviewee D

She said the danger associated with online activism is that one might get into trouble especially with the Cyber Act of which the majority of online activists are ignorant. She said that people

need education on the content of that law. She said that the other danger of online activism is trolling which has the negative impact on the online activists.

Interviewee E

She identified the arrests and incarceration of activists by the state security agents in Zimbabwe as the most dangerous aspect to online activism in the country. She gave the example of the persecution of Evan Mawarire by the Mugabe regime and the current constant persecution of Hopewell Chin'ono by the Mnangagwa regime. She says that online activists receive threats online when they post contrary or material opposing or exposing the regime.

Interviewee F

She said the danger associated with online activism is that most activists are targeted by the authorities such as Hopewell Chin'ono's frequent arrests by the Mnangagwa regime. She also said that activists are frequently trolled and harassed online. She said that laws on or against online activism are not clear therefore anyone can be targeted; arrested and they will spend long periods of time in remand prison because the state does not have clear legal instruments with which to charge online activists. She went on to say that the state also spies into activists' online activities and arrest them. She said usually activists are accused of crimes related to attempting to unlawfully overthrow the government and because of lack of clarity of laws governing online communications, arrested activists languish in remand prison without being charged.

Interviewee G

She went on to say that the dangers associated with online activism in Zimbabwe are similar to those of activism everywhere else. She said with online activism, the danger is that it is all speech or activism online but the one advocating just stays online with no tangible action on the ground.

Interviewee H

The activist said that there is an exaggeration when it comes to dangers for online activism. He says he would rather use challenges rather than dangers. He says the biggest challenge associated with online activism is harassment either from the state or other state sponsored stalkers or online bullies.

Interviewee I

He said online activism in Zimbabwe has its own challenges such as misinformation, fake news, exaggeration, sensationalisation of news which gets shared without verification

Interviewee J

The activist said online activism comes along with some dangers for example in Zimbabwe the Varakashi trolls can make life uncomfortable for online activists as they bully especially women. He said you can be arrested or hacked. He went on to say that there is also the danger of having your account hacked and the government agents can plant some information that will

show that you are being sponsored by a foreign government so that they can arrest you and charge you with treason or for being a foreign agent.

3. Data colonialism

He says activists are arrested or state agents mine information of activists' previous acts of misdemeanor or crimes then unleash them online for all and sundry to read therefore damaging the reputation of the targeted activists.

On his understanding of data colonialism, the interviewee said it is the extension of Western domination due to the word colonialism. He said data colonialism is in relation to the use of modern ways of communication to entrench dominance of the West over the subservient South which is not producing or reproducing any issues to do with data. He said no success stories in computing or any strides have been made in AI, for instance, by the South. Therefore, as far as data colonialism is concerned, his view is that it is a sophisticated way that is being used by the West to entrench its capitalist appetite and increase the dependence of the South, especially Africa, when it comes to issues of technology development and innovation. He said what it means primarily is that as colonialism was a violent process, it tries to ensure that the mind of the colonizer and the mind of the colonized are in tandem with the objectives of the colonizer. He said so with colonialism instituted, historically, through violence, this one is being instituted through modern gadgets such as computers. Therefore, it is a continued dependence by the South on the Western system that try to exploit information and biometrics for the detriment of the South which remains subservient, dependent and dominated by the West.

4. Online offline relationships

Interviewee B.

At the moment, online activism is not evidently translating to street protest in Zimbabwe

Interviewee C

There are dangers to online activism in Zimbabwe. For instance, activists are vulnerable as they can easily be tracked and abducted by state agents. For example, comedians known as Bus stop TV crew and others I cannot mention by name. for activism, it is not quite effective to just post online and it ends there because you might not have enough traction with followers, therefore your message ends up just as good as lost as no one would have read it. Online activists at times post haphazardly and are not systematic and consistent; therefore they might fail to command a credible following.

Interviewee D

The female activist went on to say that the main difference between online activism and the physical ones that they used to do in the past is that the physical protests were met with violence, she said that the state sponsored the violence against protestors in the form of the Zimbabwe Republic Police descending upon the protestors, beating them up with baton sticks,

tear gassing them and arresting them. With online activism, a lot of people come in with their hash tags and the message spreads faster and reaches a lot of people within a short space of time. She also said that it is easier to mobilize online and that it is easy to influence people or connect with like minded people online. She also said that it is easier to gather a lot of people for action through online mobilization as compared to physical mobilization.

5. Models of online activism which are alternative or counter to Western ones.

Interviewee H

other challenge is that of infiltration or dilution of the activist agenda, for example by Varakashi; pro government agitators who dilute activism by producing counter narratives. He says that by diluting the online activist content, they kill the momentum the activists will be nursing and building online.

The 27 year old male activist said that in the next 10 years, he foresees online activism will still be in the same state as it is today. He says it is because the more activists participate online, the more the government invests in the technology of digital authoritarianism in order to counter the online narratives by the opposition. He said already the government is funding creation of counter narratives online. He said there may be changes but they would not be effective enough to bring much change in the next 10 years.

In response to the question on the impact of data colonialism on activism in Zimbabwe, he said that the platforms used by activists are not owned by the South. He said during colonialism, people offending the authorities were arrested and detained under the Unlawful Organizations Act or other related laws. He said the same applies to online activism which is regulated somehow so that someone avoids being banned from certain platforms using their original names unless they go underground to change identity. He went on to say that for Varakashi, the likes of Chin'ono, Mahere and Kubeko reported them to Twitter seeking them to be sanctioned. He said fortunately for Varakashi, Twitter could not find them guilty of any offence or violations of Twitter policies. He said such threats are a disadvantage. He said data colonialism is therefore a replica of the old colonialism whereby rules, regulations and policies once violated will lead to the curtailment of activism. He said this leads to self-censorship as Varakashi avoid offending the owners of the digital platforms.

Appendix J: Responses to online posts

Responses to Aubrey Mpofu post

Stephen Machakara

Kana risiri bepa pay yaE.D ngaive yema ZIG

Clayton Takawira

dnt confuse being patriotic n being zanu pf

Edmund Makubaza

Clayton Takawira true patriotism is not supporting Zanu-pf because Zanu-pf isn't Zimbabwe.

