RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Deferred 'Democracy Dividend' of Citizen Journalism and Social Media: Perils, Promises and Prospects from the Zimbabwean Experience

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The efficacy of digital media on politics, and society at large, has long been a subject of intense scholarly debate. This paper examines the democratisation potential of social media within Zimbabwe's historically repressive political environment. Since the early 2000s, technological determinists in Zimbabwe saw citizen journalism and social media as a 'game-changer' in propping up a democratic project against the ruling regime. Two decades later, and as the country grapples with governance challenges, the prospects for meaningful political participation enabled by social media have remained elusive. The current study uses a contextual analytic lens informed by critical political economy of media and broader media effects theoretical concepts to probe the political impact of social media activism. Social media are technological tools whose role in society is contingent on human agency. While Zimbabwe has had significant protests employing social and digital media, their political impact, this paper argues, should not be overstated. Deterministic views have tended to create solutionist approaches to social media, undermining a nuanced understanding of their transformative potential.

Introduction

Viewing social media as a 'magic wand propelling politicians into office' has in a way contributed to a speculative hope of their ability to deliver 'the revolutionary winds' in sub-Saharan Africa similar to what was witnessed in the Arab Spring (Langmia, 2014). It goes without saying that social media are not magic, for their contribution to democracy should be scrutinised beyond the ephemeral euphoria of the first decade of the 21st century. Several studies have already explored the relationship between new media technologies and political development in Africa. For example, Gagliardone (2016) introduces the concept of technopolitics, which he defines as an interplay between technology, politics and actors, using it to assess how digital technologies are impacting political changes in Ethiopia. Other studies have attempted to

theorise the African public sphere (Akinbobola, 2015) while others have sought to scrutinise the impact of Twitter and Facebook-led online activism in Africa (See Ogola, 2019; Mutsvairo, 2018; Bosch and Mutsvairo, 2017; Mutsvairo, 2016a; Mutsvairo 2013a; Mutsvairo, 2016b). More recently a special issue edited by Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane (2019, p.13) made an attempt to understand 'the idea of publics as both a heuristic means as well as an object of study for coming to grips with the nature and significance of burgeoning new communicative practices in Africa in a digital age.'

The purpose of this paper is to examine social media's potential to influence political processes in Zimbabwe. It takes an interpretative approach, seeking to offer an overview of recent reflections and developments on the social media dividend for Zimbabwe. Ultimately, it seeks to highlight recent research and insights on social media activism in Zimbabwe contributing largely to a growing body of literature pertaining to digital activism in Africa. In alluding to the Zimbabwean case, we draw the reader's attention to some of the nation's notable social media-organised protest movements in order to reflect and comment on their impact. Our scope of 'social media' focuses on the Facebook platform, which has a sizeable user base in Zimbabwe. With varying results, plenty of studies have already appraised social media's role in determining the southern African country's political destiny. For example, while Mutsvairo and Sirks (2015) found little evidence for how a noted faceless Facebook character was influencing the country's political direction through his 'exclusive leaks,' on social media, a study conducted by Chibuwe and Ureke (2016) and later by Karekwaivanane (2019) showed the same Facebook page had provided an alternative public sphere for citizens opposed to the state's endeavour to control the media space. Other research exploitations that have solely explored social media's role is galvanising online-based activism in Zimbabwe include Mare (2016), Mano and Willems (2017) and Moyo (2011), among several others. This reflection will aim to contribute to the growing scholarly discussion on social media's prospective ability to advance political change in Africa.

The paper explores social media use in Zimbabwe looking beyond what has been termed the 'myth' of social media revolutions (Barzegar, 2010; Bennett, 2009; Berkow, 2011). In this regard, we examine the locus of [social] media and democracy beyond the deterministic focus on what technologies can do as well as looking at participatory politics beyond normative democratic systems. In terms of approach, the paper heeds the caution raised by Wasserman for the need to approach media in Africa from a Global South point of view, not just using African experiences to prove Western theories (Wasserman, 2018). This reading on recent developments regarding the social media dividend for Zimbabwe contributes to both discourse and practice as informed by nuances seeded in the context under examination.

