Patterns of social media usage amongst the marginalized rural Zimbabwean peasants: The case of Bikita.

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Abstract: *It is an undisputed fact that politicians, the media, experts and opinion leaders dominated political debate prior to social media, however it is not clear how social media has altered or fostered participation by all in the public sphere. It is also undisputed that news in most parts of Africa was urban-centric and the rural folks were mainly forgotten, marginalized and often ignored. In Zimbabwe the traditional barriers of poverty, lack of infrastructure, censorship, intimidation and fear to express opinions in public date back to colonialism and affected rural peasants the most. The coming of independence changed little as the rural areas were largely marginalized. However, mobile telephony service providers have since 2009 managed to widen the reach of internet services in the country as one only needs to be in possession of a requisite handset and sim card. As a result more rural people now have access to social network sites especially, Facebook. This paper thus sought to investigate whether the marginalized rural peasants have been empowered by social media or the marginalization has resurfaced in new dimensions. This was made possible by looking at patterns of Facebook use in rural Zimbabwe. Interviews and observation were used to ascertain the emerging communication dynamics associated with the use of social media by marginalized rural communities in the democratic process. The study found out that the majority of the middle-aged and elderly rural peasants unlike the young generation do not have access to the internet as they prefer less sophisticated internet incompatible mobile phones since they are internet illiterate.*
Key words: Social media, rural peasants, public sphere, marginalisation, internet literacy, Zimbabwe

I. Introduction

This paper strives to argue that social media and the internet in Zimbabwe brought some sigh of relief for the usually forgotten and stifled voices of the rural citizen due to various reasons. This is reiterated by the Freedom House report (2012:1) which posits that despite the restrictive environment for the traditional media in Zimbabwe, the internet and mobile phone usage is normally free from government interference. In her report, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay in 2012 concurs with Freedom House findings that the internet in Zimbabwe is free and is completely unregulated. Freedom house however, also notes, that "there are also obstacles that hinder citizens' access, including poor infrastructure in urban areas and an almost lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

Though the Internet came with its challenges, its accommodativeness and ease of access makes the traditional media editors' functions of setting the agenda, gate keeping, filtering and censoring of other people's voices redundant and impossible. Numerous scholars challenge this optimistic view as they criticise the dichotomous interpretation of the emancipatory nature of the internet arguing that there still exist various divides that operate at the societal and individual levels (Norris, 2001; Wilson, 2004; Van Dijk, 2005.) Accordingly Van Dijk juxtaposes four levels of digital divide, namely:

1) Motivational access: motivation to use digital technology
2) Material or physical access: possession of computers and internet connections or permissions to use them and their contents.
3) Skill access: Possession of digital skills that is operational, informational and strategic
4) Usage access: Number and diversity of applications and usage time.

Despite this realistic digital divides, it remains undisputed that nowadays the former recipients of information regardless of geographical location are active writers and consumers of information of their choice on the cyber space. Although some scholars argue that Africa is poorly positioned in the cyberspace as to benefit from globalisation, it is not disputed that the cyber public sphere enhances participation by Africans. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to explore how the marginalised citizens are exploring and using technology in Bikita. While the gloomy portrayal of the stifled rural voices has been made since the colonial period in Zimbabwe, the role being played by mobile phones and the internet to address this information imbalance requires academic probing.

The public sphere participation imbalance that deprived the rural folks of their constitutional right to Freedom of expression and to participate in issues relating to the state as is expected of all citizens in a

democracy now appears to be a thing of the past. Whether this is true or false for the rural peasants in this 'information age' is the subject of this paper. The emancipatory nature of the Internet might have granted the information marginalised rural Zimbabwean citizens an opportunity to be active producers and consumers of information. Through the internet, the barriers of distance for newspaper distribution or radio/television accessibility no longer matter. The forgotten rural citizen has an opportunity to escape the muzzling and harness the opportunities presented by the new media to participate in issues of common concern and those of governance. Indeed it is the ways in which the rural peasants are harnessing the new media and whether they have been empowered or marginalisation has resurfaced in new ways that is being considered in this paper.