Moyo Osama

This thing called Zanu pf is just rotten plain and simple

Charm Onismo

Uri Car door tea ker moon iwe Aubrey ..Kar tsete ker door tea

Richard Phiri

Its not suprise that such type of thinking is found in zanu pf people very detached from reallity

Democratic Freedom Fighters Plus

Your desperation to hold on power will send you to the gates of hell.

Cally Furamera

Tseke

Michael Zenda

nonsense

Frank Bekezela Mpofu

ZIDHODHI

Gibson Chininga

Nonsense, if not from an idiot, it's a fool 🤔

Pride Muzondo

You are a fool,why Zimbabwean leave if the economy is functional....do you even understand that a functional economy draws more tourist to come visit but when citizens leave its a statement on its own,jus because you are benefiting from the system means you are right....

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

Pride Muzondo we don't force people to visit Zimbabwe. Even those citizens leaving must feel free to do so

Pride Muzondo

Aubrey Mhofu because you are fool,tourism means bussiness,your master understand it but bcoz of greed he s holding unto propaganda...iwewe uripo pafb kuvadefender asi pavanodya Mari havatokuzive...you are jus but a fool

David Fambisai

Aubrey stop taking your stupidity to higher levels. Just listen to yourself for a moment and think like a grown-up man. Zanu does not own Zim and this kind of thinking is pathetic and demonic

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

David Fambisai ZANU PF freed Zimbabwe from the yoke of white oppression. It owns the country

Tendai Celestino Dominguez

Aubrey Mhofu its now high time for the oppressed to free ourselves from Zanu

Pride Muzondo

Aubrey Mhofu Zanu pf never freed our generation,we weren't born,our yoke is Zanu PF and mind you yesterday's victory is tomorrow's mediocrity.... ZANU PF did not liberate Zimbabwe but zimbabweans who freed Zim,Charlatans like ED never fight war,they were just boys in that time....in the history they don't exist,ED is younger than my late uncle,he told everything,you can't use propaganda in everything,ED akabvuta and he is a failure

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

Tendai Celestino Dominguez kkkkk a joke.

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

Pride Muzondo chikoro chacho makatomboenda here. Kutaura nemafudzamombe kunobhwa

David Fambisai

Aubrey Mhofu so now you are saying that zanu is right in stealing our resources because Zim is their personal property. Just listen to what you are saying there is definitely something wrong with your thinking abilities

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

David Fambisai irikuba wakatarisepi. Wake up

David Fambisai

Aubrey Mhofu handisi mupurisa I could have done something and by the way I'm not a zanu's bootlicker

Pride Muzondo

Aubrey Mhofu Chaunoti chikoro ndechipi...O level hachisi chikoro...chikoro ruzivo through learning system,tarisa hembu dzakapfeka mwana wako uzvibvunze kuti arikuendepi,check your friends vaunawo paFB and think whether you are worth defending corruption...until you learn skills above O level you aren't worth debating with

Aubrey Mhofu

Author

Pride Muzondo kkkk wandinakidza. Hembu is a choice, so are friends. Ruzivo is a gift. Kana wakadarika O level ne reasoning yako iyi saka hazvibatsire

Pride Muzondo

Aubrey Mhofu Gadzirira mwana future uyu kwete kuzvisimbisa Pano,I stand for the truth and i speak nothing but truth

Edmund Makubaza

Aubrey Mhofu if it owns you don't think it owns every Zimbabwean. Zanu was only a vehicle to bring about freedom but Zimbabweans freed themselves from white oppression. Zanu-pf don't own Zimbabwe

Pride Muzondo

Aubrey Mhofu zvinobatsira,you are talking as if you have my certificate,you are just a foolish man,i just feel sorry for the smart phone in your hands

David Fambisai

Pride Muzondo even if you are eating leftovers from zanu but your kith and kin are suffering with the rest of zimbos and if it is not affecting you then something is wrong with you. Zanu elites are enjoying ill-gotten loot with their own but alas for you a normal zanu's. Don't feel sorry for my phone it doesn't belong to zanu

David Fambisai

Pride Muzondo you behave as if you are God but just a mortal like everybody

Pride Muzondo

David Fambisai Yes I am a mortal,unlike you who defend corruption at the expense of the citizens

David Fambisai

Pride Muzondo I do not defend corruption

David Fambisai

Pride Muzondo which corruption I may ask

Pride Muzondo

David Fambisai so arent you aware that the disappearing of diamonds is part of corruption, why there is no medication in the hospital wake up from your dream...zim has 16 million people yet they cant provide a better economy, yet SA has 60 million with functional economy, clean water, electricity, good and functional health sector the list goes

David Fambisai

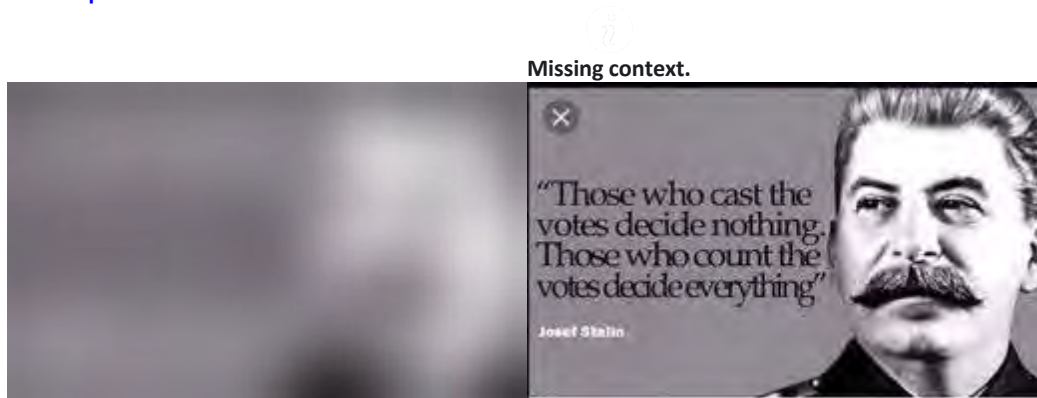
Pride Muzondo for your record check my comments about Zanu and I have criticized Zanu left right centre. How can I support authors of misery in Zim

Martin Sibanda

Show this Poem Chivhaya easy way to see Victor

Responses to Hungwe Charles post

Alois Hapazari Nzembe



The same information was checked in another post by independent fact-checkers.

