

Full Length Research Paper

Interactivity and cyber democracy: The case of Zimbabwe's online newspapers

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This paper discusses the potential for promoting cyber-democracy through interactivity on news websites. The paper views interactivity and cyber-democracy on the online arena as central to free expression. The paper argues that the Internet is endowed with possibilities to promote the threefold ideal for public deliberations, that is, a conducive virtual environment for interactivity, cyber-democracy and a broadened public sphere. A content analysis of interactive tools carried out on 22 Zimbabwean online newspapers revealed that many newspapers are providing interactive tools that are of limited relevance to interactive citizen engagement with political issues. Different models were employed to assess the interactivity levels that the various feedback tools accorded citizens with a view to measure the potential for cyber-democracy. The three aspects of public deliberation and citizen engagement identified in this paper were found to be interdependent, that is, when one was low the same would be for other two.

Key words: cyber-democracy, interactivity, online newspapers, freedom of expression.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwean online news: Not yet post colonialism

Freedom of expression is not a 'nice to have' concept, but a bare necessity in any situation where human beings are involved. Freedom of expression and access to information is of paramount importance if citizens' sense of belonging is to be upheld. This is why it is important for a country to uphold and safeguard freedom of expression for citizens to be partakers in issues of governance. It goes without saying, that democracy, vague as it is, is a widely revered concept, with some countries deemed undemocratic and others more democratic. Freedom of expression, access to information and democracy are issues that form part of the puzzle on the path to the

legitimacy of those who are in power. At stake in Zimbabwe are the issues of doubt, scepticism and mistrust that hover around the legitimacy of those that occupy political positions. It is clear that there are specific linkages between media control, politics and the election in Zimbabwe and it has been argued that undermining the media weakens democratic practices (Mazango, 2005). This paper looks at new ways, while acknowledging the failures of traditional methods, of bringing sustainable freedom of expression, access to information and democracy through the new media.

The Zimbabwean media, dating back from colonial times, has been part of the civil service. Central to this civil service is the controlling arm of the government. The

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current government, more harsh than its predecessor (the colonial government), exercises autonomous control over both broadcast and print media. It prescribes what the mainstream media disseminate and uses the media as propaganda tools. Numerous reports and incidents that point to the risks involved in practicing independent journalism in Zimbabwe due to draconian media laws enforced by the ruling party, especially in the past two decades have been circulating through the media (Chuma, 2004). Tough media laws in Zimbabwe forced the closure of independent media and exiled most journalists to other African countries and abroad. These frustrated, exiled journalists established websites that focus on Zimbabwean news and issues: websites such as *changezimbabwe.com*, *zwnews.com*, and *newzimbabwe.com* to name but a few. Currently there are at least 34 Zimbabwe-focused Internet news websites established.

Online journalism is becoming increasingly important with repressive media laws that are strangling independent journalism within Zimbabwe. The online arena provides an alternative source of information for many Zimbabweans who can access it. In the light of the Zimbabwean media scenario, the provision of user-friendly interactive tools on these websites becomes of paramount importance because the traditional media has failed to tolerate the views of independent writers. There is such a distinct gap in news reportages between independent media and government controlled ones that readers do not know what to believe. Interactive tools empower readers to engage fully with texts and arrive at meaning on their own. This paper reports on the availability of interactive options on Zimbabwean newspaper websites aiming to discover the extent to which these news agencies utilise the two way-way communication and interactive features of the Internet.

RESEARCH METHODS

A research methodology similar to the ones used by Schultz (1999) and Rosenberry (2005) was developed for this project. 22 of the 34 online Zimbabwean newspapers were purposively selected for a content analysis. A list of Zimbabwean newspapers provided on the web site of Africa South of the Sahara (<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/africa/zimbambwe/zimnews.html>) was used as a sampling frame. It was one of the most reliable and up-to-date lists of Southern African online newspapers. The sampling frame was composed of both weekly and daily newspapers. The researcher purposively selected daily (those that were updated daily) web publications for the sake of uniformity.