First, the paper gives a contextual overview linking social media use and the political environment in Zimbabwe. It then explores the concepts of democracy and social media activism and how they relate to each other, normatively and in practice, as well as presenting a brief conceptual framework informing the paper. Third, it looks at literature on journalism and democracy before delving into its analysis, which provides a reflection of our examination of the Zimbabwean case based on our previous and on-going research engagements there and informed by perspectives drawn from other digital media scholars working primarily in Zimbabwe and Africa. We then draw some conclusions targeting practitioners, academics, students, government officials, and policymakers interested in understanding the role of social media in advancing transformative change within politically restrictive environments.

Contextual overview

Since 2012, Zimbabwe has witnessed a growth in digital activism. This by no means represented the beginning of online campaigns; platforms like Kubatana and Sokwanele were established in the early 2000s and contributed to the then nascent forms of citizen-driven

online socio-political activism in the country. The growth in social media use since 2012, coincided with economic and political recession, that resulted in activists and ordinary citizens harnessing online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to challenge the status quo. Baba Jukwa, an anonymous whistle-blower, who leaked state and the governing party's secrets on social media, became the most significant voice – despite controversies surrounding the identity of individuals, who spearheaded the campaign and their intentions (Mare, 2016). In the lead-up to 2013 elections, Baba Jukwa's Facebook page had over 300,000 followers. After the election there was an increase in digital activists on social media, including Occupy Africa Unit Square (OAUS), #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, and #GenerationalConsesus.

Against this surge in online opposition, the State became increasingly intolerant of online dissent. It applied both the law and force to contain the situation. The leader of the OAUS movement disappeared in March 2015 and has since not been found, sustaining fear and inviting a further backlash among activists. Leaders of movements like #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka have been arrested on more than one occasion and in some cases were charged for committing treasonous acts by inciting public violence. With ever increasing online dissent, the government sought different ways to control the internet, including a social media blackout during the 2016 #ShutDownZim protests and drafting a cybercrime bill. When activists took to the streets to protest, the state's response was heavy-handed. In an attempt to silence critics, former president Robert Mugabe in 2017 even appointed one of his loyalists to supervise the newly-established Cyber Security, Threat Detection and Mitigation ministry. The appointment came after a series of anti-government protests, organised on Facebook and WhatsApp, despite a series of restrictive laws aiming to control freedom of expression. For its part, the government argued that digital activists were Western-backed regime change protagonists bent on creating a moment of political instability for the purpose of unseating the ruling ZANU-PF party from power.

After the historic change in presidency in November 2017, the new government has attempted to take a moderate approach to dealing with dissent. The public relations offensive aimed at marketing the country's neoliberal 'Zimbabwe is open for business' dogma has also seen an increase in high-level government officials, including President Emmerson Mnangagwa, using social media to engage Zimbabweans on Facebook and Twitter. Considering the intricacies of Zimbabwean politics – the power dynamics between the state, the party, and the security sector – it remains to be seen how this growth in use of social media can advance democracy in Zimbabwe. Without necessary political power and facing a heavily fortified state, it remains improbable that digital activists will effectively use social media to push a democratic agenda. Indeed, several attempts have already been made, for example, the January 2019 protests, but the government has used the military to openly shoot at protesters following violent street campaigns, which had been originally organised on social media.

Democracy, role of media, and the democratising power of social media

In normative democracy, the media plays a custodian role of holding to account the three arms of state – the executive, an independent judiciary and enfranchised parliament. The media plays a key role in checking the balance of power and in keeping the public informed, consequently enabling citizens to make informed decisions on social, economic and political matters. Unpacking the concept of democracy is therefore pertinent in the discussion of social media's potential to improve political practice in a place like Zimbabwe. Similarly, it is essential to also understand the historical and current practice of democracy in Zimbabwe. This allows for a context-appropriate assessment of the extent to which Zimbabweans are using social media to influence political processes.

Long before researchers in Africa, especially in the aftermath of the new millennium, began questioning information communication technology (ICT)'s ability to trigger political change, the effectiveness of new media in supporting political mobilization and change had already gained prominence in various studies outside Africa, especially in the West (Bimber et al. 2005; Benkler, 2006;Valenzuela, 2013). Polat (2005) even went to the extent of suggesting that the internet offered an alternative virtual public sphere. While a well-documented narrative disputing a technological-deterministic Africa has since emerged, its birthplace can be traced to a surge in research that began to take shape in the early 2000s, buoyed by a renewed interest in postcolonial studies (Chatterjee, 1993) and social movements (Diani, 1992).