See why

See post

Taurayi Marembo



Zvidzai Ndlovu

Ndaigararo udza vanhu pano kuti kuzadza ma rallies hazvina basa taizviona kubva kuna Morgan Tsvangirai asi achidiyiwa. Nyika yakakura iyi veduwee inevanhu. Chi Kwekwe chandogara chidoko pane nzvimbo dzekumamisha uko. Chamisa ngaafambe nevatevedzeri vake achihwavo pfungwa dzavo. Zvinonzi chara chimwe hachitsvanye inda wani. Biti and W. Ncube are smiling now kkkk

Wayne Zishiri

But I promise you he will not finish his term

 **Author**

Hungwe Charles

Wayne Zishiri, POVO (People of various opinions) it's your opinion

Motsepe Sedange

When I said CCC will get a hiding I was ridiculed, there we are. One man team with its strategic ambiguity gone up in smoke

Oddness Hwarari

He who laughs last.....Chimbotungamirai..Mahwisiwa manyoka Na Mandla... kkkkkkkk

 Author

Hungwe Charles

Oddness Hwarari, kkkkkkk for those who play Cards, (njuga/makasi), 🚫 There is ploy called A Bluff,, probably Mandla is just calling a Bluff,, you can expose you game when the other guy has a useless Card,, politics is a game

Tapiwa Tapoka

Tichama** tese ne2million vacho vakavhota for Ed 🤔🤔🤔

Zvidzai Ndlovu

Tapiwa Tapoka Life ndeyaMwari my brother. You never know about your tomorrow only God. So don't stress yourself leave it to God. Kana zviri izvo zvavanoda face the situation inokupa hushingi

Tapiwa Tapoka

Zvidzai yeah true, I left politics in 2018 haaa now I'm free from it, hameno mwari. I hope aWinner achabatsira vakamuVhotera

Zvidzai Ndlovu

Tapiwa Tapoka ndicho chishuwo chedu my brother. Isu sevanhu ngatibatanei nokubatsirana muraramo zvisinei nekuti uri wekudivi ripi. Zvino tozopinda politics nemoyo. Ukadero unotorerwa njere wofunga zvisinei nekuraramisa mhuri

Tapiwa Tapoka

Zvidzai ichokwadi mukoma 🙏

 Author

Hungwe Charles

Tapiwa Tapoka,, I hear u my brother, I also hear Zvidzai Ndlovu,, I am just but an Unbridled Spirit Analyst my post was mostly directed to the two Teams,, I was Congratulating Varakashi 4ED for a job well done and being politically mature, in the same breath asking Team Pachedu kuti Saka vachaitaseyi, are they going to put the shoulder to the yoke or what. As of us POVO (People of various opinions) ngoma ndiyo ndiyo, tinongotamba iri kurira Usapinda politics nemoyo Ahhh Ini Zvangu Ini

 Author

Hungwe Charles

Wallace W Muz 🤔🤔🤔🤔 agwadziwa kusvika mubvudzi

Responses to Bayero Media post.

All reactions:

6464

22 comments

1 share

Like

Comment

Share

Top comments

Gwindingwi Rineshumba

GNU naani?Whats the purpose of going for elections IF thres already rumour such an arrangement?This is a race nd the eventuality is 1 winner.The filthy idea of a GNU would come from the loser who is desperate to keep grip on levers of power nd we shld NEVER entertain such a corrupt suggestion.

- [51w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**

Tendai Chipungumberi

Gnu with who?only 10 zanu mps will win this year the rest yellowman

3

- [52w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**

Obert Saizi

The change pioneer honorable luckson Tendai Tindo Biti .

- [52w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**

Michael Billy

And us as citizens we love Biti

- [52w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**

Frank Bekezela Mpofu

We DO NOT WANT A GNU. We need a NEW GOVERNMENT.

Hon. Biti is both PARLIAMENT and GOVERNMENT CABINET MATERIAL.

- [51w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**
- Edited

Henry Tinovatenda Deka

No need for gnu.....only youths in.

- [51w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**

Mollen Mcmanaman Muchayana

Foward with Honourable T Biti

- [52w](#)
- **Like**
- **Reply**

- [Share](#)

Baba Rue

GOD IS IN IT

Citizen Coalition For Change CCC



- [52w](#)
- [Like](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [Share](#)

Tatenda Mugove

To hell with GNU

- [51w](#)
- [Like](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [Share](#)

Phillmon Pasinawako



- [51w](#)
- [Like](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [Share](#)

Vivace Spices

Phillmon bhoki

- [51w](#)
- [Like](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [Share](#)

Gift Asande



- [51w](#)
- [Like](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [Share](#)

Responses to Sekuru Gudo veku Dotito's post

Tendai Mushaya

@MushayaTendai

Dec 11, 2021

Sounds of joy, sounds of hope for one who stares glimpses of light at the very end of a dark tunnel!!! This is one of so many reasons that will kill ZANU PF!!!

Makomborero

@MokoscoM

Dec 12, 2021

Buller proof yakapinda kare

Isaiah Sibanda

@MhaziChirumhan1

Dec 11, 2021

Sekuru muno uraisa varakashi ne BP. Chaunga icho vanopinda mumachira ne bhutsu.

The Real Mbuya Gudo From Dotito@Cazawaty

@cazawaty

Dec 11, 2021

Unlike some rallies these are adults not school kids

Chikomana Chitema

@ChikomanaC

Dec 11, 2021

Most of those people gathered there either are not registered to vote or do not have the necessary documentation to vote

@NgiroziY

Dec 11, 2021

Very normal?

Uncle Alfie

@Alfred67686158

Dec 11, 2021

Chamisa chibaba

The Immortal

@Hloko_Sibangani

Dec 11, 2021

Theodore Katuka

@Katuka1Katuka

Dec 11, 2021

Dougie haana bhora saka hapana chekumumakira ane bhora ndiye akamakwa NHM

Jeff Makate

@samaz_dunga

Dec 11, 2021
[@GetVideoBot](#)

yoBoy
[@tichaveShona](#)
Dec 11, 2021
[@GetVideoBot](#)

Cherima Toddy
[@CherimaToddy](#)
Dec 11, 2021

vakaregister kuvhota here vanhu vese avo?

