



JOURNALIST BLOGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract:

It is a growing phenomenon that journalists in Zimbabwe are blogging. Some journalists blog within the media outlet's website, while some blogs in the public sites. This paper mainly discusses the limitation of blogs by analyzing the difference between newspaper blogs and writings on public blog platforms. I argue that the content of public blogs is markedly different from those published on newspaper blogs. This is because newspaper blogs are less individualistic and journalistic blogging on newspaper platforms is more strongly influenced by the organization to which they belong.

Keywords: blog, newspaper blog, public blog, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Journalists make up an important part in the first generation of bloggers. Robinson (2006) characterizes journalistic blogs as a reporter's notebook of news tidbits and incidentals; a straight column of opinion; a question-and-answer format by editors; a readership forum; a confessional diary written by the reporter about his or her beat; a round-up of news summaries that promote the print publication; and a rumor-mill that reporter uses as an off-the-record account. Robinson does not provide quantitative data to support his arguments. The categorization, however, indicates how blogs serve journalism in various ways.

Several studies have focused on how blogs change journalists' life and work practices. Carison (2007) notes that blogging presents journalists an opportunity to make journalism more transparent. Lowrey and Mackay (2008) pointed out that blogs

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affect the ways journalists practice their profession, such as reporting, using blogs as news sources and decision making regarding the newsworthiness of events. In the literature, there is much speculation that journalistic blogs may create opportunities to increase reader engagement with mainstream news outlets and heighten community participation in the public discourse. Therefore, we are interested to know if the same process takes place in Zimbabwe. In this study, I explore the journalistic narratives on newspaper blogs and independent public blogs that are advanced in different ways related to their occupations. By discussing these areas, we can develop a better understanding of the evolving landscape of Zimbabwean journalism and how blogging has introduced new elements into journalism.

A growing number of journalists in Zimbabwe are now blogging. Although there has been little research into Zimbabwean journalist bloggers, it appears to be a growing phenomenon. Many traditional media websites in Zimbabwe host blogs, with reporters and editors serving as bloggers. This indicates that journalists use blogs much more extensively than the general public. Journalists are part of the first generation to publicly exchange views with readers and viewers through blogging.

Blogging by journalists in Zimbabwe compares in some ways to the Western countries. For example, blogs are used by Zimbabwean newspapers to maintain or increase readership especially on online readership. Blogs also make journalism more transparent when journalists update news stories. However, except for the similarities, journalism in Zimbabwe differs greatly in terms of social, political, and cultural structures compared to the Western countries. Therefore, we must note that journalistic blogs in Zimbabwe also differ greatly in many aspects with their counterparts.

2. Media Structure in Zimbabwe

The media structure in Zimbabwe has unique features that were introduced during the colonial era. Since the 1890s, Rhodesian media have undergone profound reforms. In the colonial era, journalism was dominated by the imperial need to control the colonized people. Journalists were employed by the State in order to ensure that government officials were given the opportunity to create a link between the government, and the people. As a result, journalists became the mouthpiece of the colonial government. The structure was not transformed after independence because the independent government inherited the media system whose transformation was cosmetic. The major change that took place in 1980 was that independent media was allowed to operate whilst the public media remains under the control of the government. Both public and private media operate under stringent laws that regulate media operations.

In the US, there exists the *American Journalism Review*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Broadcast and Cable*, and *Quill*. Those writing for such trade journals are typically working journalists, media managers from the news industry, and journalism educators and scholars. The journalistic community is constituted through trade publications, with other institutional practices, such as membership of professional associations and awards for excellence. The news industry's trade publications serve as important historical markers of modern journalism's efforts to position itself as a bona fide profession (Parameswaran, 2006). However, in Zimbabwe, there are greater limits on freedom of expression. In the Zimbabwean media context, professional associations, awards for excellence, etc, do not carry the same weight or symbolism to support education in journalism. Under government restrictions, trade publications in Zimbabwe have limited ability to reflect the complexity of newsroom operations. Therefore, blogs become key public forum for journalists to exchange ideas about norms, controversial issues, ethical boundaries and trends in their field. Journalists in Zimbabwe have to find a way of operating within the difficult environment as a result the blogosphere and its influence is possibly an avenue that journalists use to highlight their own opinions.

