An Exploration of Social Media as Forms of Social Control and Political Othering:
A Critical Discourse Approach

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century problem is of "Othering." In a world beset by challenges, global, national, and regional conflict wrapped within or organized around group-based difference. The concept of "Othering" is used for social media platforms as the cause of many, if not all of the stresses of globalization, and the "collision of cultures." This article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of social media in the wake of political othering on the Zimbabwean political landscape. More so, political othering is viewed as exacerbated by the various manipulations of different social media platforms. The article uses critical discourse analysis to unravel the unequal power relations inherent in social media platforms as both users and receivers of the peddled messages. Much as public media platforms are known to propagate a certain kind of mediated reality aimed at agenda setting and ideological persuasion in the presumed receivers. Social media platforms are used to negatively propagate rivalry, especially among political opponents.

KEYWORDS

Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Othering, Social Control, Social Media platforms

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is loosely defined as the antagonistic forces between two or more parties. In Zimbabwe due to prevailing economic hardships, politically, socially and economically, entities and individuals have become hyper-sensitive to information. The traditional media platforms have been highly polarized because of the ideological inclination and the agenda that their media houses subscribe to. Therefore, the only platform where though debatable individuals can manipulate to reach out to their intended recipient without so much mediation of the messages is the social media platforms. The social media platform is currently giving voice to the voiceless, that is, to the general readers and communities where their works manifest from. By finding a vent of some sort to vent their emotional anger, political expectations and economic dreams the general populace engages in what this discussion refers to as "political othering." The paper makes use of social media platforms that have been manipulated by players in the run to and the post-election periods of 2018 Zimbabwe's Harmonized Elections. The discussion centers on the three popularly used social media platforms and how they have been manipulated to politic Othering. Among the three are the Facebook, the Tweeter and WhatsApp. This discussion employs critical discourse analysis to analyze text and images used on these social media platforms as an end to a means- Political Othering.

The Discussion Will Be Guided by and Try to Answer Some of these Questions

How much noise is social media making as compared to established formal media platforms?

How is Social Media helping in shaping the social, political and economic spheres of life in Zimbabwe?

How powerful is social media as a political, social and economic tool used to propagate an ideology?

Is social media having a hand in social control of individuals?

Is social media helping in resolving the social, political and economic woes of Zimbabwe?

The preceding section will highlight a brief literature review on the key elements of the discussion. First the literature on othering and the birth of each of the three media platforms analyzed in this paper. The advantages and disadvantages of Social Media Platforms in general will be highlighted.

THE CONCEPT OF OTHERING

Staszak (2008) objectifies that, scholars who work with Structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, and other methodologies which depend on "binary oppositions" often look for works in which characters are created by invoking some rhetoric of "otherness." The proper characters can be distinguished by their difference from the improper characters who are represented as somehow "Other" than the norm, the standards attributed by the author to the work's implied audience. In the same vein, Staszak (2008) states that, otherness is a way of the discursive process by which a dominant group "Us the self" constructs one or more dominated out-groups "Them" by stigmatizing a difference-real or imagined -presented as a negation of identity and a motive for potential discrimination. The difference belongs to the realm of discourse.

Staszak (2008) further insists that, the creation of otherness/othering consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us. The out-group is only coherent as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing

Language of Othering

According to Black (2006), language is structured around differences. Whenever a definition is proffered something, is at least implicitly defining it in terms of what it is not. This idea of difference becomes particularly pertinent when thinking about human relations. Black (2006) further relays that, at the fundamental level, all languages have ways of distinguishing between "them" and "us"; these very pronouns highlight the distinction between the groups. As the first-person plural pronoun, "us" places the speaker within a group with a shared identity. By contrast, "them" is the third person plural, which is used to refer to people at a distance. In their denotation, their meaning, the words "us" and "them" contain no indication of power structures or perceptions of these groups. However, the power of words does not just derive from their definitions, but also from the connotations that they acquire through usage.

The power of language to "other" people becomes even clearer when considering the words used to refer to "them". In English, the word "foreigner" derives from the Latin *forãs* meaning "out of doors". This literal meaning remained, but by the early 15th century it had been almost entirely overtaken by the metaphorical meaning of "of other countries" (Black, 2006). Similarly, the French word "étranger" derived from the Latin *extraneous*, meaning outside, and then came to acquire the metaphorical meaning of "qui est d'une autre nation" (Robert, 2000). These words do not merely designate those from elsewhere as separate, but also as different. This desire to distinguish "us" from "them" often leads to words for the "other" acquiring explicitly negative connotations. These negative connotations are usually more pronounced in reference to groups that are geographically close to "us" as the need to distinguish "them" is even more fraught with social, cultural and political

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