After all, around the same time the dominance of Eurocentrism in media studies was gaining plenty of attention among researchers (Park and Curran, 2000) and later Wang, (2011), there was intensifying interest in media studies in the Global South (Thussu, 2009). While there now is a general consensus that the internet has become a key information battleground in Africa, empirical studies are dominated by divergent and diverse views on social media's potentiality to enable Afrocentric political transformations. For example, in a recent investigation into the influence of social media in advancing democratisation, Dzisah (2018, 43) confirmed new technologies had 'deepened the participatory principle in Ghana's fledgling democracy' further concluding that 'social media platforms add to the participatory ideal.'

Salgado's (2012) comparative study on the impact of the internet in influencing democracy in Mozambique and Angola found that the web had a hand in strengthening the civil society in the former Portuguese colonies. After analysing social media-based interactions posted on Twitter and Facebook, Iwata (2015, 69) also concluded that the digital platforms 'might bring radical political change in Africa.' The same sentiments were shared by Kalyango and Adu-Kumi (2013), whose study into the impact of social media in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Uganda, and Kenya confirmed social networking sites' ability to advance political mobilisation and change. But other studies have repeatedly questioned such claims. In a new volume *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Security, and Surveillance*, Molony and Dwyer (2019) acknowledge and rationalise social media's potential to effect political change but warn digital technologies could also strengthen African dictators' grip on power. Recent moves to introduce social media tax in Uganda or the prevalence of internet shutdowns in countries such as Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, among several others, only serve to demonstrate the force behind social media's power and consequently, their limitations.

Coming back to the normative and process-centric approach to democracy, which includes characteristics such as political plurality, free press, guarantee of human rights, and rule of law (Sachikonye, 1995), Zimbabwe can be considered a democratic state. The country has constantly held elections since independence in 1980 and all citizens above 18 years have been 'free' to participate. In what may appear like a healthy sign of democracy, the 2018 elections saw 22 candidates vying for the presidential ticket, and five years earlier, the country had a new constitution drafted from a long consultative process involving a broad range of stakeholders. The State has a two-tier legislature (senate and parliament), a president elected by popular vote, an 'independent' judiciary, and a semblance of an independent press. However, Jabusile Shumba's critical assessments of the Zimbabwean state deem it a 'predatory state' thriving on a concatenation of state, military, party and business interests (Shumba, 2018). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index classify Zimbabwe as an authoritarian state (EIU, 2018) and the country is ranked 127 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index of 2019 (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Apart from further signalling only the superficial characteristics of democracy, this calls for careful consideration of the democratising potential of social media.

(Social) media's role in advancing democracy

The relationship between media and democracy is heavily explored in literature. A free press has been connected to democratic process (Gomia, 2014) and is seen as a requirement for democratic election (Howard 2005). Media keeps people informed about their democratic rights (Kpaduwa 2014; Uzukwu, 2014). Where traditional news media has failed, the prospect of new media driven citizen journalism 'put(ting) democracy back into people's hands' (Kpaduwa, 2014, 17) is cited. Endemic corruption in media in African countries (Uzukwu 2014), the so-called brown-envelope journalism, and other structural challenges, abate the potential role of news media to safeguard democracy.

Using a meta-analysis of 36 studies, Boulianne finds a positive relationship between social media use and participation in politics (Boulianne, 2015). Social media have been seen as enabling 'mini-revolutions' and protest that calls into question government policies or highlight other pertinent issues (Daniels, 2016). The #Mustfall movements in South Africa have contributed to the view of social media as an emergent public sphere, overtaking elite politics (Daniels, 2016) and the internet as a site for better engagement, especially in places with limited democratic space (Bosch, 2016). Rishel examines the normative approach to social media and citizen engagement, linking them to a form of deliberative democracy. (Rishel, 2011). These concepts have been presented in their relationship to the Western conception of democracy. A hyperbolic view of social media has been regarded as having marketing origins deriving from commentators like Tim O'Reilly (see Loader and Mercea, 2011).