Responses to Team Pachedu post

Mani
[@opensaysmani](#)
Aug 8, 2020 [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#)

Jess Geraldine
[@VaChivi](#)
Aug 8, 2020 This is what all soldiers should be feeling and this is correct !!!!!!!!!!! If they stand with us , things will happen

Gugu Brown
[@brown_gugu](#)
Aug 10, 2020
Stupidity opposition drama working with their handlers with not succeed in Zimbabwe.

Hope Jnr
[@Jnrhop](#) Aug 8, 2020 This guy is not a soldier at all ndi Tinashe wagambakwe uyu
look closely

King Jay
[@KingJayZim](#)
Aug 9, 2020 While I'm tempted to say "YAH", I revert to my 'factory setting' saying ... "Haiwawo"! No "soldier" in the ZNA, whatever would DARE to film himself let alone post the video ! FOCUS! Nxa!

Stuart Johanne

@StuartJohanne2

Aug 28, 2022 Angori 1 plus anoudzirwa zvekuita

jork

@jokosi09

Aug 9, 2020 That's a military uniform, the only difference is he buttoned the top button chete.. We used to army camouflage shirts those rollups it also has camouflage jackets iro rakapfeka so does police. The camouflage resembles that of ZNA. Army camouflage are unique of each country.

James Trest

@trest_james

Aug 8, 2020 There was a clip when the army took over showing the general holding the constitution, saying they take their mandate from the constitution..

'President' - Nelson Chamisa Documentary

@DirectorCamilla

Aug 8, 2020 [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#)

Tonderayi Machiridza

@tonde_machi

Aug 8, 2020 I hope the men in the army listen to this! [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#)

sirgalec

@sirgalec Aug 8, 2020 The future of our children is at stake. I agree % . This is the spirit! Refuse t be used. Izvezvi if u retire, what is it that u show ur children for all the yrs in service? Torn shoes and going back to rural areas! Nononono [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#) including lives dze masoja.

Oscar Ncube

@ThobelaNcube

Aug 8, 2020 [#ZimbabweanLivesMatter](#)

baba joju

@Ganda_matsiko Aug 8, 2020

Matanga kushudha mafirimu, ndiani uyu akapfekera hembe dzinenge dzemaSoja

ZiG Emir Of Sanyati

@MarlvernAddy

Aug 8, 2020 Big up JahNoz anywhere u der ..bho heree bhoooooooo?????

Appendix k: Literature review article/book chapter summaries and findings.

	Author and Title	Summary	Findings
1.	Last Moyo. 2020. The End of the Public Sphere: social media, Civic Virtue, and the Democratic Divide.	The digital public sphere in Zimbabwe is affected by digital divide challenges. For those who can afford Twitter (now X), the poor in Zimbabwe's political engagement is inhibited by the inability to sustain meaningful contribution to debate due to lack of knowledge (shallow content levels). The poor on Twitter also engage in uncivil conduct (use of unethical language). The poor also lack requisite skills to navigate the digital communication space.	The democratic divide existing in the digital public sphere undermines the internet's democratic functions. Exchanges on Twitter (now X) interlocutors is characterised by name calling, insults, threats and hate speech. Instead of inviting fellow interlocutors to debate, X users employ injurious speech based on ethnic differences. Such speech is a representation of social media abuse and the rise of an anarchic and dysfunctional public sphere.
2.	Tenford Chitanana. 2019. Disinformation and digital disparities in fledgling democracies. A case study of post Mugabe Zimbabwe.	The Zimbabwean digital public sphere is affected by challenges related to disinformation and misinformation campaigns in digital communication spaces. This disinformation is mainly related to political communication. Misinformation campaigns are mostly visible in the build up to general elections, during elections and the immediate aftermath. Consumers of online news have limited knowledge about disinformation in Zimbabwe.	There is significant growth in communication technology penetration in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe (100% mobile penetration by December 2017 according to POTRAZ). However, entrenched social, economic and political factors affect access to the technologies by citizens. Misinformation has its roots in the liberation struggle. The Smith regime used Radio Rhodesia and fliers to spread misinformation. The nationalist movement used Radio Mozambique and <i>pungwes</i> (night meetings for educating the masses). Access to the internet is stratified which emphasizes the urban-rural divide. The stratification of data determines how people connect and use information. Those who have more money have access to a broad range of data packages and the poor mainly use WhatsApp. Pro-government Facebook pages increased during the build up to the 2018 election. These Facebook pages posted images generating fake screenshots carrying anti-political opposition messages. The pro-government Facebook pages carried perspective shifting and historical revisionist content. Apart from Facebook pages, the pro-government digital brigade created

			fake accounts on other platforms and sensationalist blogs. The elite generate information on Titter/X, and downstream consumers access the content through Facebook and WhatsApp as recipients of political news produced by the elite on Twitter/X.
3.	Tenford Chitanana. 2019. From Global to Local, Metropolitan to Village A Case for a Definitional and Context-Oriented Approach to Examining the 'Digital Divide'.	There is a disconnect between global perspectives of the digital divide and the local experiences from urban and rural Zimbabwe. To get a better sense of the digital divide, access and utilization of ICTs should be assessed with an equitable consideration of individuals' needs, depending on their social, political and economic contexts.	The Zimbabwean digital divide is based on geography and age. Rural communities are less connected to the new media technologies as compared with their peers in the urban areas. Young people are more active and adept at using new media. In some rural areas in Zimbabwe, some people have not encountered new communication technologies and would neither know how to use them nor would they be interested in using the new technologies. Individuals may do without ICTs, and they can participate in issues that they find engaging with or without new media technology. Rather than transplanting western technologies to the south as a panacea for deep-rooted socioeconomic challenges, policymakers and scholars should understand the needs of their target community and promote adoption and adaptation of ICTs.
4.	Chipo Dendere. 2019. Tweeting to democracy: a new anti-authoritarian liberation struggle in Zimbabwe.	The social movements originating from social media are by a youth citizenry that does not feel indebted to the liberation struggle. The born free generation is willing to take political risks by speaking candid politics online, mobilise their peers for street protests that can unseat an illegitimate government.	Social media has increased citizen discussion of politics beyond mainstream media ad other traditional communication platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp have contributed to significantly to citizen participation in political discussion. However, engagement on social media is not a guarantee for offline political participation by Zimbabweans. There is also the danger of fake news spreading fast on digital media platforms. Election results in Zimbabwe provide evidence that robust online engagement does not translate to voter participation.
5.	Nigel Kudzai Kwenda. 2019. Social media and the	Social media platforms have expanded access to information and increased public participation in discussions. Social media platforms	People no longer rely on mainstream media as the only source of news as they have various other sources of news such as social

