
Exploring the relevance of WhatsApp groups in empowering Zimbabwean urban communities: Case of Wezhira Community Radio Initiative's WhatsApp platforms.

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Abstract

The paper explores the use of WhatsApp as a communication tool to spear-heard community development in Masvingo urban. WhatsApp has been celebrated in contemporary societies for facilitating participation of citizens in the affairs of their communities. WhatsApp offers an ideal, freedom of expression and upholding of human rights. WhatsApp is highly commendable for offering an ideal public sphere where citizens can discuss issues which affect them. Draconian legislation that govern media operations in the country restrict free flow of information thereby reducing the freedom of expression in traditional media. Traditionally, the media in Zimbabwe serve urban dwellers. WhatsApp is accessible using internet compatible mobile phones. WhatsApp has opened discursive forums which used not to be found in developing democracies like Zimbabwe. The discursive public of Masvingo urban is now able to exchange information via the Wezhira community radio initiative platform. However, there is increasing debate on the relevance of WhatsApp platforms in facilitating critical debates which touch on bread and butter issues. There is the need to determine if the use of WhatsApp by Wezhira Community Radio is improving urban communities.

Key words : WhatsApp, Communities, Public Debates, Newspapers, Traditional Media

1. Introduction

The social media have become one of the most important communication means in recent times. Today the mobile application, WhatsApp has become a part of people's life. It has become the communication application that people find difficult to do without. WhatsApp enable people to communicate with their friends and family, and is also used for disseminating information, entertainment and educational purposes just like the traditional media. Zimbabweans also use WhatsApp for infotainment; exchange of emotional intimate content and also to co-ordinate socio economic and political activities. People recruit their peers and relatives to WhatsApp groups of their interest. A group Administrator regulates on membership and at times formulates the content policy. Failure to observe the policy can lead one into expulsion. In these groups people share ideas, thoughts and feelings on wide range of issues.

This study explores the relevance of social media (WhatsApp) in facilitating communication

within communities especially Masvingo urban. The paper focuses on WhatsApp users in Masvingo Urban. The general assumption is that the developments of information and communication technology offer multiple chances of transforming societies the use of high speed data services facilities.

UNICEF (2011), note that the evolution of internet technology has dramatically facilitated critical changes in society. Al-Rahmi, W.M. et al 2013 note that social media networks exist so as to facilitate communication among people regardless distance, making it open for people to share information, files, pictures, videos, messages, and conduct real-time conversations. These systems are referred to as social networking, simply because they allow communication with friends, family and co-workers so easily and effectively. While technology is often described as the most important influence upon society, it remains an issue which has undergone little study. Recognizing that technology lies at the very heart of society, this study needs to investigate the role of WhatsApp in livelihood improvement. For the purpose of this study, the scope is limited to social networking site of social media (WhatsApp) which exist so as to provide communication among people regardless of their distance, making it open to people to easily share information. In light of these, the study scope is also delimited to the effects of these social network sites in Masvingo Urban.

2. Wezhira WhatsApp group as a platform for development

There are a number of reasons as to why members of the public felt that it was important for them to join various WhatsApp groups with key reason being that respondents wanted to be kept updated on developmental issues on what was happening around them while others were however interested in following jokes being posted on the platform. Some of the people who are in the group are not actively involved in either posting stories, jokes, or any other information, but they are rather keen to follow debates so that they make informed decisions based on the data being shared on the social media platform. The group administration, argues that some of the group members would suggest topics for discussion via private chats - a development that would see interesting debates taking place. The Mayor of the city of Masvingo Hubert Fidze has been kept on his toes as members of the public request for critical issues via Wezhira WhatsApp platform. In the end, members were giving testimonials that the group has greatly helped them to have some issues being solved by the local authorities and key service providers such as the municipality of Masvingo.

A lot of people have joined WhatsApp groups in Masvingo but most of them have confessed that they usually leave the groups whenever they fail to get some kind of benefit from their membership. In fact, some respondents argued that WhatsApp sometimes affect the durability of their phone batteries hence the need for them to be in a group which brings direct benefit to their daily lives. Despite the fact that some individuals would shun other WhatsApp groups, the case is completely different with Wezhira where almost one out of three people in Masvingo urban would have heard of the platform or even benefited from the information shared on the platform.

Although the internet connectivity is still low in some parts of Masvingo, those who have seen the usefulness of getting news updates from Wezhira argued that they would make sure that they get connected on their mobile phones for at least one hour on daily basis. Usually people get connected between 18 00 hours and 2200 hours so that they have enough time to follow the posts shared throughout the day. It is again during this time when most participants get the opportunity

to contest different views and arguments posted on the platform. The information shared on the WhatsApp group is also forwarded to other groups and individuals in Masvingo Urban who also end up benefiting from the information posted.