II.   Perceptions and prejudices about rural Zimbabwe

Rural Zimbabwe from the colonial period had been synonymous with a place of hunger, famine, illiteracy, outright poverty, donor-dependency and backwardness among other negative connotations (Ranger T, 1985). It is viewed as a place where the failures or older generation are to be found waiting for death and playing with grandchildren while the younger people and active generation is expected to work in the urban areas and sending handouts to the relatives in the countryside. Rural Zimbabwe is also perceived as the bedrock for propaganda activities from the colonial period to the present (Fredrikse, 1982: Windrich, 1981). Most rural communities are geographically isolated and economically disadvantaged and have consequently failed to attract the interest of commercial service providers (Freedom House 2012:2). In terms of information reach and media reach the rural peasants are the last to hear the news and at most times occurrences in their locality are viewed as non-newsworthy. It is for this reason that the right to participation is often taken away from the rural populace. This is not withstanding or underestimating the alternative forms of communication that are at the disposal of the rural peasants. While the rural peasants are marginalised in terms of traditional mass media exposure since the colonial times to the present they had alternative means of communication. Fredrikse points out that the rural people could access information through "group communication, face to face interaction and they got pamphlets, magazines, posters and stickers that were delivered door to door" (1982:111-112).

Despite the disadvantage of the rural people in terms of access to information, the government's position on ICT and communication is that all people should have access despite their geographical location. According to the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ) the government plans to set up rural information centres and mobile van units, presumably to address the information gap and communication needs of the people". MMPZ further state that the government believes that taking information to rural areas would "enhance development and bridge the urban-rural digital divide". MMPZ though commending such an initiative expressed reservations and "hoped the empowerment of the rural folks that the government envisages includes offering them essential information on electoral, human rights and other pertinent developmental issues. MMPZ also cautioned authorities not to "turn these multi-media instruments of propaganda in the same way that they, and their colonial predecessors reduced the public media into their mouthpieces (2007:1). In light of the assertions by government it is worthwhile to study the extent to which they are contributing to the people of Bikita so that they are not left out in the 'information super-highway'.

The foregoing connotations about rural areas in general also go along with views on Bikita-the physical location of the study where myths and labels of witchcraft, notions of famine, hunger, poverty, backwardness and a general lack of knowledge haunts them. The tag of illiteracy is hardly there as Masvingo Province boasts of being the highest literate province in the country. Zimbabwe in the African continent is rated as the best with an adult literacy rate of above 90 percent. It should be noted that this literacy does not in any way depict internet and social media as a significant number of the adult population are internet incompetent. The other challenge of rural Zimbabwe is that it is viewed as traditional and culturally static communities that are resistant to change. This resistance to change also applies to the resistance to adopt and use new technology such as going on the cyberspace. The foregoing perception of the rural folk as the 'wretched of the earth' shall inform this study's analysis of findings.

III.   Uses of social media in Zimbabwe

It is imperative to give an overview of how Zimbabweans have been using social media before delving into the patterns of social media usage in Bikita. Social media is an alternative means of mass communications that employs new information and communication technologies like mobile phones, ipads and internet to produce, store and distribute multi-media messaging, text messaging and mobile pictures (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo 2013:415). Social media networking according to Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013:427) is usually a form of leisure that sustains interpersonal communication amongst friends, relatives, colleagues or 'people pursuing a common interest'. In general, sites like facebook are mainly used for friendly chats and renewing social contacts, as the lack of anonymity on such sites and fear of repercussions limit politically-oriented statements which can be traced back to those expressing them (freedom House 2012:8) .
The country's patterns of using social media though might not encompass some uses of social media in the

study's physical location; the truth is that for some reason other pertinent uses are not found in the area under study. An understanding thus of social media uses in Zimbabwe would lay a foundation and an overview of social media use and consumption trends in general in the country. This background is critical as it gives us a general understanding of opinion builders and leaders in the use of social media. The following are some of the uses of social media in Zimbabwe:

- Business marketing

     The innovative business sector has been using social media to reach the customers and to build their brand names and loyalty through requesting customers to 'like' their face book or twitter pages. Apart from advertising products the corporate world as the leaders in business who has access to funds has been harnessing social media to advance their corporate ambitions and to outwit competitors. E-commerce and e-banking became the buzzwords with the widespread use and adaptation of social media use by the business community.