Although blogs have enhanced the development of journalism, there are many factors that may limit the degree to which blogging can bring to enhance journalistic autonomy. One of these factors concerns with certain organizational influence and censorship. For example, in a survey of 153 reporters in the U.S., Sheffer & Schultz (2008) found that those that were "other-motivated", including journalists required to blog by management, accounted for 73 percent of respondents, while "self-motivated" blogger reporters made up only 27 percent of those surveyed. This research also suggests that there are high levels of resistance to blogging by journalists, as well as poor management communication strategy from the media company to overcome that resistance. Managers encourage journalists to blog, but fail to take the necessary steps to support successful blogging. Cohen's (2002) study of CNN.com also indicates how blogs sit firmly within the CNN corporate structure. In his study, blogs may have the potential to spur open journalism and greater pluralism, as well as challenge authority, but this does not seem to be the reality in practice. Singer (2005) noticed that while some journalistic blogs are more opinionated than others, they provide readers with a more personal account of the news and blogs tend to extend traditional norms to an online format rather than representing a radical shift in journalistic practice.

The impact of blogs also meets many barriers in Zimbabwe. As noted, the Zimbabwe government has developed a range of mechanisms to control media based on its access to information system (AIPPA). Zimbabwe's social media has had an ambiguous role in political events in the last twelve months and particularly with the

yet to come July 31 2018 electoral period. Local ICT experts have lauded the expansion of mobile telephony and 3G internet as signifying definite improvements in citizens access to information and freedom of expression. Given the fact that the country will face a highly contested electoral period, the use of social media applications will be dominated by matters related to politics and the targeting of voters. In other spheres such as in the mainstream media, social media is being used to increase online readership and in part re-brand their titles into trendy multimedia publications. Civil society organizations also utilize the increasingly fashionable social media for voter education campaigns as well as to communicate variegated positions on the state of affairs in the country.

For those that are the end receivers of news receivers via Twitter, Facebook or Whatsup (among others), they took to it less to act on information received and more to express their own opinions on anything (from the religious to the political). In most instances, it has become a platform more for information, entertainment, rumor-mongering and sensationalism that has transcended levels never seen before in Zimbabwe's media and communications history. This to the extent that social media has left many a user upset, confused, seeking legal recourse or trying to contact the complaints email of one social media company or the other.

But perhaps what is of immediate concern are its political dimensions in Zimbabwe. The use of blogs Twitter and Facebook has signified a major shift in how political news and events in the country are received and interpreted. Because it does not have a specific journalistic ethos as regards its content, the news that social media users put into the public domain were more for communication of opinion, personal matters than serving to professionally and ethically inform a somewhat unlimited number of persons. This would then point to the fact that the arrival of social media has led to the expansion of the right of Zimbabweans to receive and impart information in a manner that was more personally empowering and without direct censorship. It is a right that in this electoral period Zimbabweans are enjoying all too well (if they could afford to get connected).

The first of these is that social media usage and its evolution in Zimbabwean political matters was largely one of mimicry. Its political utilization was framed within the framework characterized by the Arab Spring, particularly the Tunisian version of it. Except that, here it was more for incremental change than any perceived or anticipated revolution. So the initial political usage of social media within the context of elections was more or less framed within the ambit of access to information and not action on information. This means that its usage in Zimbabwe was not in the aftermath of a specified injustice but in anticipation of a political event and therefore it had to be introduced and not enhanced.

This introduction of civic/political education and mobilization social media platforms literally unleashed a stream of what I would like to call 'immediate/defensive consciousness's related to various but specific political affiliations. And this is the second point to place on the table. More often than not, social media did not necessarily change the political viewpoints of users, it gave them a platform on which to reinforce or defend them against rival ones with greater urgency and immediacy. In the process, it also served as a medium of rivalry even beyond political parties but also between differing civil society actors.

The penultimate issue relates to the emerging question of whether in Zimbabwe's case, social media leads to action from the virtual and into reality. When one looks at the electoral period, beginning with the March 2013 Constitutional referendum, social media was important in generating public interest in various political issues but did not however significantly replace the direct need for either door to door lobbying, campaigning or political rallies. It was used more often than not after a major event and not as an event in and of itself. The campaigns to lure the youth to register to vote and eventually do so via social media could not be left merely to the internet by way of mobilizing. There had to be a prioritisation of physical mobilization and accepting the social media as 'toppings'. Emphasis had to be placed on the real before turning to the virtual.