Interactive tools were coded. It was not required to read through the entire news website. The study focused on the availability of feedback tools such as e-mail links and directories, chat rooms, blogs, online polls, and discussion forums. Due to the fluidity of online journalism, the coding scheme was left open for unexpected interactive options. Coding did not only include quantitative categories but qualitative notes, as well. This way it was possible to obtain more specific information on encountered interactive options, especially on the topics and structures of chats, polls, and forums. It acknowledged that recognizing the mere availability of interactive

options was not enough to describe the concept of interactivity. Hence, linking interactive options to characteristics drawn from cyber-democratic theory was used to provide the necessary descriptive tools for a qualitative analysis.

It was clear that the features to be examined in this study were fairly constant elements that did not change on a daily basis, unless a newspaper had launched a complete overhaul of its site. While topics of discussion forums or polls, for example, did change frequently, the availability of such tools did not.

Data were analysed by subjecting the identified interactive tool to an index of analysis as constructed by Shultz (1999). The index of feedback options assigns numeric values to interactive options in relation to the level of interaction they enable. The qualitative data were analysed and interpreted by drawing from different models interactive and cyber democracy models (McMillan and Hwang, 2002; Ferber et al., 2007).

Interactivity and cyber democracy: Theoretical models

Interactivity is an enabling factor of cyber democracy. There is a strong dependence cyber democracy has on interactivity and interactive features, hence interactivity models provide a theoretical basis for understanding cyber democracy. Increased interactivity broadens the spectrum of cyber democracy. Cyber democracy is a relatively new concept compared to interactivity which has already been the subject of discussion for quite a number of scholars from a wide range of fields (Heeter, 1989; Rafeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Ha and James, 1998; Choi 2004; McMillan and Hwang, 2002). Additionally, scholars contend that online political participation redefines democratic principles of access to information and transparency of the activities of the politicians (Garris et al., 2011; Radu, 2014). Interactivity then becomes a more advanced manifestation than mere access to information and transparency.

Measures of Perceived Interactivity (MPI) (McMillan and Hwang, 2002) is one theory that would help unpack cyber democracy. The approach focuses on the consumer's perceptions of a website's potential for interactivity. Apart from focusing on user perceptions or experiences of users, this approach interestingly combines the three basic elements of interactivity, which are direction of communication, user control and time, to come up with a holistic view. These elements, having appeared consistently in most of the interactivity literature, are central to the study of interactivity and consequently cyber democracy.

The MPI model, though designed specifically to explicate interactivity in relation to advertising, can be used as a basis for understanding cyber democracy. Though cyber democracy and advertising might appear to be parallel entities, there is a lot of correlation between the two terms. The overlap between the two lies in the idea both cyber democracy and advertising often aim to "get inside the head" of consumers (voters) and understand how and why they respond to messages (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). In cyber democracy and perceived interactivity are most likely to influence citizen perception and behaviour. Many people are becoming dissatisfied with traditional methods of political participation through representatives. They see politicians representing them, as constantly being involved in unproductive bickering in parliaments and houses of assembly (Dahlgren, 2013). Therefore, for the desired influence among the voters, an understanding of what triggers a specific behaviour pattern is required is of great importance to the evaluation of the added value that cyber democracy brings.

The mediated moderation model of interactivity as explicated by Bucy and Tao (2007) was also used to explain cyber democracy. The theory focuses on piecing together ideas from different approaches to locate commonality among them. The model approaches interactivity as technological attributes of mediated environments that enable reciprocal communication or information

exchange. According to this model, interaction can then be located between communication technology and users, and between users through technology, (Bucy and Tao, 2007). Most notably, the model combines ideas from message-centred, structural and perceptual approaches

Building on McMillan's (2002) four part model of cyber-interactivity, Ferber et al. (2007) developed a new model of cyber democracy. Central to McMillan's (2002) model are the three dimensions: receiver control of information, control of time and choice of subject. The model purports that one-way communication, which is equivalent to provision of information on websites, is actually monologue. Monologue, then, sometimes elicits feedback, which is still one-way with some limited participation. When this particular feedback, from the receiver, generates a response from the sender then it further develops into responsive dialogue. However, this level of communication is not yet ideal for cyber interactivity, until it takes a step further from this and paves the way for mutual discourse. According to McMillan (2002), mutual discourse allows both the sender and the receiver to generate messages. This means their roles can be interchanged.