Predominant assessments of social media and digital communication technologies in some earlier years focused on a binary divide between optimistic views that promised a tech-driven utopia and pessimist alarm for what was considered an impending dystopia. To better understand the complex relationship between media and politics, there is need for nuance based on contextual understanding and 'depth of analysis'(Price, 2013). The growth in connectivity through 'equal access to the public sphere' and social media platforms, is promising for greater citizen participation in democracy, Price argues (2013, 519–20). Because of social media and digital media's perceived ability to change communicative power, they have been considered as having 'inherent democratic capacities' (Loader and Mercea, 2011, 759). They equip ordinary citizens with the capacity to escape passive consumption of government propaganda and enable ordinary users to become creators of alternative views (Loader and Mercea, 2011). Loader and Mercea note that technological optimism for democracy replaced earlier views of digital technologies as a virtual public sphere (Loader and Mercea, 2011, 757), but call for a cautious consideration of this potential.

Another concern regarding social media and electronic communications has been the infrastructural limitations and dominant reach of other traditional forms of communication, especially in rural Africa. For example Megwa (2014, vi) argues that 'interpersonal communication as a dominant form of conversation in many rural areas of Africa potentially diminishes the influence of media in catalysing the electoral process'. Communication technologies' transformative role should therefore not be seen as ubiquitous. In places where these technologies are scarce or new, some people might not be able to use them or may have no interest and would rather use their trusted channels like word-of-mouth with little reliance on modern technologies (Mutsvairo, 2013b; de Bruijn, 2016).

Despite some structural flaws, literature also shows that media still wields influence, but not the kind of influence anticipated in the normative democracy concept. It influences perceptions and shapes a peoples' worldview, and influences how people get involved, and/or not, in issues deemed important to local and global agendas. Agenda-setting through framing and priming of objects has been identified as one of the key areas through which media

influences people's opinions (Kpaduwa, 2014; McCombs and Reynolds, 2009). This way, the media shapes the 'basis of political and social action' and how people collectively perceive politics (Megwa, 2014, vi) as people may rely on media to form their own opinion (Kpaduwa, 2014). This power should not be seen as neutral, however.

By emphasising the power of the user or the user-centric view in Web 2.0, literature assumes the transformative power of these media as an underpinning factor of political and economic relations in the information age. However, social media have been linked with 'echo chambers', a communicative environment made up of people who share similar beliefs. Related to this phenomenon is the limited role of media, as individuals are inclined to select information that supports their worldviews (Justwan et al., 2018). Such 'closed' communities – when online – create and deepen single dominant perception of particular topics, creating a narrow point of view, especially in relation to politics.

Considering the limitation of electoral processes in upholding democratic principles, what powers does the media have in Zimbabwe, a country that at one stage has been considered to have the most restrictive media environment (Freedom House, 2011)? As illustrated in the general definition of normative democracy, a free press plays an essential public watchdog role, informing the public and holding to account the other components of democracy. In liberal economic systems, however, capital finds its way into the media, helping a few profiteering individuals to wield influence on politics, markets, and society thus undermining the essence of democracy itself and tipping the scales in their own favour (Fuchs, 2017; McChesney, 2015; Sachikonye, 1995; Wasserman, 2018). In developing countries, politicians expect media to play a more patriotic and supportive role on behalf of the state (Daniels, 2018).

Social media platforms hold a promise to change communicative power relations, as they become more widely available. However, their role and impact need to be cautiously considered. To begin with, they should not be seen as value-free platforms solely placed to drive a democratic agenda. Social media do not solely habitat progressive movements, as current global experiences show. Recent events have shown a growth in fascist groups enabled by both the anonymity and the ubiquity of social media to advance extreme ideologies, racism, sexism, climate change denialism, xenophobia, and bigotry. In Zimbabwe, the ruling ZANU-PF party is competently deploying social media to continue its political dominance.

A theoretical 'framework' for examining social media and democracy

The relationship between media and democracy in the Information Age is paradoxical, if not unclear. While technological advances have expanded the access to information and communication, and facilitated the growth of big media conglomerates, they have also weakened the balance of power between media users and those who control media institutions, undermining a critical aspect of democracy (McChesney, 2015). As Sachikonye (1995) notes, the principles of liberty and equality, which are at the core of liberal democracy, often conflict with the accompanying liberal economic thinking and practice. Economic inequalities typical in modern democracies undermine the essence of democracy and create 'undemocratic power relations' (Gills and Roccamora, 1992). Free market forces that are imbedded in new media institutions, for example, can push the weak to the fringes of society, undermining their assumed equality and politically disenfranchising them (see Castells, 1998).