- Political campaign and participation platform

     As a democratising nation, politicians and citizens have been using social media to interact and to get their political parties liked. In other words politicians in Zimbabwe are using social media as an opinion polling platform, as a voter mobilisation platform, as a platform to market their ideologies. Nowadays politicians from across the political divide are utilising social media effectively to reach voters in their private spheres. Voters likewise are posting and participating in political debates without the fear of victimisation or being threatened as they hide behind the privacy and anonymity made possible by the Internet. The legal restrictions imposed on candidates seeking political office in the country by the Public Order and Security Act which require police clearance for a rally to be convened has been rendered useless and baseless. The social media space has also been used to advertise rallies and popular candidates. For instance on February 21st every year the portrait of Zimbabwean president is posted so as for citizens to wish him more years and to air their views on his leadership credentials.

- Research platform

     In institutions of higher learning social media has been utilised for research purposes. Moreover research institutes and academics have been posting questions on facebook thereby using the platform as an opinion and data gathering platform. Issues relating to politics, sexuality, marriage, negative effects of facebook and issues affecting the economy have all been researched via the social media platform. Assignments and virtual classes have also been conducted on social media especially facebook and whatsapp.

- Entertainment

     Social media in Zimbabwe has proved to be a sound entertainment platform since it is awash with jokes of various forms. These range from text messages, photos, audio and audio-visual jokes. There is an array of communities who post entertainment information and this has quite a considerable number of followers thereby making entertainment one of the best uses of social media.

- Socialising and Relationship building

     The interactive nature of social media has allowed Zimbabweans to seek friendship and to interact with significant others in different localities. Online relationships have arisen with love affairs blooming between people who are physically miles apart and in some cases continents apart. The Zimbabweans have been using the social media to share ideas, to solicit for help and at times to seek advise on challenges they would be facing in their lives. Social media has become somewhat a replacement for counsellors and culturally specific advisers that used to be there prior to the platform.

- News dissemination

     Social media brought with it citizen or guerrilla journalists who report occurrences in their vicinity or who comment on issues affecting them on a day to day basis. In Zimbabwe this has been the major use of social media as people in different areas are reporting issues occurring in their areas as soon as an event happens. Internet compatible mobile phones have made the traditional news values of releasing news as and when they occur possible. Social media has become a source of news from all over the country. This has forced a leading newspaper group in Zimbabwe Alpha Media Holdings to invite contributions from citizen journalists. Indeed the social media has become the most reliable and dependable platform for people to get breaking news.

- Educational purposes

     Social media has been utilised and harnessed in the education sector and this has been supported by the highest office in Zimbabwe. Under the programme dubbed the presidential computerisation scheme, there was

an initiative spearheaded by President Robert Mugabe to donate computers to schools. This was meant to improve the pupils and students to participate in the information superhighway. The tertiary institutions in the country have embraced the use of technology and students use the internet for research and for conducting group discussions.

IV. Government's policy in relation to rural communication and ICTs

The Zimbabwean government since 1980 had initiatives on paper on the need for a vibrant information network inclusive of all people regardless of their dwellings. According to the Minister's 1990 report, "The Zimbabwean government recognizes that no meaningful development can take place unless the people have ready access to the media of information and communication such as newspapers, radio and television….".
The report further states that

"… in the ten years of independence the Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications has been tasked to provide adequate and effective information and communication infrastructures throughout Zimbabwe. In this respect the ministry's short term and long term objectives were to bring the mass media ….within easy reach of all Zimbabweans."