Ferber et al. (2007) modify McMillan's measures of perceived interactivity model to explain three-way communication that taps into websites' potential for interactivity and public deliberation. They came up with a six part model to explain both interactivity and cyber democracy. The six-part model of cyber-interactivity asserts that McMillan's (2002) two-way communication which can be characterised by the provisions of e-mails cannot be used to measure the complexities of cyber-interactivity that other features offer. The fact that e-mails sent to the site's staff or to a politician if it is a political website, cannot be directly accessed by other site users unless approved, limits this interactive device to two way communication only. For communication to graduate to new levels of three-way communication, a site has to offer interactive tools that allow controlled response, for example features such as polls and bulletin boards, where users have access to other users' responses. Three-way communication is also enabled at an even higher level by the presence of forums and chat rooms. These devices allow for unlimited interaction among participants and offer users an opportunity to control content. Both the six-part model and the four-part models of cyber-interactivity provide important tools for the analysis of a website's potential to promote cyber democracy.

According to Bucy and Tao's (2007), interactivity lies in media attributes, technological features and modes of presentation. Similarly, Anttiroiko (2010) points to the empowering aspect of Web 2.0 applications that allow governments to make a leap towards post-modern governance. The availability of interactive tools enable the generation of web-based communities which facilitate interaction between users, and between users and government officials. Bucy and Tao (2007) advocate a narrow focus of interactivity to technological attributes or mediated environments that enable reciprocal communication or information exchange, which afford interaction between communication technology and users or between users and technology. The unit of measure according to this view should be interactive tools (Bucy and Tao, 2007; Rosenberry, 2005; Schultz, 1999; Massey and Levy, 1999; Choi, 2004). Interactive tools should then enable message sending or retrieval and even manipulation of content. Summing up the relationship between interactivity and the user, Bucy and Tao (2007) further acknowledge that the objective existence of interactive attributes does not guarantee the subjective experience of the user. Other variables such as the mediator variable, the moderator variable and Internet self-efficacy have some bearing on actual interactivity. Internet self-efficacy is the major factor that contributes inequalities among users and networks apart from the digital divide (Hacker et al., 2013). The mediator variable can be explained as an "intervening" variable or that which causes communication to take place. The mediator variable is also equated to functions of "cognitive mechanisms"; in other words, the user's

understanding and grasp of interactivity serves as the mediatory factor, while a moderation variable serves as a reserve from which the user taps into in times of need throughout the whole interactivity process (Bucy and Tao, 2007). Interactivity can still take place without moderation, yet the mediator variable is a pre-requisite.

THE QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of the content analysis of the interactive revealed that most of the newspaper sites (73% of the news sites) had an e-mail facility to contact newsroom, staff or friends. Only 18% of the sites did not offer any e-mail addresses. On almost all the sites, the e-mail facility was used to facilitate feedback from the readers or merely to contact the newsroom to post an article. 97% of the e-mail facilities on the websites were designed to facilitate one way or down-up communication. Of the 97% of e-mail use was for general purposes to contact newsroom. On most sites the general e-mail addresses were the most popular feedback tools and were not linked to any specific published article.

The second most popular e-mail facilities were e-mail addresses to writers and editors. 36% of the websites provided email addresses to writers or editors. Most of these e-mail addresses provided were of editors, not the writers of the articles. Under this category, the availability of the e-mail links was limited to a few writers or editors. 31% frequency on the list of e-mail addresses to editors/writers (limited) was considered quite high compared to the list of editors/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern) which had a 7% frequency. The general pattern offers a better opportunity for reactive response, which might in turn trigger interactivity. This is mainly because they will provide direct e-mail links to the authors of specific stories.

Very few sites provided e-mail links to at least some articles/authors of a limited pattern (9%). These sites displayed limited links to some previous articles or authors. For instance, on one of these sites one article provided a link to the author's blog. Following this link one could easily trace the development of events by making references to previous ones. The e-mail link of this type was limited to a few individual authors and articles. However, none of the sites offered this feature as a general pattern.

Most online newspapers (95%) in this sample did not provide e-mail links to politicians. The sites that offered this option consistently used it with a 3% frequency of appearance. The e-mail links of this nature provided were sometimes of quite high ranking politicians, which ushered in an ideal situation for cyber democracy if this interactive device were to be utilized by both the politicians and the users. Another interactive device that featured not very prominently (10% frequency) was e-mail link to friends initiated by news or discussion forums. This interactive feature was offered on 3 of the newspaper sites studied. E-mail links to friends initiated

by news or discussion forums were a common feature that sparked heated debate as users posted their opinion on news and topical issues. These culminated in discussion forums, another interactive feature to be reported on in this study.