The final matter to be placed on the table is a rather controversial but necessary one to make. That is whether social media platforms have created new platforms for critical engagement or have merely extended the reach of propaganda. In the case of our country, for now, social media has reflected not only the mainstream views in our society but also the rival mainstream ideas about elections and/or their results. This binary character to the 'critical thought' one encounters on these platforms means for now, whatever the hegemonic and counter hegemonic trends in real society, these will come to be represented in the new or alternative media.

So as it is, and during our electoral period (which has not yet ended) social media has been most useful as an alternative source of information for many citizens. It has also allowed greater participation by citizens in debates that their opinions may have never seen it into any newspapers, radio or TV stations. It has not however, been as great an agent of direct change. For now, it remains direct and real mobilization that works.

3. Research Questions

1. What role has media blogs played in the provision of information dissemination in Zimbabwe

2. To what extent do journalists practice self-censorship in their blogs when public blog sites and newspaper blog sites are compared?
3. To what extent are sensitive topics able to survive in blogs when public blog sites and newspaper blog sites are compared?

4. Methodology

4.1 Analysis and Results

In this section, I will present the research results as well as a sketch of journalist bloggers in Zimbabwe. The overall findings are divided into three parts: the first part is concerned with the organizational structure which influences journalists' blogging in newspaper blog platform, while the other two deal with the different characteristics of newspaper blogs sites and public blog sites. There are some similarities between the two newspaper blog sites. For example, the relationship between journalist bloggers and readers is limited by many external factors. Both official press platforms adopt the real-name system. Current reporters can register with their real name and work ID to write blogs. Journalistic blogs are the domain of verified journalists. Other citizens can still register but cannot write columns.

In this study, I have also observed that some sensitive words were usually replaced by similar words or abbreviations to escape external censors. Playing around with abbreviations to make them close to the politically sensitive terms is a witty way to get published. The result of this study is that in the game of a cat and a mouse between external censors and Zimbabwe's increasingly outspoken bloggers, blocking of message content has for the most part been ineffective. By using the previous strategies, despite censorship, journalists can accept the system of public blogs and maintain strong control over the blog content as long as the deviant views and opinions do not directly challenge the Party's ideology and leadership. Therefore, I have noted in this study that some journalists change blog hosts due to unreasonable deletion of posts. However, after a period of time, some of the bloggers would move back.

Dube, a social media expert based in the UK, says the same situation could happen with Zimbabwe by all means. Egypt and Zimbabwe are mirrors of each other in two respects. Both have a high rate of Internet penetration and both have highly literate populations. The conditions necessary for social media to be a catalyst are all there. Cheap mobile broadband, a proliferation of feature phones and Internet-connected hardware means that information can be disseminated quickly and accurately in viral form. The question is no longer if but simply when. Since the inception of the Web, there have been huge changes in how media is consumed and produced. At the

forefront of this media evolution is social media – a participatory phenomenon that is no longer being used by a few but by many.

However, nearer home, there is an increased fear, although muted, on what the Zimbabwean government is capable of doing in light of the new-found power of the Internet which is largely unaffected and uncontrolled by draconian laws. In June 2016, Econet Wireless, the country's largest mobile phone operator, faced a closure threat for allegedly allowing the Movement for Democratic Change to campaign on its network through a toll-free interactive service.

A state media columnist stated that the next polls will be fought on the waves, which is why Econet, and its card-carrying owner, Strive Masiyiwa, are so critical to the MDC-T. He warned the Econet from allowing MDC-T from using Masiyiwa's network, through a toll-free facility to utilize that facility for campaigning purposes. He even threatened the Econet network of closure if he gave the opposition with the chance of using its network to campaign for MDC -T. A year before that the same mobile service provider had been accused of alleged involvement in politics by offering a toll-free facility where a subscriber gets daily news roundups, updates on MDC-T's rallies, the party's position on the constitution-making process and a message from the party president Morgan Tsvangirai.

The MDC-T has dubbed the new platform The Voice of Real Change and said it would herald a new era in communication "at a time when the so-called public broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, has shamefully become a conveyor of Zanu PF propaganda. The fear is that now that the Internet is obviously unregulated, people are becoming more expressive and have found a new platform to vent their anger on government officials. Recently media reports picked on a spat between controversial musician Viomak and Zimbabwe's Tourism minister Walter Mzembi.

Mzembi was infuriated by the musician's branding of Zanu PF as a party of "murderers and thieves". Mzembi is said to having shot back: "*Shame on you, you have lost the last thread of decent engagement.*" In light of the recent dispute over the post of the presidency of MDC-M between Arthur Mutambara and Welshman Ncube, the latter has benefited immensely from the views of people on his Facebook wall with over 200 people posting comments.