Considering these complexities, the paper's analytical perspective is influenced by ideas around critical political economy of media analysis. The question of power – who benefits and who is exploited from the use of a commodified social media – is thus central. Recent contributions to critical political economy of media, such as Fuchs (2017) and McChesney (2015), demonstrate the compelling need for application of this approach to media studies, especially considering the tumultuous nature of global politics and their nexus with capital and media. While McChesney looks at the broader media industry, Fuchs' critique

focuses on social media. Because of their decentralised nature, social media and the internet repeatedly pass as user-centric and therefore 'democratic' platforms enabling globalised information society. Such an overarching characterisation overlooks the role of economic and political power that drives these media and corporations behind them. Applying a critical political economy of media analysis helps to unpack the structural level of social media. But several questions also emerge. What role, if any, do social media play in Zimbabwean politics? What are the implications of social media use or lack thereof on Zimbabwean politics? What are the underlying dynamics influencing and restraining the use of social media impact in Zimbabwe? With what effect?

A critical theory perspective used here challenges the positivist view of social media often used by activists in their repertoire of 'progressive' actions. It engages issues of power and domination embedded in economic and political structures and inherent in the media industry and often ignored in social media literature (see Fuchs, 2017). With respect to the role of economic power in social media, the concept of commodification of media comes into play. Social media have become marketing tools where users' data are commodities to sell to advertisers. In turn, users also build their own influence and social capital, another layer of commodities. This way social platforms became rather more self-producing platforms where consumers are also products and capitalist ideology self-reinforces itself as the best and only system (Fuchs, 2017).

Discussion

The following discussion is organised under four sub-topics: civil society and citizen participation, which reflects on the role of Zimbabwean social media and how it propagates citizens' participation in pertinent processes as well as the limitations imposed by aggressive policing of the internet in Zimbabwe, and the challenges related to activists' visibility and citizens' attention; digital activism and activists' politics, which focuses on the organisation side of digital activism and how that supports and/or undercuts activists' efforts towards democratisation; Zimbabwe's digital divide, which briefly examines the inequalities of the digital environment and their implications on activism; and media and political change, which focuses on the role of media during a major political event, the November 2017 coup.

Civil society, citizen journalists and citizen participation

To comprehend the democratisation potential in Zimbabwe, we ought to probe the potential for deeper involvement of ordinary citizens in significant socio-political platforms, considering that citizen participation is an essential component of all democratic processes. As an associative component of democratic systems, a thriving civil society constantly galvanises citizens and exert pressure on the status quo to advance interests of the society. A broader conception of civil society encompasses social movements, trade unions, cultural organisations, voluntary organisations, community-based organisations, churches, news media, communications entities, and similar institutions working outside the state. A Gramscian view of civil society entails production of competing ideologies by hegemonic and counterhegemonic intellectuals.

In its current version in Zimbabwe, civil society has come to acquire a narrow definition that only considers non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pressure groups. In line with our observations, active civil society organisations resemble formalised NGOs, whose activities are principally funded by donor agencies. This implies that these NGOs' programming, as much as it responds to the context, is also influenced by the 'calls for proposals' from the different funding institutions. Their structure and composition is predominantly made up of elite and urban intellectuals who mostly report to funding institutions and not Zimbabwean society. Traditional activist organisations are less member driven and their narrow scope

undermines the essence and role of civil society, and distances them from contestation for state power. They lack popular participation of ordinary citizens and when grassroots communities are involved, the approaches reflected are top-down – citizens are passive recipients of NGO information. Seen this way, civil society organisations (CSOs) can hardly effect change or entrench political changes that instil democracy. Importantly, Zimbabwean CSOs tend to mimic and depend on external governments' resources and state patronage. This resonates with Sachikonye's observation that, 'While these forces represent sources of pressure for democratisation, they also achieve their development through access to state patronage, resources or legal structures…' (1995: 12).

