



## **Social Networks as Anti-revolutionary Forces: Facebook and Political Apathy among Youth in Urban Harare, Zimbabwe**

Manase Kudzai Chiweshe\*

### **Abstract**

The much celebrated Arab Spring has championed social media as an organizing force. This led to the celebration of a new revolutionary force for people seeking more justice and accountability from their leaders. Maghreb became the example to follow for others across Africa especially given the central role youth played in the revolts. This article questions the ability of social media to galvanize, organize and bring together youth in other parts of Africa to be actively involved in political processes within their own spaces. Using the example of urban youth in Harare, the article shows that the most popular social networking site, Facebook, is anything but a site of deep political engagement. Rather, youth spent hours on the site discussing anything from fashion, gossip, sport, sex, relationships, religion and music. By removing youth from serious engagement with issues that affect their lives, social media is cultivating political apathy among Zimbabwean youth. There are little, if any, serious policy debates and discussions online. Social media alone is thus not a panacea to address youth political apathy in Africa.

### **Résumé**

Le très célèbre Printemps arabe s'est fait le champion des médias sociaux en tant que force organisatrice. Cela a conduit à la célébration d'une nouvelle force révolutionnaire pour les personnes qui réclament plus de justice et de reddition de compte à leurs dirigeants. Le Maghreb est devenu l'exemple à suivre pour les autres en Afrique, en particulier compte tenu du rôle central joué par les jeunes dans les révoltes. Le présent article examine la capacité des médias sociaux à galvaniser, organiser et rassembler les jeunes dans d'autres parties de l'Afrique pour participer activement aux processus politiques dans leurs propres espaces. En utilisant l'exemple de la jeunesse urbaine à Harare, nous montrons

---

\* Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Email: manasekudzai@gmail.com

que Facebook, le site de réseautage social le plus populaire, est tout sauf un site d'engagement politique profond. Au contraire, les jeunes ont passé des heures sur le site à discuter de la mode, des potins, du sport, de la religion et de la musique. Écartant les jeunes d'un engagement sérieux dans des questions qui affectent leur vie, les médias sociaux cultivent une apathie politique au niveau de la jeunesse zimbabwéenne. Il y a peu, le cas échéant, de débats politiques et de discussions sérieux en ligne. Les médias sociaux ne sont donc pas une panacée pour remédier à l'apathie politique des jeunes en Afrique.

## **Introduction**

The much celebrated Arab Spring has championed social media as an organizing force. This led to the celebration of a new revolutionary force for people seeking more justice and accountability from their leaders. Maghreb became the example to follow for others across Africa especially given the central role youth played in the revolts. This article questions the ability of social media to galvanize, organize and bring together youth in other parts of Africa to be actively involved in political processes within their own spaces. Using the example of urban youth in Harare I show that the most popular social networking site, Facebook, is anything but a site of deep political engagement. Rather youth spent hours on the site discussing anything from fashion, gossip, sport, religion and music. By removing youth from serious engagement with issues that affect their lives, social media is cultivating political apathy among Zimbabwean youth. There are little, if any, serious policy debates and discussions online. Social media alone is thus not a panacea to address youth political apathy in Africa.

Youth involvement in politics has mainly been as cannon fodder for older politicians who use them for campaigning as foot soldiers and at times as perpetrators of political violence. They are rarely represented in senior political positions with one party having a man over sixty as the national youth chairperson. I therefore ask what social media can do to improve youth participation in politics and policy? To simply think the mere presence of these cyberspace networks and communities will work as a magic bullet is erroneous and unhelpful. Rather we need to question how we can increase knowledge and generate interest amongst the youth through various platforms including but not limited to social media. This article explores the celebration of social media as a panacea to address youth voter apathy in Africa. Social media sites in Zimbabwe are not cultivating political consciousness in today's youth. This article focuses on questions around the current state of youth political activism, prevalence and utilization of social media platforms amongst the youth. How are the youth utilizing social media platforms and how are social media platforms affecting political activism amongst the youth?

After the Arab Spring we have seen the rise in calls to use social media as a platform to increase youth political participation in sub-Saharan Africa. What has not been done is to question the efficacy of such an approach in countries such as Zimbabwe. How feasible is Facebook as the most popular site in the country as a platform to cultivate and grow political participation of youth? It is imperative to analyse how hours spent discussing social issues and browsing entertainment platforms on social media has meant that we have a youth that spends the majority of their time in front of a small screen and not out on the streets demanding their rights. Social media as an addictive force means that youth are 'imprisoned' on their laptops, computers, phones and tablets and may become anti-revolutionary.

## **Background**

As of December 2011 Zimbabwe had 1,445,717 Internet users, which is 12 per cent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Manganga (2012) note that in 1990 there were only ten computer companies in the country but in 2004 the number had increased to 200. Cyberspace has become an important political space in urban Zimbabwe, however the majority of people are resident in the rural areas. Rural areas have serious challenges including network coverage and lack of electricity. Mobile telecommunications companies are gradually increasing coverage thus offering increased access to the Internet for rural communities. The cost of compatible phones and browsing fees may continue to be a deterrent for many among the poor. This is important because the majority of disenfranchised voters remain marginalized from access to this space that can offer them resources for organizing and demanding their rights. Many politicians in Zimbabwe have taken to Facebook to connect better with citizens. The leader of the Movement for Democratic Change has a Prime Minister's page on Facebook. Urbanites in Zimbabwe are increasingly finding themselves joining Facebook which in many ways has made the site a political constituency.