	democratization of the Zimbabwean political arena.	also facilitate a more direct approach by politicians to reach the general population, circumventing gatekeepers who inhibit such interaction in mainstream print and broadcast media. Civil Society Organizations and political groups in Zimbabwe harness social media for activism. social media is therefore an alternative space for activism.	media platforms. By sourcing news from other outlets apart from mainstream media, the people of Zimbabwe are no longer susceptible to state propaganda. This means that citizens are now able to make well informed political decisions. However, diversity of news sources has not changed voting patterns in Zimbabwe. The post-Mugabe government is making effective use of social media platforms by engaging with the electorate. Citizens fear state surveillance of their communications in the social media space in Zimbabwe, therefore, they participate with caution.
6.	Admire Mare. 2020. State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe.	Private telecommunications operators in Zimbabwe comply with government orders to shut down the internet. The internet shut dos took place between 2026 and 2019. The government weaponizes the law to enforce the internet shutdowns. The telecommunications companies comply with the government orders to abide by their licensing obligations and out of fear of political harassment and victimization because they fear arbitrary imprisonment.	The internet shutdown of 6 July 2016 was partial. It lasted for four hours. The social movements #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka called for a national shutdown to put pressure on the government to resolve the economic meltdown crippling the country. The social movements mobilized for the stay away action via social media. The government therefore enforced a four-hour blackout of WhatsApp. The internet shutdown of 14 January 2019 totally disrupted all internet and social media services nationwide. The nation was protesting a 150 percent increase in fuel prices. The protests were violent. The minister of state security ordered the internet shutdown in terms of the Interception of Communications Act of 2007.
7.	Amy Stevens, Pete Fussey, Daragh Murrey, Kudakwashe Hove and Otto Sake. 2023. "I started seeing shadows everywhere": The diverse chilling effects of surveillance in Zimbabwe.	State surveillance of the digital communication space is on the increase. The surveillance of the online space by the state has implications for human rights and social justice. The chilling effects of surveillance are under researched in Africa. State and non-state actors are involved in surveillance in Zimbabwe. It is a combination of big data, social media and other digital monitoring and traditional human surveillance practices in Zimbabwe. The effects of the	State surveillance activities by specialist intelligence units in Zimbabwe involve the co-option of third-party and informal elements, sometimes amounting to a form of surveillance by proxy. In Zimbabwe, human rights activists are abducted/kidnapped and handed over to the police to be charged with for various trumped-up charges against the state. Surveillance in Zimbabwe includes the infiltration of seemingly private digitally hosted discussions on WhatsApp.

		combination of online and offline surveillance in Zimbabwe is fear. The fear affects the functioning of participatory democracy.	The effects of surveillance on activists include greater restraint in political conversations, increased self-censorship, limited participation on social media, amplified awareness of surroundings, eroded interpersonal trust and restricted economic participation through limited access to work and informal blacklisting.
8.	Allen Munoriyarwa. 2022. The militarization of digital surveillance in post-coup Zimbabwe: ‘Just don’t tell them what we do’.	There is lack of substantial research on military surveillance activities against civilians in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Defence Force is involved in the ZNU PF factional fights by practicing surveillance on some party members. The ZDF acquires the surveillance technologies from China. The ZDF’s acts of surveillance entrench authoritarianism as it is interference with human rights and leads to the increased shrinking of civilian space for protest and democratic engagement.	Surveillance by the ZDF is done by units such as Military Intelligence (MI), the Special Air Services (SAS) and the Signals Unit (SU). These army units have been acquiring surveillance equipment to facilitate the military’s surveillance of public spaces and communication surveillance. The military is therefore skilled in public space and cyber-communication surveillance. A huge budget from the national fiscal provides the ZDF with enough finances for the purchase of sophisticated surveillance equipment. The main threats to ZANU PF rule are prioritised for surveillance by the military. The ZDF surveillance operations are outside the boundaries of the constitution of Zimbabwe. The role of the CIO and ZRP, who have the constitutional mandate to carry out digital surveillance for criminal investigations, has been usurped by the military. The institutions that should control the military surveillance activities are too weak to carry out the mandate effectively. The military surveillance of the public and digital space is a danger to democracy and has eroded individuals’ liberties to dissent.
9.	Jonah Reisboard. 2022. “No strings attached”: learning and collaboration in the Sino-Zimbabwe surveillance.	In the China-Zimbabwe surveillance relationship, the primary mechanism is collaboration, and Zimbabwe leads China in achieving a unique Zimbabwean type of autocracy. Zimbabwe uses China as a source of surveillance technology. However, the Zimbabwean government has largely depended on local companies and local laws to entrench repression.	The government of Zimbabwe is notorious for shutting down the internet in times of political turmoil. However, the courts have at times protected citizen rights. For example, the courts opposed the central government’s efforts to coerce Econet (network provider) to share its subscriber database for its mobile payment service. China provides Zimbabwe with tools for

			repression. However, Zimbabwean human rights abuses do not stem from Chinese influence. The government of Zimbabwe purchased CloudWalk facial recognition technology from China in 2018. However, most of the surveillance technology comes from local companies such as Tendy Three. The government of Zimbabwe is also adept at the surveillance of the online space, social media and the internet. The surveillance activities are augmented by repressive legislation.
10.	Vincent Chenzi. 2021. Fake news, corruption, Human Rights and the Mnangagwa regime.	The Mnangagwa government utilizes fake news which is disseminated through mainstream print, radio, television and social media platforms. False news is used by the state to fight against all opposition to the ZANU PF government. Fake news is also used to vindicate state corruption and human rights abuses. However, only supporters and beneficiaries of the ZANU PF patronage system accept the fake media content generated by the state.	Fake news generated by the ZANU PF government acceptance is primarily determined by political affiliation. Those who believe the government produced fake news are the ones enjoying the status quo. The majority of Zimbabweans do not believe state produced fake news. They believe that the Mnangagwa government is involved in corruption, human rights abuse and victimization of the political opposition. Disinformation and misinformation campaigns have failed to exonerate the ZANU PF government in the eyes of both Zimbabweans and the international community.
11.	Tendai Marima. 2021. Zimbabwe: social media as a toxic tool or a future bridge to peace.	Increased social media use has brought a variety of platforms on which people can express themselves. However, state restrictions on the use of digital media platforms on one hand, and polarization on the other, has increased.	President Mnangagwa urged ZANU PF youth to battle it out online and defend the party. The Zimbabwean social media landscape was already polarised when the president made the statement. During the 2018 elections, supporters of political parties sent out distasteful messages against their rivals seeking to discredit them. The practice of spreading fake news through social media became prominent. #ThisFlag and the ZCTU called for a nationwide stay away action to protest a 150 percent fuel price increase in January 2019. The minister of state in the president's office for national security ordered the shutting down of the whole internet provision system on safety