Only 27% of the news websites offered discussion forums. All the news websites that offered discussion forums required registration for one to participate. To register, a greater number of the websites requested a potential participant to supply name, email address and password. The rest only required a simple registration, asking for e-mail address and password for one to register.

Only one site (*Zimdaily.com*) ran discussion forums related to news articles. Participants on this forum still had to follow the same registration procedure. The participants posted their responses to a news article, commenting sometimes on the authenticity of the information presented. Most of the time, the debates would deteriorate into a war of words among the participants. These debates sometimes supplied new information the article had missed. The participation of journalists in this particular forum was not quite evident. Users sometimes posted vulgar outbursts so much so that one would wonder if there was any journalist checking the postings before they were displayed on the newspaper site.

Twenty-seven percent of Zimbabwe's online newspapers offer blogs. Blogs on all these news websites were frequently updated and contained topical information. The blogs were dated and the pattern tallied with daily news information. Information contained on these blogs seemed to be quite similar to news articles. The only difference was most of the bloggers appeared to follow a certain format of writing, in most cases a feature writing format. Apart from presenting news articles, on a site such as *Change Zimbabwe*, bloggers posted general information. Bloggers on this site seemed to be correspondents for the site as the blog section had similar news to that on the website.

Only 9% of websites studied conducted polls and surveys. These sites mainly featured simple quick polls that asked readers about their preferred candidates during the run-up to the March elections in Zimbabwe. Though the elections were harmonized (presidential, parliamentary and local government), the main focus was on the presidential vote. Polls were conducted to ask the readers' perspectives on the presidential candidates.

This type of a quick poll only required the participant to click on the preferred candidate and send the results back. There was no provision made for extra comments. Only after sending the vote would a participant access the results of the overall survey. In this particular type of quick poll survey, not only were users given an opportunity to reflect on their preferred candidate, but they were also made aware of the presidential aspirants. Letters to the editor was another interactive tool used by

the online news websites. 18% of the Zimbabwean news websites displayed letters to the editors on their site. These online newspapers fell under the independent category of the Zimbabwean media. Most of the writers' articles focused on voting, electoral candidates, and some on politicians believed to be opportunistic. Letters entitled: "Vote with Gukurahundi (the genocide in Matabeleland soon after Zimbabwe got independent from colonialism) in mind", "Lets not split the vote", "Qualities needed by a president", "So the dogs are out again March 29th", "Buying votes from civil servants", "A tip for voters", "Lets have a white neutral leader", "Bronze not gold Makoni" among others, were posted and displayed on one of the websites. Chat rooms also featured on some of the websites. 13% of news websites explored offered chat rooms. The chat rooms offered were asynchronous and were mainly for social purposes. For instance, *Zimdaily.com* offered its own chat room known as "Zimface". This was a mere social utility feature that connects Zimbabweans across the globe. No specific topics were offered on these chat rooms. Users visited them to experience an online sense of belonging and to reconnect with former high school friends. Users formed sub-groups, depending on their unique and various interests. None of the online newspapers offered synchronous chats and journalists were neither participating nor hosting.

The frequency of appearance of interactive options, other than the one discussed in this paper, was very low, close to insignificance in relation to the context of this paper. Only one site offered mobile phone campaign (SMS services), the implementation of which was difficult to establish save for the fact that it was displayed on the home page of the site.

Tracing cyber-democracy in Zimbabwe's online newspapers

The results of the content analysis revealed that interactive features were used to capture the atmosphere and mood of the time. For instance, on the home page of one of the sites explored was displayed an online poll representing the aspiring presidential candidates. Active participation took place when users expressed their opinions on who they predicted was likely to win the presidential elections. Opinion polls of this nature promote cyber-democracy in two ways. Firstly, they give an opportunity for the participant to influence other users when he or she casts a vote for a preferred candidate. Secondly, when the user submitted his or her vote the overall results for the poll were displayed. The same user would then situate his or her opinion in the context of what the majority of people are thinking. The resultant level of communication was two-way communication.