As an example, leaders of a Harare vendors' organisation, one of the leading activists organisations in 2016 protests, became indirect supporters of the post-coup government in 2018. This led fellow activists to believe they had been co-opted by the state. In cases of co-option of CSOs, they reflect little or any of the voices of ordinary citizens; such co-options are the result of decisions led by the administrators and leaders of these organisations. As an organic counter-measure, less institutionalised social groups are emerging online to challenge the status quo. They use social media as a safer alternative to offline public spaces to circumvent repression, and to expand the public sphere where they deliberate on issues of concern.

Despite the emergence of new platforms for participation, outside formalised CSOs, there are still challenges inhibiting effective and open online participation. These inhibitions include how the internet is policed and the dynamics of attention on online platforms. While the Zimbabwean constitution grants fundamental civil liberties, including freedom of assembly and association (Section 56), freedom to demonstrate and petition (Section 59), and freedom of expression (Section 61), and freedom of the media (Section 66), in reality there are few guarantees. The state's traditional attitude in response to citizen dissent on social media has been that of extensive policing and criminalisation of self-expression. Individuals deemed critical of the government have been arrested 'for abuse of social media'. For example, Martha O'Donovan an employee of Magamba Activists Network was arrested on 2 November 2017 for a retweet attributed to @Matigari – an anonymous Twitter handle considered a serious threat to the government at the time. She was accused of being Matigari and/or being behind the group managing the platform. To garnish its claims of being democratic, the state uses the law to police the internet, applying laws such as Section 33(2) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform). Yet, observers have noted that high levels of repression may have resulted in strengthening the resolve of protesters in Zimbabwe (Duncan, 2018).

Another inhibition to citizen participation pertains to the attention economy in online platforms. Considering the growth of new media technologies in Zimbabwe, the scarcity of attention is potentially on the rise. This relates to two aspects of visibility: Who/what gets seen? How much gets seen? Powerful and well-resourced media houses have teams managing their platforms and can deploy funds to market content. Because of their sheer size, bigger media houses tend to be accepted as legitimate and, as such, amass huge social media following. For example, ZBC Online, Herald Online, and Newsday Facebook pages have a bigger following and consistently higher engagement in their posts as compared with activists, platforms. Activists' media sometimes appear more sentimental and focus on issue-to-issue rather creating 'editorial frames', as such, they inadvertently legitimise social media platforms owned by mainstream media which appear to have a measure of stability in terms of themes, quality, long term appeal, and ideological backing. The lack of coordination and resources by those propagating democratic intentions undermines their online visibility and reach. Also, while social media have provided an alternative platform for citizens' participation there is little organisation of civil society to capitalise on the opportunity and entrench democratic culture.

Digital activism and activists' politics

Related to the above, is the practice of activism online and how digital activists organise themselves. Zimbabwe's digital activism practice is still very narrow and full of contradictions. For one, there is little alignment between social media movements and traditional movements like labour, women, civil society organisations, students' movements (except for Tajamuka and #GenerationalConsensus that are led by former student-leaders). The one-off protests emerging from the activity of #ThisFlag have not birthed a strong social movement; CSOs and digital activists continue to act as distinct organisations with no significant collaboration. Online movements that have emerged since 2016 have little or any structure and are weak when it comes to deeper systems of ideas. Prior to the 2017 coup, the core message among Zimbabwean activists was 'Mugabe must go' and, in some cases, generic outlines of grievances like corruption, economic hardships, etc., but without proffering alternative solutions and political approaches.

The lack of structure among digital activists' organisations plays to their disadvantage as they cannot effectively organise or sustainably mobilise resources. Some activists do their work to gain the attention of Western embassies which are said to finance their activities. Where they have leaders, they create cult figures, thus weakening their claims of pushing for democracy. When the de facto leader of the #ThisFlag movement temporarily fled the country for the United States of America in 2016, the movement shrunk as online followers viewed the leader's decision as an act of cowardice. The movement lost momentum between 2016 and November 2017 only to attract renewed interest following the January 2019 protests. Interconnected to the lack of structure is the propensity towards a lack of ownership. Nobody owns or distinctly feels a part of most of these social movements except for their founders and small cliques around them. The themes they drive are rarely internalised beyond their academic intrigue or the gratification from a sense of being part of bigger conversations. This inequality of ownership has another distancing effect in that leaders accumulate more social capital as groups grow and the more groups grow the more individual members who have little say in the social media community become distanced from the vision and mission of these movements.