Joseph Kamunda, an ICT expert, said it was not surprising that Africa was finding a voice on social media networks and most on mobile Internet as shown by North Africa. The Next Generation Telecoms Africa Summit recently held in Nairobi, Kenya, showed that mobile data and applications (inclusive is mobile Internet) usage has grown and Zimbabwe was also mentioned," he said. Protests staged by citizens like Evan Mawarire of #thisflag movement and Tajamuka-Sesijikile Campaign, which is demanding the immediate resignation of President Robert Mugabe, appear to have

been spearheaded through social media like Facebook and Twitter, and the messaging application, WhatsApp.

This appears to have unsettled the government as Zimbabwe's Information Technology Minister, Supa Mandiwanzira, is being quoted by a South African news organization warning the country's social media users that their phones can be tracked if they spread messages that President Mugabe's government deems abusive. But Mandiwanzira is on record as saying the government won't block social media like in some authoritarian states.

Are social media a tool for effecting political transformation in Zimbabwe? For perspective, Studio 7 reached Nigel Mugamu of 263 Chat, an award-winning Zimbabwe media company encouraging dialogue using social media, guest blogs, live events and providing training and social media strategies, and Kholwani Nyathi, editor of the independent Standard newspaper.

Nyathi said social media are playing a critical role in enhancing the necessary transformation in Zimbabwe though at times such media can be destructive.

“What has happened in Zimbabwe is that due to the economic situation and the restrictive media laws that we have ... we have very few official media channels and because of social media people have found channels outside the mainstream media and social media has a wider reach than the mainstream media. The difference between social media and mainstream media is that there is that feedback aspect. It's no longer one way ... people can exchange messages and they can generate their own stories that they can debate on social media and this means that information travels much faster. There is a lot of freedom in that space and this is why its easier for activists to push their messages than through traditional media.”

But Nyathi noted that social media can also be destructive. There is always danger in an environment where information is restricted. People end up speculating as exemplified by messages that have been flighted on social media regarding the Zimbabwean government failure to pay civil servants on set dates. There were people announcing several pay dates for civil servants and in the end, you don't know what's true. When there is a vacuum people come up with all sorts of things to fill the vacuum and that is one of the first challenges about social media.

“With the first stay away (in Zimbabwe) there were people who were sending each other messages on how best to influence the State to pay their salaries on time. It's for a good cause but the suggestions contributed on social media can easily be destructive. Social media is having a huge impact on Zimbabwe's political processes. The impact of social

media will depend on how the ruling political party reacts to the developments taking place in Zimbabwe."

5. Conclusions

In this study, I note that both public blogs and newspaper blogs are constructed as a negotiated space between censorship and bloggers' private domains. Content control in Zimbabwe not only occurs through formal regulation of public blogs, but also through informal means on newspaper blogs. Under stronger external censorship on public blogs compared to that of newspaper blogs, journalists adopt different strategies to deal with the pressure. Using satirical, implicit wordings which are comprehensible to readers, reporters can avoid troubles. Therefore, even though censorship of public blogs is tougher than that at newspaper blogs, I found reporters can often accept higher levels of external censorship at public blogs. On the contrary, on newspaper blogs, even though controls imposed by the press are loosened, self-censorship and other similar constraining factors hamper the development of newspaper blogs and make it currently at a stage of low communication: there is insufficient interactivity, low response rates and low overall usage.

In conclusion, the content of public blogs is markedly different from those published on the newspaper blogs. Independent public blogs feature more behind-the-scenes stories, informal interviews with news sources, full interviews with sources, in-depth analysis of current issues, unpublished stories, personal opinion and other stories beyond careers by reporters. On the contrary, newspaper blogs are less individualistic because journalistic blogging on newspaper platforms is more strongly influenced by the organization to which they belong. Comparing the two blog platforms and the strategies bloggers employ in writing, I can conclude that newspaper blogs did not make good use of the freedom provided by the internet to make qualitative changes to their content.

There are limitations in this study. One major issue is its sample. Due to the difficulty to obtain a complete sampling frame on the internet, this paper chose to study a total of fifty blogs from four blog sites and thus they are by no means a "representative sample" of all journalistic blogs in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, the study presents a snapshot of how blogging and journalism are developing in Zimbabwe so as to reveal possible patterns.

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