3. Highlights of information shared on Wezhira WhatsApp platform

3.1 Notices and announcements by public officials

The platform has mainly served as a notice board for major announcements and developments taking place in the city. Local newspapers and national publications such as NewsDay have carried stories praising the Masvingo city mayor for utilising social media in making announcements that benefited members of the community. Thus, Wezhira Community Radio Initiative's WhatsApp platform played a critical role in giving the mayor of Masvingo a platform to reach out to members of the community. Issues such as public meetings, new tariffs to be charged by the local authority, road closure and Mutirikwi dam level took center stage at the platform as the mayor tries to communicate with the public. Masvingo City councillors from all the ten wards have since joined the mayor in communicating issues affecting the public in their respective wards. All the councillors and also the immediate past local authority leaders as well as the council secretariat are members of the WhatsApp group and they have immensely participated in sharing critical information. Other public officials from government run departments such as Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) are also in the group and they have played a major role in giving useful information. According to Curran (2002) the media are society's major source of political knowledge. The WhatsApp platforms created by the radio initiative have therefore managed to take over in a number of areas where traditional media were found wanting. Thus members of the community have greatly benefited from the initiative on daily basis.

3.2 WhatsApp platform as a tool to amplify ordinary people's voices

Mitra (2001) argues that alternative online media give readers a voice that authority cannot afford to ignore. Thus, the coming of social media has emancipated the ordinary man whose voice was not loud enough to attract the attention of major service providers and government officials. Wezhira WhatsApp group has helped the Masvingo local community to directly link with elected leaders. Previously, it was a 'taboo' for an ordinary man in the street to argue with the mayor of the city. However, the existence of Wezhira WhatsApp group demystified the relationship between the mayor and the public. Residents therefore, used the platform to cry for services needed in their local areas. Moreso, the public have testified that the platform has helped in provoking rapid response from responsible authorities. The platform has therefore helped in transforming the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans who can now directly engage the service providers in order to get rapid response to their demands. On the other hand, Chuma (2013) argue that Zimbabwean journalism standards have deteriorated due to a number of factors ranging from power salaries to lack of knowledge and experience. This has played a critical role in motivating members of the public to take on their issues on their own so that they engage relevant authorities without involving the 'so called fourth estate' which in any case has become very weak due to a number of issues that have affected the profession.

3.3 WhatsApp as an alternative source of setting agenda in urban communities

Chiyadzwa and Maunganidze (2014) argue that gone are the days when the traditional media

could afford to impose their agenda on their audience. Previously, members of the public together with the public officials were relying on mainstream media to get information pertaining to developments taking place in their communities. The traditional media had the privilege to set the agenda on what the community should think about, however, the coming of new media in the form of WhatsApp has seen the community setting their own agenda. The people of Masvingo are now able to determine what to prioritize for their discussions. It is no longer the newspaper that give headlines alone, instead, the WhatsApp platform can come up with critical issues to be discussed. Unlike in the newspaper where journalists produce media content to be consumed by 'passive' readers, on WhatsApp there is interchanging of roles where anyone can be either the producer or the consumer. The people of Masvingo through Wezhira WhatsApp group are now discussing their own issues which they think are more important to them.

3.4 Wezhira WhatsApp platform as an escapist ploy

Not all people who are members of Wezhira WhatsApp platforms are eager to follow developmental issues posted on the platform. A sizable number of respondents argued that after spending very busy schedules during the day, it is during the night and their spare time when they scroll down the WhatsApp chats posted on the group mainly looking for jokes and other interesting content that may provoke their emotions so that they may laugh with friends. Often the jokes border around issues that people want to hear especially those with sexual connotations normally go viral.

However, there are some members of the groups who often look for church related content that can uplift their spiritual lives. Thus the content found on the platform help almost every member to identify some few issues that can be relevant to their lives.

4. Conclusion

Over and above all, it can be thus concluded that the coming in of new media platforms such as WhatsApp has greatly emancipated ordinary people in Zimbabwe. Members of the public have become empowered by the availability of new technologies since they can now openly enter into healthy dialogues with the key service providers. Thus the general living standards have been certainly improved by these new platforms. Although the credit for the improvement of service provision in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe, the role played by platforms such as Wezhira WhatsApp groups must not be undermined. The ordinary way of living where journalist have the mandate to disseminate information to sometimes passive audience has since elapsed as the new media revolution has already disrupted the way of living.

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