			grounds. The state also abducted and tortured the opposition. Women were abused online.
12.	Simbarashe Gukurume. 2022. Navigating Precarious Spaces Youth, Social Movements and Political Activism in Zimbabwe from the book <i>Youth Led Social Movements and Peacebuilding in Africa</i> .	Social media platforms have facilitated the youth to confront a predominantly authoritarian state in Zimbabwe. Through online social movements, the youth have managed to express their anger against the government. The anger stems from joblessness, government corruption, police brutality and poor service delivery in urban spaces. These youth social movements contributed to the fall of Mugabe. However, the social movement organised protests helped to sanitize the coup against Mugabe in November 2017. Post Mugabe, youth activists are arrested and detained without trial.	The constitution of Zimbabwe provides for the right to peaceful protest by citizens. However, activists continue to be arrested for exercising the constitutional rights to protest or organize. The police brutalize activists during and after arrests. Political activists are subjected to state surveillance and intimidation. Mugabeism (the system that sustained Mugabe's rule) is still in place even after Mugabe was deposed by the military. What Mugabe would do clandestinely to contain dissent, Mnangagwa does openly. Surveillance has intensified under Mnangagwa. To circumvent state surveillance and brutality, youth activists switched from offline to online activism.
13.	Collen Sabao and Theophilus Tinashe Nenjerama. 2023. Politicking or Political contestation? The Digital Space as Alternative Public Sphere in the Run up to the 2023 Public Elections in Zimbabwe" from the book <i>Electoral politics in Zimbabwe Volume 11</i> .	Social media platforms have the potential to provide an alternative public sphere. ZANU PF tries to quash any oppositional political organization through the digital media communication space. One of the methods used by ZANU PF to counter online dissent is through deploying counter voices online to those of the opposition. The deployment of pro ZANU PF troops to provide a counter narrative is an addition to the earlier methods of threats and arrests of opposition activists. Laws are also used to criminalise opposition forms of protest such as the using the national flag as a symbol of protest by the opposition. Laws such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act of 2021 and the Patriotic Act of 2023 were added to other laws used by the ZANU PF government to criminalise dissent.	The growth of social media platforms over the past two decades has facilitated for the widespread debating and interrogating of issues on almost all facets of human existence. The availability of social media platforms to the opposition makes it easier to challenge the ZANU PF government's desire to gag information flow in a bid to shield the spread of narratives of its mismanagement of the country from the world public gaze. The ZANU PF government does not want issues to do with the government's ineptitudes, election rigging/theft, electoral malpractices, corruption, the ailing economy, state sponsored violence, state of medical facilities and levels of unemployment to be discussed in the media. Through social media, the likes of Mawarire managed to speak of a nationalism contrary to that of the ZANU PF government. The alternative public sphere that web-based social media platforms represent in Zimbabwe has become a heavily restricted and monitored space. The Mnangagwa government has also harnessed the

			power of social media as an influence of political consciousness and ideas. ZANU PF functionaries have accounts on social media for the counter narrative war such as party spin doctor Nick Mangwana, ZANU PF Official, ZANU PF Patriots and ZANU PF Youth League.
14.	Bhekizulu Bethapi Tshuma, Lungile Augustine Tshuma and Mphatise Ndlovu. 2022. Twitter and political discourses: how supporters of Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU PF party use Twitter for political engagement.	Social networks are transforming political engagement in contemporary Zimbabwe. Social media platforms offer counter-hegemonic opportunities in the Zimbabwean political landscape. However, supporters of ZANU PF are appropriating and using Twitter (now X) for political engagements. Through Varakashi, post Mugabe ZANU PF is increasingly occupying online spaces traditionally associated with opposition voices. Varakashi defend and promote the interests of the Mnangagwa government.	@nickmangwana and @Jones Musara were very active and consistently tweeted during the November 2017 coup period. The coup is sanitized by the Varakashi through the politics of naming (identity making speech act to produce certain viewpoints and thoughts). The Varakashi used logos in ways that seek to justify the coup by invoking the constitution. During the July 2018 elections, Varakashi depicted the elections as a watershed moment requiring the electorate to choose between forces of good (ZANU PF) and forces of evil (MDC Alliance). The MDC Alliance leader Chamisa was portrayed as a Mugabe proxy. Varakashi deployed forensic rhetoric in advancing blame-shifting and blame-deflection strategies following the military shootings of MDC supporters on 1 August 2018. Varakashi blamed the MDC Alliance leadership for the shootings. The MDC Alliance contested the results of the 2018 elections at the constitutional court. Varakashi proclaimed the court contestation as a blessing in disguise to Mnangagwa and ZANU PF because their victory was going to be proven authentic in court. Varakashi ridiculed the MDC Alliance and Chamisa as bitter losers. In the aftermath of the constitutional ruling in favour of ZANU PF, Varakashi started advancing New Dispensation, Second Republic and New Dawn discourses.
15.	Albert Chibuwe. 2020. Social Media and Elections in	The July elections were characterised by the extensive use of social media platforms, Twitter (now X), Facebook and WhatsApp	There was misuse of the digital space which did not promote opening of the democratic space in