Apart from aiding a bilateral flow of messages in the form of two-way communication (Choi, 2004), Internet

polls can also ignite and channel discussions and become part of a communicative level that can reach interactive level (Schultz, 1999). Internet polls are part of the Web 2.0 applications that are opening up avenues for increased political participation (Anttiroiko (2010), empowering aspect of new media. Internet polls were particularly popular among users, most probably because of their user-friendliness of being such a clique away. Most importantly, Internet polls added to the hype necessary to generate interest in politics which would culminate into further discussions on other interactivity tools. For instance, in the cited example of the Internet poll on one of Zimbabwe's online newspapers, users would discuss the results of the poll survey itself or the suitability of the candidates on chat rooms that were provided on the news website. Even though this was not ascertained in this study, the potential for poll surveys culminating in discussions cannot be ruled out. Despite the fact that the interactive level of communication due to polls was not established, this interactive device can still be hailed for engaging users in the political discourses of the time. Polls can also be heralded for initiating citizen engagement in governance and electoral issues. Such initiative usually produced the hype needed to stimulate interest, among voters, in politics.

However, Internet polls have their own limitations in terms of promoting cyber-democracy. The most glaring limitation is in the fact that only two of the 22 Zimbabwe's online newspapers offered poll surveys. This would affect accessibility by users, hence low cyber interactivity. Only quick poll surveys were conducted and the only other sophisticated survey, with an open-ended question, was not user friendly, as discussed elsewhere in this study. Quick poll surveys have inherent weaknesses in terms of facilitating cyber interactivity. According to Shultz (1999), Internet polls and surveys restrict users to operate merely on a reactive level of communication; they do not offer users an opportunity to engage in further discursive constructs that inform interactive communication. The other criticism levelled against Internet polls is that they do not transform into meaningful democracy on ground, in terms of removing unpopular politicians, the way real elections do. At best, they are used to test the popularity of the politicians which, in most cases, is usually parallel to the reality on ground. Internet polls, just like most online civic engagement tools, are limited factors of transformation (Dahlgren, 2013). In other words, their ability to transform into real meaningful democracy on the ground is minimal as they are mostly relegated to cyberspace.

27% of Zimbabwe's online newspapers used blogs to promote cyber-democracy. As highlighted above, blogs are used to present candid information, the likes of which would never be printed in state-controlled newspapers. Blogs on one of the news sites could be accessed under an umbrella heading, "Kick Mugabe Out". One did not even have to read through the texts posted on this

interactive device to know the type of information presented. This was clearly protest writing, given the political situation in Zimbabwe. According to Rosenberry (2005), citizen blogs, online letters and online polls are features that show that a newspaper website is empowering users with a channel to voice their opinions (putting institutional authority behind citizen voices). In the Zimbabwean context, the institutional authority could be the state and its media laws. If readers are empowered to write information that forms their opinions, in the traditional media this being regarded as contravening the media laws, then that would be true empowerment. Similarly, Dahlgren (2013) advocates a move away from politics whose terrain is defined only by politicians, but rather political debates that can develop anywhere and everywhere on the socio-cultural landscape. The fact that bloggers do not have to be necessarily in the same geographical location to influence each other by the ideas that they post on their blogs makes political debates accessible anywhere. Earlier on, Garris et al. (2011) had hailed this accessibility of information, which is not geographically bound, as a redefinition of political standards. According to the media laws such as POSA and AIPPA, it is a criminal offence to write and publish information that is negative about Mugabe (Lush and Kupe, 2005). With these laws still in place, it is quite clear the texts posted on these blogs would never be published in the traditional state-owned Zimbabwean media. With these laws still in place, interactivity tools such as blogs will play a special part in enabling a form of democratic deliberation with political issues that bypass the instituted draconian laws.

Following one of the bloggers' welcome statement to his blog, inferences can be made about perceptions of the user in terms of how he views the medium and its role. The blogger first introduces himself with "the opinions of a blogger, writer, singer, son, brother, father and husband". He goes on explicitly to distance himself from professional journalism and asserts himself as a true citizen journalist. Above all, he states his role of making the people aware of the political situation in Zimbabwe. Using McMillan and Hwang's (2002) Measures of Perceived Interactivity (MPI) model, the motives for setting up blogs on Zimbabwe's online newspapers can be inferred. The model attributes user perceptions or experiences of users as the main reason why participants engage with the media interactively. With this particular blogger, perceptions that prompted him to use this interactive device could be the potential of the Internet to reach out to an innumerable number of readers across geographical boundaries, what McMillan and Hwang (2002) termed synchronous communication on the MPI model. The blogger is very clear about his intention, which is to let as many people as possible know of the devastating rule in Zimbabwe. His perceptions of blogs and the Internet as a medium, therefore, have informed his choice of the best channel to create this awareness.