Online social movement activists incline towards drawing attention to themselves as the inadvertency of their activism efforts transforms them into overnight heroes and 'keyboard warriors'. Their followers likewise are keyboard heroes waiting for their big break. Compounded in this anticipation is the start-up culture or entertainment 'blowing-up' cultures where one is just waiting to be discovered to ascend into stardom. As critics of the self-centric obsession in social media culture like Lovink have pointed out, there is a predisposition to nihilistic cynicism (Lovink, 2013) and 'self-branding' (Fuchs, 2017). This undercuts the potential constructive role of social media. A focus on the individual causes conflicts that reverse whatever gains social movements would have made. #ThisFlag movement suffered this with some of its key leaders resulting in the undeclared rift between its two most visible leaders, Fadzayi Mahere and Evan Mawarire.

Zimbabwe's digital divide

Social media use and general internet access in Zimbabwe have an economic and political class challenge. While WhatsApp is used broadly, Facebook is limited, and Twitter is even more limited in terms of usage. Divisions in social media use have literacy, financial, geographic, and personal inclination dimensions, where economic and geographic factors play a stronger role. Of the 880 thousand Facebook users in Zimbabwe (per ITU [2019] data), a majority of them are in the capital city, Harare. Rural areas are heavily underrepresented, despite their perennial role in deciding national elections.

Social class divisions are apparent in such social media protests like #FreePastorEvan, #FreePastorEvan middle class and white-collar activists coming out for a street-level protest. This protest responded to the incarceration of pastor Evan Mawarire for undermining the state in 2016. A few years earlier, Itai Dzamara, a journalist-turned-activist had regularly faced similar charges and even greater persecution. Itai, from a low-income background and neighbourhood did not receive the same solidarity as the clergyman. In fact, his one-man protests were ridiculed as a futile search for relevance. His movement, Occupy Africa Unity Square, had a negligible online and offline following up until his enforced disappearance on 9 March 2015. Only then did he become a form of social media activism martyr with campaigns such as #BringBackItaiDzamara, #BBID, and #IamItaiDzamara growing in numbers, and his story becoming a highlight of human rights reports. The technological and economic divide in the online space undercuts the democratic potential of social media in Zimbabwe. Instead, it reinforces deep-rooted inequalities, further disenfranchises other sections of the society, and creates a false perception of participation.

Journalism and political change

During the military-assisted coup of November 2017, the executive together with the media were the first causalities. When storming the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, soldiers attacked journalists and took control of the airwaves, broadcasting what would become a popular speech by Brigadier General S.B. Moyo, now the country's minister of foreign affairs. The broadcast had an effect on people's perception of the coup. It reassured them that 'the President [Mugabe] is safe' and that this 'was not a military take over' but, rather, a restoration of a legacy that had been corrupted by 'a few individuals around the president'. This framing of a textbook coup influenced people's opinion of the military and the nature of what was taking place. On the streets and on social media, Zimbabweans called it 'a coup not a coup' or 'a coup that went to private school', implying that it was bloodless and that it was a unique change of government but not a coup. Inevitably, when, a few days later, people took to the streets in a final push to get President Mugabe to resign officially, they had placards, posters and t-shirts praising the military and the generals. This momentary euphoria and perception of reprieve from 37 years of socio-economic decline took away the necessity for caution and regard for constitutionalism. Images on Facebook and the immense public relations machinery that went into mobilising people appealed to popular sentiment and not due process. Through those November days, Zimbabweans were having their 'spring' moment. Hashtags had triumphed, albeit with the support of the gun and the not-so-hidden hand of the military.

