
Social media as tools for the promotion of access to information, justice and peace during elections in Zimbabwe: Case of Bikita West by-election (January 2017)

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Abstract

The media play a very important role in amplifying citizen voices in advocating for social justice and peace in any society. However, there are “draconian” media laws in Zimbabwe which militate against this noble agenda. Consequently, such laws have muffled mainstream media operations and crippled fair debate and commentary. The conventional media such as newspapers, radio and television have been profoundly affected by such laws especially in budding democracies like Zimbabwe. In this contribution we examine the democratic impact of alternative media. We argue that in Zimbabwe, due to media polarisation and restrictive mainstream media environment, alternative media has become instrumental in affording citizens platforms to exchange ideas. The media environment in Zimbabwe has seen ordinary citizens losing ideal platforms to use in advocating for their civil and political rights. Participatory voices have been muzzled and fragmented by a host of issues. In this context, the coming in of alternative media has breathed hope to Zimbabweans who saw an opportunity to freely express their views and opinions. The alternative of participatory media in Zimbabwe is viewed against the background of restrictive media laws, media polarisation, media pluralism without diversity and the closures of mainstream media due to economic hardships. This chapter analyses how Zimbabweans have used alternative media mainly WhatsApp to freely convey their messages during elections as a way of promoting justice and peace. It also demonstrates how alternative media have become independent forums and credible sources of developmental, health and political information in Zimbabwe. Archival research and critical analysis are employed to draw conclusions.

1. Introduction

Almost all opposition political parties in Zimbabwe such as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T), National People’s Party (NPP), Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Renewal Democrats of Zimbabwe (RDZ) among others complain that the government has used draconian laws to control media operations especially during the election period. This has generated a heated debate between the opposition political parties and the ruling Zanu PF party. The ruling party has been accused of abusing the state media so that they report favorably towards Zanu PF while demonizing other political parties. Thus the media end up feeding the public with half baked stories that are usually unbalanced. The Zanu PF led government has been openly condemned for abusing state media especially the Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers) run

publications and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) television and radio stations. The development has seen civic society and media stakeholders on the other hand becoming restless since 2000 as they demand the government of the day to come up with legislation that allow free flow of information, media pluralism, media diversity and access to information among others. Chuma (2013) bemoaned the state of the media in Zimbabwe saying journalists were lacking critical professional benchmarks in executing their duties and were prioritizing prominent people and politicians at the expense of community reporting. People in rural areas, Chuma argues, were the most affected as they were not given space in the media, hence their voices remain unheard. Critical information therefore, remain unreported despite their news value. During elections, the public would be in dire need of information so that they would be able to make critical decisions however, with a number of problems haunting the media in Zimbabwe, the public end up receiving a heavy blow. The coming of new media, however, has brought a sigh of relief since there is a new approach to news writing and reporting. The Bikita West by-election saw new trends in the information dissemination by members of the community as they used smart phones to capture events as they were happening before sharing the information to a wider audience withing their networks.

2. Social media taking over the role of traditional media during elections

The media have traditionally been ascribed three primary roles which are “to educate, inform and entertain the public”, (Mapira 2013). This paper, however, dwell on the first two roles which happen to be the most relevant for this discussion. Regarded as the Fourth Estate, the media play a critical role not only at oversight level but also at an equally important level as purveyors of timely information of public interest. Their informative role of the media makes them all the more essential in times of elections when the general public would be expected to make decisions based on the information available to them. Generally, the media in Zimbabwe has failed to fulfill their mandate thereby giving room to alternative media to take-over media roles.

(i) Education

The media in Masvingo are found reporting about the critical issues that need to be known by an ordinary citizen during election time especially during the Bikita West constituency by-election campaign but failing to be proactive in foreseeing potential consequences associated by unfolding events. Thus newspapers mainly ended up narrating events as they unfolded without giving a critical analysis of what should be done by either the electorate or local authorities in order to avoid possible negative effects. In many instances, communities failed to access newspapers and yet numerous studies have proved that communities with access to newspapers and other reliable information sources are better off in terms of disaster preparedness than those with limited or no access to communication channels.

This correlation that exists between media use and disaster preparedness is linked to the awareness factor which underlines one the goals of the media which is to educate their audiences. In the social responsibility normative theory of the press, Pfukwa (2001:56) says, “the media have clear obligations of public service that transcend moneymaking”, a characteristic which makes them important stakeholders in disaster management strategies. The 1998 hurricane Mitch and the 2001 earthquakes in El Salvador, according to Messer (2003:2) were “widely covered by the media” and this “boosted awareness and catalysed changes in attitudes towards more proactive

stances.”