McMillan and Hwang (2002)'s Measures of Perceived Interactivity model also focuses on user experiences as the drive to interactivity. Applying this aspect of the model to Zimbabwe's online media landscape, then, two types of experience were noticeable. It could be experience with the online media, Internet proficiency or physical experience with the political situation, personal experience with the devastating rule. Both these experiences are apparent with the blogger. Scanning through the blogger's profile displayed on the page showed that he was a Zimbabwean who had left the country in 2000. This indicated that he was likely to have experienced the crises due to the current political situation. The fact that he is able to combine the two-way communication (to read and send messages) and control navigation/control choices (use an interactive device) to participate actively shows his Internet experience as explicated in McMillan and Hwang's (2002) MPI model. The two types of experience could have acted in combination to urge the blogger to engage interactively on one of Zimbabwe's online newspaper's website.

Apart from McMillan and Hwang (2002)'s MPI model, Ferber et al. (2007) propose a six-part model to analyze cyber-democracy on newspaper websites. The six-part model, as explained in the previous chapter, adds to McMillan's (2002) four-part model. The six-part model was purposively chosen because of its improvement on the four-part model, hence offering a comprehensive set of dimensions for the analysis and discussion of interactive devices and their role in cyber-democracy. According to both models, the provision of information on websites is a monologue, mainly because readers have no control over what they find on the site.

Both the four-part and six-part models classify feedback as one-way communication with limited participation. The findings of the content analysis in this study reveal that Zimbabwean online newspapers solicit feedback from their readers using the e-mail facility. According to the two models, communication of this nature restricts users to operate on a one-way communication basis. The e-mail device had the highest frequency -49% in relation to all the other interactive tools - yet it accords users minimal interactivity. There is usually no assurance that the solicited feedback will generate any response (Ferber et al., 2007). In relation to this study, what this means, therefore, is that even if the bulk of Zimbabwe's online newspapers is connecting readers to online editors, readers to other readers, readers to politicians and officials through the e-mail device, cyber-interactivity will remain low because of the inherent limitations of the feature to promote interactivity and/or cyber-democracy.

McMillan (2002)'s and Ferber et al. (2007)'s models also agree on how websites provide an opportunity for responsive dialogue which paves the way for two-way communication. In this category of communication, the sender still retains the primary control of the process

(McMillan, 2002). In the online newspapers explored in this study, the sender in the form of the online newspapers' staff loads the information on the website and decides on what interactive options to provide on the site. The interactive options that enable responsive dialogue are similar to those that allow two-way communication, devices such as Internet polls and e-mail to friends. The role of the reader is pre-determined by the online newspapers' staff. The reader is merely expected to read the texts, and use available interactive tools to send feedback. The major weakness of this type of communication is that it does not empower the reader. Again this adds to the criticism of low availability and low Internet accessibility that affects Zimbabwean online newspapers, apart from the issue of the inherent limitations of the device itself.

The fourth dimension in the direction of communication as proposed in the two models is mutual discourse. Mutual discourse gives both parties an equal opportunity to send and receive messages. The provision of interactive tools such as chat rooms and discussion forums signifies the occurrence of mutual discourse (Ferber et al., 2007). Chat rooms and discussion forums were offered on only two of the 22 online newspapers explored. There is such an anomaly in terms of the interactive devices that are given prominence in Zimbabwe's online newspapers and their corresponding significance in promoting interactivity and cyber-democracy. The online newspapers are focusing on providing interactive devices that are of low value to interactivity or that offer the user limited interactive communication. If online newspapers were really for the empowerment of the users, great emphasis would be given to devices that promote the highest level of interactivity. If prominence was given to devices like that of high interactive level chat rooms and discussion forums, these could have been more common on the websites, their value lying in facilitating mutual discourse.