The report documents the measures taken by the Ministry since 1980, stating, the Ministry has taken wide ranging measures to fulfill its mandate. The right to information as guaranteed by the constitution has been its guiding principle in endeavouring to ensure free circulation, wider and better dissemination of Information through the provision of diverse information and communication sources. The ministry has at the same time tried to guarantee freedom of access to such sources.
According to the Ministers' 1990 report, in the past decade the Ministry embarked on the following ongoing programmes to achieve its stated objectives:

1) Established information offices and deployed Rural Information Officers and mobile cinema units throughout Zimbabwe
2) Established communal communication, viewing and listening centres in the rural areas
3) Provided radio and television transmitters throughout the country in order to receive clear radio and television signals especially in the remote rural areas
4) Established rural press

In terms of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) the government has a Ministry responsible for that and there is a national ICT that identifies the following as the main challenges confronting the ICT sector:

- Inadequate communication infrastructure
- Inadequate ICT facilities
- Inadequate ICT skills
- Limited institutional arrangements
- Inadequate financial resources
- Limited private-public partnerships
- Limited data management capacity
- Inadequate horizontal and vertical communication (Government of Zimbabwe 2005:17 as cited by Chari 2013:384)

While there are these challenges Chari (2013:384) posits that in terms of infrastructure that supports ICTs there is currently one fixed telephone network subscriber, the state owned Telone, three mobile subscribers namely state-owned Netone, Econet wireless owned by business mogul Strive Masiiwa and Telecel which is owned by a consortium of local businessman and some foreign investors. With this infrastructure it remains to be seen whether the rural peasants in Bikita have access to the internet through the available resources or their marginalization have resurfaced in new ways.

V. Conceptual framework

The Public sphere, information society concept and related theories
In its original conceptualization, Habermas defined the Public sphere as,

…that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed." In the culture characterized by the public sphere …there occurred a public space outside the control by the state where individuals exchanged views and knowledge (Habermas (1989:56).

The public sphere concept has been adopted by various scholars and some have defined it as,
"a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed….Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion-that is within the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to publish their opinions" (Pusey, 1978:89)

Marshall Soules (2008:176) explained that in its ideal form, the public sphere is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state. Soules further asserts that "Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes that would work as a check on state power."

The public sphere theory in the context of this paper is used to refer to the electronic virtual communities found on social media and on the internet where the rural peasants "confer in an unrestricted fashion' and debate issues affecting them. The issue raised as priorities by the informants become the pattern of use and hence answers pertinent questions raised by this paper. Related to reasons why people confer in the public sphere is the uses and gratifications theory which states that people make use of the media and technology to gratify themselves. This is pertinent in the sense that rural peasants like every other human being has a need for self-praise and gratification which determines their use of social media.

The term information society theory denotes a postmodern, knowledge based society that is reliant more on information than any other factors. Melody (1990:26-27) describes information societies simply as those that have become 'dependent upon complex electronic information networks and which allocate a major portion of their resources to information and communication activities.' McQuail D (2010:107) sums the main propositions of the information society theory as:

- Information work replaces industrial work
- Production and flow of information accelerates
- Society is characterised by increasing interconnectivity
- Disparate activities converge and integrate
- There is increasing dependency on complex systems
- Trends to globalise accelerate
- Constraints on time and space are much reduced
- Consequences are open to alternate interpretations, both positive and negative
- There are increased risks of loss of control
- Information society theory is more of an ideology than a theory

The information society theory is important in explaining the increased production and flow of information as well as increased interconnectivity implying that the public sphere has been widened as more people can participate. The constraints on time and space imply thus that the marginalised communities can longer purport to be isolated and muzzled but have an opportunity to be heard beyond their villages.