The coming of social media has however, helped the local communities in accessing instant news updates. During the January 2017 Bikita West by-election, the social media especially WhatsApp and Facebook outpaced the traditional media in educating members of the public on what was taking place. The public relied more on various WhatsApp groups for information on what was taking place in Bikita West by-election campaign. Organisations like Tell Zimbabwe, Heal Zimbabwe, ZimRights, Wezhira Community Radio Initiative were actively informing the public about events taking place in Bikita thorough the social media and as a result, the responsible authorities were forced to take rapid response to the raised issues.

Unlike the traditional media which was mainly following iconic political figures, citizen journalists in the constituency kept posting events as they were unfolding.

(ii) Information

There appears to be a thin line between education and information as education can be bundled within the same information category so that the terms can be used interchangeably i.e. education is information or information is education. What is clear, however, is the key role that the media play in the welfare of communities by relaying timely information on potential events or developments likely to take place so that the audience would be able to make informed decisions. This information could be in the form of news stories or official government communication alerting the public on what could be coming on their way. Right information empowers communities hence the need to constantly help the public to know what is taking place in their communities as well as alerting them on what is likely going to happen.

McQuail (2010:82) says ‘a central presupposition, relating to questions both of society and of culture, is that the media institution is essentially concerned with the production and distribution of knowledge’ This knowledge, if looked at in the context of elections could mean expert information on the right candidate, best political manifestos and information on polling stations, key dates like election day, and the dos and don’ts at polling station. Information on voters’ rights would be also very essential since voters are sometimes violated by political hooligans. This can only be achieved when there is a vibrant media during election time. However, due to a number of problems that have affected local mainstream media in Zimbabwe such as lack of resources, has seen newspapers failing to satisfy their targeted audience thereby leaving the burden to the new comers - social media. Although they lack expertise in news gathering and reporting, citizen journalists have tried their best in addressing issues affecting the communities and reporting issues as they are, thus during election time, citizen reporters ended up playing a critical role in giving information to the communities while the traditional media resorted to picking issues already posted on social media platforms.

3. Media coverage of Bikita West Constituency by-election campaign

The campaigning period for the Bikita West by-election was very short and vibrant. The candidates only campaigned for less than two calendar months - a development which saw many weekly newspapers failing to give detailed and regular reports pertaining the elections. It is during such situations when radio becomes very helpful in disseminating information.

The national newspapers together with the national broadcaster (ZBC) were only visible during the days when a top politician was visiting the constituency. Vice President Emmarson

Mnangagwa and VP Phelekezela Mphoko were given acres of space in the state run newspapers like *The Herald* when they visited Bikita West on two different times. Although the opposition leader Joice Mujuru did not receive positive media coverage in the state run newspaper, the reporters went to Bikita during her visit at Nyika Growth Point only two days before the election. From the observation on how reporters were covering events in Bikita West constituency, it was crystal clear that the Zimbabwean media were still polarised with the state controlled newspapers and ZBC writing negative stories about the opposition candidates thereby disadvantaging members of the public who should make informed decisions from information obtained from newspapers. In some instances, members of the opposition would be starved of the media coverage - often they would be in the press in the last paragraphs when the reporter would be only informing the readers about other candidates who were in the race. Stories from people who were accusing Zanu PF for intimidation, vote buying and violence among others could not find their way into the national state run publications. Although the privately owned newspapers tried to give fair coverage of the election campaign, it was clear that they were struggling to give detailed reports of events as they unfolded every day. The privately run newspapers thus also failed to help the public thorough adequate reporting due to lack of resources.

Despite having three local newspapers for Masvingo province, only two namely *TellZim News* and *The Mirror* were active during the by-election campaign while *Masvingo Star* failed to give prominence to the Bikita West by-election. However, citizen journalists were able to give blow by blow account of what was happening in Bikita West constituency and they were at the forefront in providing evidence based information. Mitra (2001) argues that alternative online media give readers a voice that authority cannot afford to ignore. Thus citizen journalists took advantage of the internet and smart phones to help in amplifying ordinary people's voices during the campaigning period. The alternative media platforms therefore, uploaded content on WhatsApp groups, uploading short videos on YouTube as well as utilising platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to broadcast events as they were unfolding.