Mutual discourse then leads to yet another level of communication termed public deliberation. Ferber et al. (2007) add public discourse and controlled responses to McMillan's (2002) four-part model, to come up with the six-part model. Considering that Mcmillan's two-way communication could not account for the kind of participation that is not moderated by journalists, Ferber et al. (2007) added public discourse and controlled response to make provisions for three-way communication. The study identified chat rooms, discussion forums and blogs as some of the devices that participants can use to deliberate on political discourse. Since users can post their opinions and get responses from other participants without necessarily having to go through a journalist, there is a possibility that an entirely free form of interaction will take place. For instance, in the discussion of the use of blogs on one of Zimbabwe's online newspapers, a blogger had his own page on the main site. There is the potential for the blogger to respond to

queries from other participants with no journalist involved. The blogger had an opportunity to address an unknown third recipient of the message, hence three-way communication. This kind of interaction, as represented in the three-way direction of communication, empowers users to influence each other out of the control of journalists. The websites will then have the potential to offer citizens an audience of engaged users interested in political discourse (Ferber et al., 2007).

The last three-way communication on the improved model of political communication explains controlled response in the interaction process. In controlled response, interactive devices such as polls and bulletin boards allow users to participate when they vote and submit their votes, but the site retains control over the content. In controlled forums and chat rooms, there will be a moderator or journalist who will then forward transcripts of the discussions to the site (Ferber et al., 2007). Site control can also take place in public discourse where some comments will be deleted for libel, obscenity and other violations (Ferber et al., 2007). The controlled response as the highest order instance of communication in this model, then, places greater weighting on interactive devices like online polls in promoting cyber-democracy. Online Zimbabwean newspapers rarely use online polls to empower readers. Therefore, according to this model, these newspapers are not doing enough to promote improved political communication.

In theory, these online newspapers are living up to their role of promoting cyber-democracy, as citizens are given an opportunity to exercise their right to free expression, a right that they are denied by the traditional newspapers. However, the promises of online media are not so easy to attain because there is a number of factors that work against the achievement of a fully fledged and thriving cyber-democracy. One of the challenges is that the target citizens are not composed of a homogenous computer literate people (Schmidtke in Tsagaraousianou et al., 1998). In the face of all the crises that Zimbabwean citizens are experiencing, computer literacy would not be one's priority. Computer literacy is thus likely to remain a major threat to the success of cyber-democracy in the Zimbabwean online media. Apart from computer illiteracy, there are also other factors like accessibility to the Internet within Zimbabwe in particular which hinders the full function of cyber-democracy and its transformation into actual democracy to yield practical results.

Conclusion

Interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers was found to be very low. The content analysis of the 22 online newspapers reveals that interactive options were limited in terms of widespread use and presence across the websites, and in terms of the real interactivity that they were able to accord a user. The content analysis revealed that online sites were providing features that

offered limited interactivity. The paper shows that the e-mail facility was very common with the online newspapers, yet this facility limits users to operate at a merely reactive level. Interactive options that offer higher levels of interactivity, like discussion forums and chat rooms, were not popular with Zimbabwe's online newspapers. An analysis of the interactive devices using Schultz's (1999) index of analysis revealed low levels of interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers.

The low levels of interactivity due to limited devices had an adverse impact on cyber-democracy. The potential for cyber-democracy hinged on the availability of interactive devices that enable two-way and three-way communication. An assessment of cyber-democracy, therefore, was only feasible at the websites' potential levels.

Zimbabwe's online newspapers were found to be promoting cyber-democracy but the correlation between interactivity and cyber-democracy was found to be a crucial factor. Low interactivity levels limited the news websites' potential to present a thriving cyber-democracy. Interactive devices that promote cyber-democracy were identified in some of the online newspapers in the sample. Online polls were used to mirror the political realities of what was happening in Zimbabwe during the run up to the March 2008 elections. Other interactive devices closely linked to promoting cyber-democracy identified on the sites were blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. Transcripts of the discussions were available on a few of the newspaper sites.

In terms of cyber-democracy, therefore, the findings of this study suggest that Zimbabwean online newspapers are asserting themselves as alternative avenues to the traditional media for political deliberations on diverse opinions. The Zimbabwean online newspapers are closing the spaces and boundaries between the citizens and the media created by tough media laws. The online newspapers provide political information about electoral candidates, parliamentary debates and news articles based on politics. Political information on the online newspapers helps citizens to gain an insight into the candidates' profiles and helps them to make informed decisions.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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