	Zimbabwe: Twitter War between Pro-ZANU-PF and Pro-MDC-A Netizens.	in particular. The two top presidential candidates Mnangagwa and Chamisa were leading contenders on these social media platforms in their struggle for hegemony. The contestation was evidently strong between Chamisa's Nerrorists and Mnangagwa's Varakashi supporters. The exchange between these protagonists was characterised by fake news and mudslinging.	the country. Instead, the use of abusive and inflammatory words further entrenched and widened the political chasm of the already polarized polity. The prodemocracy movement also engaged in twitter-based opinion polling before the elections. The pro-Chamisa opinion polls contacted through twitter were mere propaganda antics because the reality of the election results was far from what the polls reflected. Such antics contributed to the outbreak of the post-election violence. Supporters' hopes and expectations were raised too high, and the resultant anger and frustration was let out through the violent demonstrations that ensued.
16.	Allen Munoriyarwa and Collen Chambwera. 2020. Tweeting the July 2018 elections in Zimbabwe.	Hashtags were used to discuss the legitimacy of the 2018 election. The discussions were based on the history of election related violence and other electoral matters. The dominant issues discussed, apart from election violence, were reforms, democratization, preparedness of ZEC, the non-partisanship of electoral and other institutions as well as the post elections future. Interlocutors gravitated towards using uncivil language. Some interlocutors were sexist, vulgar and defamatory. While Twitter (now X) can be disruptive, it can support open debates that may not be hosted on mainstream media in environments where media is censored.	Two themes emerged from the study of the use of hashtags during the 2018 elections. The first one was that hashtags were a space for the rationalisation of party-state conflation. The second was that hashtag tweets were acts of political resistance. The hashtag was also used for memory mining during the 2018 election period by the political elite from across the political divide. Chamisa's supporters normalised hegemonic masculinities by attacking the female ZEC leader with sexist references. The Nerrorists attacked the electoral processes online in the same way Chamisa did offline. Varakashi blurred party-state lines by defending the ZEC against Nerrorist attacks. Such Varakashi actions portrayed the picture of a captured ZEC by ZANU PF. Nerrorists were the MDC Alliance voice online to resist ZANU PF authoritarianism. Nerrorist online discourses did not touch on the chaos of anarchism as they focused on just resisting ZANU PF rule.
17.	Charles Moyo. 2019. Social media, civil resistance, the	An increase in internet access and ICT devices led to a surge in social media use by the citizenry in Zimbabwe. The most popular social	The forces disgruntled with ZANU PF governance over the years found voice for resistance through social media platforms. The government

	Varakashi factor and the shifting polemics of Zimbabwe's social media "wars".	media platforms by users are WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram. Social movements harness these platforms to resist the ZANU PF government authoritarianism. #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, #This Gown, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare and #ThisFlower rose to prominence through social media use. After the fall of Mugabe, Varakashi emerged to give a pro-government narrative against the pro-democracy online social movements.	of national unity of 2009 to 2013 facilitated widening of the internet broadband and acquisition of ICT products. Social movements capitalised on the availability of the internet to establish pro-democracy and online reliant social activism. through the internet, social movements established the opening up of online debates, hence deepening of freedom of expression. The social movements also facilitated online policy debates and interviews. Social movements also counteract government monopoly of information, propaganda and autocratic discourses. However, the digital communication space is hampered by state repression, draconian cyber regulatory frameworks and an ever-shrinking democratic space post Mugabe. Social movements suffer from internal contradictions. The social movements' biggest liability is their urban orientation and exclusionary tendency which overlook the rural populace which constitute 67 percent of the population.
18.	Esther Mavengano and Thamsanqa Moyo. 2023. The semiotics of political schisms and prospects of nation building: "Varakashi 4ED" and the "Nerrorists"" from the book <i>Electoral politics in Zimbabwe Volume 1</i>.	Semantic dissonance in discourses about Operation Restore Legacy, New Dispensation and Second Republic were deliberately constructed to justify the removal of Mugabe from power by the military. The Mnangagwa government continues with a culture of lethal politics and muzzling of opposition voices. The continuation blurs the boundaries between the post-Mugabe era and the new era which makes it difficult to establish why Mugabe was deposed. The Mnangagwa government is even more determined to annihilate the opposition than Mugabe was. The mushrooming of 4ED groups across the country conveyed the message that Mnangagwa was determined to retain power through personalised patronage politics. 4ED construct was employed in lexicalisations of us/them/sons and daughters of the land dichotomies which were	There are continuities with the Mugabe era in political contests framed in discourses of war. However, Mnangagwa directed the ZANU PF youths to galvanise themselves for battling the enemies of ZANU PF online. Varakashi online are not concerned whether the debate is constructive or not. Theirs is to defend the ZANU PF government from what they see as the proliferation of sellouts and puppets in online platforms. In order to entrench the view that ZANU PF is invincible, Varakashi use an array of neologisms bordering on vulgarity. The oppositions is portrayed by Varakashi as barking dogs with no bite. Varakashi discourse conveys hostility of ZANU PF towards the West. Both Varakashi and Nerrorists discourses convey an impulse to defend their party leaders, produce their own political

		brought to the fore in problematic power retention conversations about citizenship, nationhood and (un)belonging. The Varakashi political philosophy perpetuates Mugabeism and reminds the nation of the ubiquitous political violence.	predispositions and subvert discourses from the others' camp. The post-Mugabe era has seen the emergence of and entrenchment of polarities between official discourse and reality on the ground. Both leaderships in ZANU PF and the opposition encouraged Twitter (now X) warfare which hampered national unity and rebuilding.
19.	Obert Hodzi and Ozge Zihnioglu. 2024. Beyond 'networked individuals': social-media and citizen-led accountability in political protests.	The accessibility to the WhatsApp platform has increased in the past decade in Sub-Saharan Africa. The benefits are that new communities of networked individuals outside of the traditional geographic localities have emerged. Ordinary citizens are now able to autonomously gather, process and publish information and by so doing taking away state monopoly over information. Local conflicts and grievances have also been globalised, building a critical base for evidence-based advocacy. However, people's inability to form robust online communities has led to them failing to transform their networks into agents of change and reform.	The internet democratises information by simplifying the creation, duplication, storage and distribution of data. In authoritarian states where information production and access are restricted, social media creates space through agency of ordinary citizens to produce and disseminate information far and wider than their governments would normally allow. Social media therefore liberalises information, taking away the autonomy of the state. With adaptation and skill, social media can be used to create a collective identity and coordination of action. However, on its own, social media cannot sustain the collective challenge against a well-organised and structured authoritarian regime like ZANU PF. Social media activism lacks the ability to transform its networked individuals into social change agents able to build and sustain common purposes, take collective action and achieve a collective objective. Social media is just a resource for mobilisation that rallies people into action relevant to their context.
20.	Paidamoyo Nyoka and Mary Tembo. 2021. Dimensions of democracy and digital political activism on Hopewell Chin'ono and Jacob Ngarivhume Twitter accounts towards the July 31st	Alternative communications spaces have revolutionised political communication in Zimbabwe. Political polarization has created a monolithic voice in the mainstream media. Digital activism has transformed into social media dissidence; calling for the resignation of the head of state and government and also mobilising for demonstrations. There is a relationship between digital democracy and digital activism, enabling political advocacy and	Digital activism takes various forms and has the ability to inspire collective offline activities in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. The 31st July 2020 demonstrations sought to correct social ills such as socio-economic and political challenges, human rights abuses, rampant corruption and a flawed justice system. Social media flourishes as a counter to a hegemonic sphere lampooning the Mnangagwa administration. The internet and social media are useful tools to