Like in all populist movements, rumours, misinformation, and weaponisation of information grew after the coup. Individual social media users became experts in 'dotcom' (a Zimbabwean euphemism for 'top-secret', often just hearsay). 'Faceless' and fake social media pages have grown, especially during the July/August 2018 election period. Instead of driving progressive and alternative discourse, social media activists were generally co-opted to the narrative of the moment. Such a narrative captured the shallow 'Mugabe must go' message and lacked critique and anticipation of what would come next. In a way, social media played a parroting role, popularising the agenda framed by the military establishment. This undermined and squandered an opportunity for advancing a democratic agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we observe that more Zimbabweans are becoming connected to the internet, through increased reach of mobile phone technologies; more activist organisations are appropriating online platforms to extend their reach and amplify their voices. #ThisFlag, an online protest movement sparked by a social media video by a Zimbabwean cleric, could be considered as a major turning point in the history of Zimbabwean digital activism. In

the video, the then little-known cleric – Evan Mawarire – evoked the image and meaning of the Zimbabwean flag to highlight corruption and bad governance on the occasion of the country's 36th independence, on 18 April 2016. The video resonated with a broad base of Zimbabweans and spawned the #ThisFlag trend which resulted in two major protests, #ShutDownZim, in July and August 2016. These protests became the first ever campaigns to be organised entirely online. Without significant on-the-ground coordination, in the traditional form of social movement organisations (SMOs), #ThisFlag video blog and hash-tag came to represent a far-reaching movement, albeit mostly confined to social media.

We also gather that prior to this moment, traditional civil society organisations had used social media, citizen journalism and the internet as tools for information dissemination and to amplify offline action but with no significant political organisation and action. For example, outspoken anti-Mugabe critic Itai Dzamara and his Occupy Africa Unity Square protests used social media to showcase their protests in front of the parliament in the form of photos, sometimes accompanied with messages. #ThisFlag protests marked the intensification of social media use in citizens' protests with new protests groups such as Tajamuka, Generational Consensus, and Pachedu also emerging. Better still, traditional activists organisations, for example, Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, Kubatana, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, and Magamba Activist Network, to name but a few, have reinvented and increased their use of social media platforms.

We are convinced that outside civil society organisations and/or these new social movements such as #ThisFlag and Tajamuka, other forms of activism that have emerged are in form of online content creators and start-up media organisations such as BustopTV, Zimbabwe Today, Zimbabwe Yadzoka, ZimEye, and Zim Solutions. Individual activists and ordinary citizens have also increased their production of user-generated content critical of the establishment as well as their participation in activist social media platforms. A combination of formalised activism and citizen-driven protests supported by use of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, has shaped broader social movement calling for political change and contributing to major political events in Zimbabwe.

With this paper, we hope to steer some debate on the role that social media and online activism have played in defining Zimbabwe's political destiny. In future, we will gather empirical data, develop, and refine concepts presented herein and new ones emerging from the data. We believe social media can help raise the profile of issues on the public agenda and potentially ignite critical conversation, but evidence of them directly driving participation at least in the case of Zimbabwe, remains limited. In places where governments and democratic systems are not far-reaching and strong enough, activists have to go beyond raising the profile of issues in order to be part of the processes that can bring about desirable outcomes. Civil society and social movements have to go beyond registering disapproval and be involved in structures of political power. As urged by the late United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, 'Tweeting and posting are not enough, you have to go to vote' (Annan, 2018). This statement accords well with the Zimbabwean case where the ruling party secures landslide victories in rural constituencies, where internet penetration remains extremely low.

Social media, like any other media, cannot replace human agency. Just like reading a newspaper, or writing a 'letter to the editor', does not necessarily empower individuals, it is not enough to comment, contribute an opinion, or attract reactions on social media. Humans must act to influence structures that can bring about change. As conceived in Fuchs' dialectical approach (Fuchs, 2017), social media should be seen as techno-social systems where technology is an enabler for access to activities that create and distribute knowledge pertinent to effecting structural changes in society.

With these reflections, the paper has noted that social media and other forms of media should be seen as tools embedded in contexts where power, politics, and economic disposition pre-exist. Though these new platforms enable individuals, communities, and civil society to

engage and network, they are yet to create strong enough counterhegemonic force to effectively challenge entrenched and competing authoritarian regimes. With use of social media predominately concentrated in urban centres, these digital frontlines barely reach rural populations and are not always translatable offline. Future studies may continue to examine fundamental factors undermining the democracy dividend of social media and how they are being more purposed for propping up authoritarianism. In such endeavours, comprehensive and holistic theory can help advance our understanding of new media effects on human society.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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