VI. Findings and discussion

Factors determining use and uses of social media in Bikita

Currently all the three mobile service providers are accessible in the area under study and most people use mobile phones to surf the internet. While the fixed mobile service provider Telone is also available its customer base is mainly formal business persons and it excludes the peasant community of whom the majority cannot afford to have a fixed telephone installed at their residential homes. The affordability of handsets coupled with handset donations send by youths who migrated to neighbouring South Africa has seen most people having internet compatible handsets. Surprisingly some elderly people with top of the range smart phones use them as receiving handsets due to lack of knowledge and reluctance to learn about the internet and social media.

The elderly that is people above the age of 45 years in Bikita are incompetent and internet illiterate though some of them possess 'user-friendly' smart phones. The level of knowledge of the 35 to 44 years age group is not impressive as most use social media such as facebook and WhatsApp for receiving and sending jokes only as well as texting to relatives in urban areas and beyond the country's borders.

The level of use of social media by people aged between 18 and 30 is impressive and encouraging as these are utilising the facebook for various reasons among them debating issues affecting them be they political, social or economic. Some have formed groups where they share information and exchange photos and videos mocking or questioning the decisions taken by the governors. There is the Bikita joking group found on WhatsApp that has transformed itself beyond jokes to an arena where they converse on pertinent political, economic and social issues. The group though is not restricted to rural peasants only as it has professionals and other people from Bikita who yearn to keep in touch with occurrences in their rural homes. There are also Bikita groups on social media platform facebook such as Bikita West Development Forum that has a membership of 548 as of February 2014. There is also Bikita Metro an alternative tabloid- like virtual community that publishes news about the area. This has just over 1000 members as of February 2014. The low membership in these groups is reflective of the low access levels as well as the high rate of internet illiteracy in the area.

Most respondents in rural Bikita are grateful for social media platforms for providing an instant solution in sending and receiving information arguing that the traditional physical 'snail mail' was an inconvenience. Some respondents were happy with facebook and said they can now access newspapers online

and could now read the news on time. Social media use though still low is proving to be fruitful for most as they can now timeously send, receive and disseminate information.

Social media has become a sphere for sending notices of deaths, births, functions and events that are transpiring within the Bikita community. The social media has also been accredited with the maintenance of family ties with relatives who are in urban and distant places as space and boundaries have been rendered useless.

VII. Conclusion

The study found out that there is still low use of social media platforms such as facebook, Youtube, WhatsApp and others due to high internet illiteracy and incompetence to go beyond the basic texting, photo uploading and information sharing possibilities. Moreso the absence of cyber café's with internet connected-computers is affecting adversely as most people cannot afford laptops and desktops which would make serious use possible. The reliance on mobile handsets to connect online has its fair share of problems as people can hardly afford the airtime and the distance to the growth point where airtime is sold hampers perpetual use. Though the service providers such as Econet wireless provide a one American dollar data bundle per week most respondents were not aware of such a facility and have been using a dollar a day and most are opting for the cheaper WhatsApp social platform to communicate with friends and relatives in and beyond the country's borders. The cost of surfing for rural peasants who rely on selling their produce at given times per year is still relatively expensive as the minimum cost of mobile airtime costs one American dollar in a country where the majority survives on less than a dollar a day according to various livelihood surveys.

It should be noted that prospects for the future is bright as most youths and middle-aged people are teaching each other internet usage with great zeal. The peasants are also joining groups in their localities that are administered by resident professionals such as teachers, nurses and non-governmental humanitarian workers. With time the social media literacy will inevitably increase as more and more schools start to induct school children on computer and internet use.

This paper thus calls upon the Ministries responsible for Information and Communication Technologies and Information, Media and Broadcasting Services to expedite initiatives to establish well-furnished "information kiosks". The information kiosks would go a long way in ensuring that the electronic public sphere that is consistent with the expectations of an Information society is achieved. More so this would ensure that the urban-rural social media use and information divide is bridged. The information kiosks would undoubtedly enhance participation at government subsidised rates and this would go a long way in empowering the marginalised rural peasantry. The business community is also encouraged to invest in cyber-café's at major business centers in areas such as Nyika Growth Point and Bikita business centre.

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