Thus None-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as ZimRights, Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and Election Resource Center (ERC) that were looking for a vibrant media platform with potential to have wider audience in Masvingo province and Bikita West Constituency in particular ended up following what was being posted on social media rather than looking for traditional media platforms.

4. Coverage of election day and announcing of poll results

January 21, 2017 was the Election Day for the Bikita West constituency. Almost all newsrooms in Zimbabwe had their representatives flocking to Bikita West constituency for official coverage of the day of the election. However, very few journalists were accredited by the Zimbabwe Election Commission (ZEC) in order for them to access all the information on what was happening on the election day. This affected the way professional journalists reported about the elections since most of the journalists ended up spending their time at Nyika Growth Point while benefiting from news updates coming from citizen reporters dotted around the constituency. Apart from failing to get accreditation some journalists who used public transport from different towns and cities found it very difficult to travel to various parts of the constituency and again ended up spending much of their time at the Growth Point relying on the citizen reporters who were posting updates from their villages. Thus mainstream media workers mainly resorted to second hand information since

they had no privileges to take their own photographs or to get statistics from election officials. Only Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and *The Herald* which had accredited reporters followed the Zanu PF candidate Beauty Chabaya and Zim PF candidate Kudakwashe Gopo for interviews and ignored other four candidates that were in the race. Of all the newspapers which were on the ground, only *TellZim News* managed to capture all the six candidates as they were casting their votes. However, the newspaper relied on their social media strategy in order to get full details of what was happening throughout the constituency. Through the newspaper's active social media desk, *TellZim News* managed to give live updates of events as they were unfolding in Bikita West. The ward based citizen journalists were very useful in giving out information of what was happening at various polling stations. The citizen reporters therefore, were critical in giving out leads to professional journalists who would in turn make a follow-up and subsequently take necessary steps to publicize electoral flaws through available media platforms in order to trigger rapid response system. Although the traditional media gave detailed and balanced reports of what happened on the election day, it was the social media that managed to steal the limelight in reporting about what was happening in the Bikita West Constituency. Election results were already circulating in the social media a few minutes after the announcement of the election results. The traditional media only published the election outcome as an endorsement of what was already announced by the 'junior partners' which is the social media. The election outcome was announced in the early hours of January 22, 2017 and a picture showing Beauty Chabaya of Zanu PF with 13156 votes followed by Zim PF's Kudakwashe Gopo with 2453 votes, Independent Candidate Innocent Muzvimbiri scoring 725 votes, National Constitution Assembly (NCA)'s Mudock Chivasa on the fourth position with 343 votes, while Terrence Makumbo of the (RDZ) was on fifth position with 132 votes and former legislator for the area Heya Shoko (Independent) coming last with 76 votes circulated on social media a few minutes after ZEC announced the results. By around 0600 hours on January 22, 2017, jokes and cartoons mocking former legislator for the area and other losing candidates were already circulating on social media while other bloggers were also posting critical analysis of the results doubting the genuineness of the number of votes garnered by Zanu PF candidate considering that the constituency was formerly known for rebelling against the ruling party.

5. Media coverage of the post election events

The traditional media thronged the constituency on the day of election only to leave a few hours after announcement of the the election results and never to write anything about Bikita West post election events. A lot events took place after the elections with some village heads and traditional leaders explaining how they were coerced in to force marching their subjects to the polling stations so that they would vote for the ruling Zanu PF party. Some villagers were victimised for openly supporting the opposition party candidates. However, the traditional media shifted their attention from Bikita and focused on the upcoming Mwenezi East by-election scheduled for April 8, 2017 thereby ignoring newsworthy events taking place in Bikita. However, the citizen reporters continued to highlight issues affecting members of the community in Bikita, however, unlike the period before elections when the traditional media a number of issues raised by citizen journalists, after elections, there was a complete blacked as if to suggest that Bikita West by-election was a closed chapter. Even the civic society organisations shifted their attention from Bikita West to Mwenezi East.

6. Conclusion

The coming of social media has greatly assisted an ordinary citizen in actively participating in electoral processes through communicating major issues taking place within their areas. Reporting issues affecting the community is no longer the privilege of the few elites who passed through a journalism training college as communities are now able to use available technologies to amplify their voices and advocate for rapid response from responsible authorities through available alternative social media platforms such as WhatsApp. Although the traditional media is still important, communities are however, empowered by the new media so that they can use technologies to promote access to information , justice and peace during elections in Zimbabwe.

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