	demonstrations in Zimbabwe.	lobbying. Twitter (now X) is used to safeguard the lives of activists.	promote online participatory behaviour, facilitate and mobilise offline protest. Twitter (now X) is weaponised by ordinary people to seize power from the repressive regime. Social media assumes the dissidence dimension as digital activists organise and mobilise citizens to overthrow the government in Zimbabwe. Twitter (now X) is a political progress medium in Zimbabwe for political discussion, engagement and interaction among the citizens. It therefore has created a political home where the people or netizens from different backgrounds equally engage in debates.
21.	Teddy Mungwari and Alfred Ndhlebe. 2019. Social media and political narratives: a case of Zimbabwe.	Social media played a critical role in narrating the events of the 2018 general election period. Social media influenced some decisions by the politicians and all the political key players. There were shifts in information dissemination and information acquisition during the 2018 election period. Social media capacitated citizen involvement and robust engagement and discussions which changed people's perceptions of politics. The good side and bad side of social media emerged during the elections period. Social media use violated media ethics, exposed people to marauding opponents and in certain instances social media was used to spread fake news. Cyber warfare became prominent on various social media platforms with proponents hiding behind ghost accounts while others used their real names to amass attention and generate personal political mileage through spreading biased narratives, fake news and factualised opinions. Social media changed lives, perceptions and convictions. It enlightened some while it created fanatics in others.	The surge in the use of the internet and ICT products led to the widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in Zimbabwe. These social media platforms became a launch pad for political activism, civil resistance and exposure of corruption and propel social movements like #ThisFlag, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, #ThisGown, Baba Jukwa and others. Social media provided a discursive space for ordinary citizens' voices to articulate their problems and to challenge the excesses of the government, which is epitomised by endemic corruption and bad governance. These factors have caused massive unemployment as well as plummeting the national economy. Social media brought in freedom of expression which translated to offline protest. Social media has also facilitated circumventing state control of information dissemination. The vices of the state in manipulating media outlets and influencing their work was diluted and made less effective through the use of social media. The posting of videos and photographs on social media gave people news as the events unfolded giving less room for the spinning of state-controlled media. However,

			social media platforms also opened doors for bullies and warmongers. People from across the political divide attacked each other for supporting certain political parties, showing deep seated rage among Zimbabweans. Journalists in the mainstream media now largely rely on social media as sources for their stories in newspapers and broadcasting.
22.	Trust Matsilele, Shepherd Mpofu, Mbongeni Msimanga and Lungile Tshuma. 2021. Transnational hashtag protest movements and emancipatory politics in Africa: a three-country study.	The appropriation of technology for activism purposes has taken root in many sub-Saharan African countries. The dictatorships in the region resort to internet shutdowns when citizens go online to protest abuses. Hashtag movements achieved a modicum of success by forcing the leadership to make piecemeal concessions of varying degrees. There is appropriation of social media parody accounts used to endorse protests and rendering support by well known actors which is meant to assist in mobilisation and giving moral support to those on the ground. The advent of internet technologies is making it increasingly difficult for dictators to ignore external pressure with tyrants resorting to either piecemeal concessions or counter cyber propaganda.	The use of digital tools has not yielded significant results as in Zimbabwe online campaigns have not morphed into significant offline activism and subsequently to the change of government. Ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe with no institutional power were able to join and contribute to a national conversation around the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter therefore served as a precursor to open and defiant protests in that it sensitised and mobilised the masses to cyberspaces. The Mnangagwa government still resorts to Mugabe era tactics of blaming the victim when the opposition is brutalised. Mnangagwa has deepened the militarisation of state institutions, a phenomenon started by his predecessor Mugabe.
23.	Ishmael Mugari. 2020. The dark side of social media in Zimbabwe: Unpacking the legal framework conundrum.	Social media platforms have brought new challenges on the national security landscape. Irresponsible use of social media has resulted in social vices such as violence, terrorism, child pornography and many other social ills. Some countries have resorted to strict regulatory frameworks that criminalise and penalise some of the unethical social media actions perceived as threats to national security. In Zimbabwe, social media platforms have been used to instigate violent protests, to issue subversive statements and to spread fake news, causing fear and despondency amongst citizens. Social media platforms have also been used to facilitate human	The adoption of social media as communication platforms has brought a dilemma on the government and its agencies. Facebook has mainly been used to issue subversive statements and to urge the citizens to revolt against the government. The challenge in controlling social media communication has facilitated the spread of fake news on social media platforms. The government finds itself in a difficult conundrum, where it must balance between harnessing the positive aspects of social media and dealing with threats that the social media bring. Whilst the constitution sets a positive framework, especially from a human rights perspective,

		trafficking and distribution of pornographic materials.	other statutory instruments are inadequate or ineffective in dealing with social media threats. Convictions were difficult on arrested social media offenders due to the absence of specific legal instruments with which to effect charges.
24.	Newman Sango, Ichsan Malik and Gede Sumertha. 2022. Social media a political fuel to social conflicts: A comparative case of Zimbabwe and Indonesia in de-escalation of conflicts in future elections.	The use of social media increased during the 2018 election period in Zimbabwe. There was post-election violence which was motivated by using social media platforms. Social media and internet use laws should be put in place to avoid social media instigated violence.	Facebook was one of the major social media platforms used in Zimbabwe between June 2018 and January 2019. Many protestors used the Facebook platform to communicate about the delayed election results and violence erupted. The government of Zimbabwe managed to contain social media use in both politically motivated conflicts of August 2018 and January 2019 by shutting down the internet completely.