

Chapter 97

Memory, National Identity, and Freedom of Expression in the Information Age: Discussing the Taboo in the Zimbabwean Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

New Media and Information Technologies (NICTs) are increasingly becoming central in facilitating freedom of expression especially in repressive countries. In addition, the burgeoning diaspora community coupled with these NICTs have offered populations in these communities alternative public spheres where they can debate issues without government control. The chapter argues that through the Website, www.newzimbabwe.com, Zimbabweans have found for themselves a platform where they debate otherwise taboo issues that are not easily discussed in Zimbabwe: ethnicity and the heroes' acre debates. The conclusion of this the chapter is that the Internet has revolutionised the way Zimbabweans know freedom of expression.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to explore how the internet has become a safe platform for Zimbabweans to exercise their right to freedom of expression. The internet simultaneously enables the user to exercise this right, receive and disseminate information, ideas and opinions visually or phonetically to large audiences at the lowest possible cost. Also, this evolution of technology has caused global dramatic changes in the field of journalism. Thus the

internet has closed the gap between the traditional electronic media, and cyberspace; where these are now linked and local papers, radio or television stations are now available online world-wide. The invasion of the Zimbabwean communicative space by the internet has posed many challenges to the government and citizens alike. It seems the internet is both liberating and enslaving at the same time. This of course depends on where the user accesses and generates content. It is important to note that the internet, much as it has been hyped as a lib-

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erating tool, may be used for committing crimes hence the increasing need for its legal regulation by national governments. For example the most curious issue in Zimbabwe's freedom of expression debates is government control of the internet. In August 2007 the Zimbabwean president signed into law the Interception of Communications Act (ICA), an instrument that allows state officials to snoop and eavesdrop on personal telephonic or internet interactions. The law is said to be necessary to protect the interests of national security or the maintenance of law and order. The chapter looks at the freedom of expression in the information age in the Zimbabwean context. Most precisely, the chapter explores how the internet has transformed the elitist dominated domestic public sphere into a sphere where ordinary citizens interact among themselves and those in power.

The chapter argues that since the rise to prominence of the Zimbabwe crisis in 2000, the internet and online media have played an integral role in the politics of the country. The chapter uses the concept of voice and power (Mitra 2001) to negotiate the central role the internet has played in Zimbabwean politics. Specifically the chapter looks at a diasporic news website, www.newzimbabwe.com, a site that covers Zimbabwean issues, and how it is used as a counter-hegemonic forum to challenge the dominant discourses advanced by the former ruling party-Zimbabwe African Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-Pf). The site is probably the first professionally run and trusted source of Zimbabwean news accessed by those at home and in the diaspora. Also, the website covers stories that relate specifically to Zimbabwean communities across the globe. Specific attention is paid to the use of historical archive and memory in the discussion of the 1980s genocide and the contested National Heroes' Acre, a burial site for those individuals deemed heroes to the nation. The possibility of the internet to offer Zimbabweans a platform for freedom of expression in the information age is looked at in this context. Memory is used as a lens to look at how Zimbabweans discuss

these 'taboo' issues like the 1983-1987 genocide, also known as Gukurahundi, and the issue of the national shrine, the National Heroes Acre. The former looks at the role the former ruling party, (Zanu-Pf) and its leader Robert Mugabe played during this era. The public media in Zimbabwe has not critically covered issues relating to the event besides systematically using the Zanu-Pf narratives to address whatever issues arise. What is clear is that the event continues to affect the fragile cohesive Zimbabwean identity that the nationalists have always struggled to construct. The latter aspect specifically looks at the contests of the government of national unity (GNU) for the control of the heroes acre. The GNU consists of Zanu-Pf and two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change led by Welshman Ncube and Morgan Tsvangirai. The heroes acre is a space where national heroes are supposedly buried. However, it seems Zanu-Pf has a monopoly on conferring the hero's status. Also the criteria for selecting heroes seems to be determined, among other things by serving the nation, having fought the war and remaining loyal to Zanu-Pf. This is explored later. These two topics form part of 'the taboo' in that no one can freely discuss them within Zimbabwe as there are legal or extralegal ramifications as shall be shown later. This chapter makes an intervention in that it argues that the dearth of freedom of expression on the 'taboo' has been circumvented by the internet.

Newzimbabwe.com, a website based in Wales, is used to analyse news stories that cover these taboo issues mainly because it offers a platform for readers to debate issues and it is "the most famous among" Zimbabweans in the homeland and diaspora (Moyo 2009). Also, the website offers a hitherto unknown and new technological characteristic in media that is only a preserve of new media, that of user generated content, in the form of reader comments, to gauge the role of the internet in advancing freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. As a background, the chapter argues that the role of public media after independence

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