Created in a dorm room at Harvard University by Mark Zuckerberg and his classmates, Facebook has become a worldwide phenomenon. In the vision of its creator, the social networking site's main goal is to open up an information flow for people. By 21 July 2010 it had reached 500 million users. The site is integrated into the daily media practices of its users, most of whom have access from work stations and mobile devices. The popularity of Facebook continues to grow exponentially in Zimbabwe. With the rise of mobile Internet access and an increase of cheap smart phones on the market, many urban and even rural people are fast becoming 'netizens'. Facebook offers a platform for instant communication and the meeting of people in different spaces. Now,

many Zimbabweans are spending hours a day at local Internet cafes with some spending as much as US \$3 a day to keep up date with their Facebook page.<sup>2</sup> Both old and young people in Zimbabwe are spending hours at Internet cafes in order to use Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family, providing a lot of business for cafe proprietors. Mzaca (2012) argues that in Zimbabwe, Facebook is as popular and essential as water. It has become so important that people cannot imagine life before the Facebook era.

Mudapakati's (2011) study on Facebook usage among youth in Zimbabwe outlines interesting findings concerning the use and popularity of the social platform. She highlights how youth use Facebook as a self-presentation platform where they manage their impressions. Facebook is widely used as a communication tool with relatives from abroad and friends from past relationships. The social network had an addictive element to it. Mudapakati noted how numerous respondents spent around three to five hours a day online. Facebook is used for religious soul-edifying messages, the storing of history/pictures and as a meeting place for boyfriends and girlfriends. This has prompted worries about the effect of excessive social media use on young people's ability to socialize in person, with others voicing more serious fears about delinquency. Still, many here acknowledge the potential that Facebook and other social media can have on development.<sup>3</sup>

Manganga (2012) highlights that with the enactment of legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) since 2002, freedom of the press has been under threat in Zimbabwe. As such, alternative publics are emerging online e.g. Zimbabwe Situation, Zimonline, talkzimbabwe, zimdaily, newzimbabwe, ZW News, zvakwana.org, ZW News and Zimonline. There are Internet radio stations like Afro Sounds FM, SW Africa and Zimnetradio. Cyber activist Bev Clark runs the Kubatana.net website (Manganga 2012: 118). What is interesting is how the vast majority of these publications and websites are run by people in the diaspora. There are even posts and sites run by white people who lost land during the land occupations in 2000, such as Cathy Buckle. Whilst all these activists and content are there online, it means very little if people in Zimbabwe have no access or do not relate to the sentiments. There is already a disjuncture of space and experience. From my discussions with youth, they outlined that they cannot listen and believe news about how they are living from people who are miles away from Zimbabwe. In the same manner, youth highlighted how it would be impossible to follow the ideas or calls for protests from someone sitting safely in Australia, South Africa or England. In summary, whilst there is an alternative public sphere emerging online it lacks connections to the grassroots.

## **Social Media and Political Organizing: The New Public Sphere**

Lynch (2011) discusses Egypt where a Facebook-planned protest on 25 January 2011 bloomed into a massive, society-wide mobilization, which drove President Hosni Mubarak and his regime from power. Social media gained prominence during what has now been termed the Arab Spring. Facebook became an influential factor in grassroots mobilization, especially in Egypt. The power to share, organize and discuss political issues of the day in cyber space proved crucial in strengthening the movement against powerful regimes. Mzaca (2012) quoting Bosmol argues that

Social media makes social organization easier and effective. Social media used by Egyptian protesters brought together individuals who shared common goals and ideas, but also offered a medium for planning. In the case of Egypt, social media forced the government to take accountability. Transnational social networks made it very difficult for governments to lie and hide from their citizens.

The power of social media was acknowledged by the Egyptian regime as it tried in vain to block Facebook. Social media suddenly became the buzzword for many movements fighting against various forms tyranny across the world. It is heralded as a new space to organize, free of suppression.

Jürgen Habermas's work on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) is instrumental to analysing the emergence of social media as spaces to discuss political issues. The public sphere is a part of social life where citizens discuss matters of importance and form public opinion for the common good. Habermas used coffee houses, societies and salons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where people met and discussed as equals in rational critical debates. Thornton (1996) notes that the debate had a set of rules which included avoiding use of emotion or emotive language, and focused on the rationality of the content alone. There should be a common interest in truth and criticism which is an important process to test the proposals being put forward and also so that participants can discover a meaning together as a result of the process itself (Calhoun 1993: 13). Social media thus becomes the modern day public sphere, the cyber space that promotes debate and common sharing of ideas. In this public sphere, unlike in Habermas's time, people meet virtually (via optics) which opens space for all genders, classes, ages and races without discrimination.

To better understand the importance of Habermas's public sphere to the analysis of this paper I turn to its critics. Dahlgren (2007) outlines the existence of 'counter public spheres', thus there are multiple and often competing spaces. The Internet, in its anarchic nature, provides space for many competing public

spheres. This may have a negative influence on increasing a critical mass with common interests. The Internet offers differing and competing views which might cause more fragmentation along gender, class, age and ethnic lines. Whilst there is innovative appropriation by many, this is not enough as people still have a choice as to whether to watch and agree with your message. The Internet, as a public sphere, is too impersonal in that you do not control when and how people meet to discuss. There is no rational debate at all times as different interests and groups can anonymously infiltrate your messages and discussions. It is disingenuous to claim that simply by creating political pages on Facebook, where people comment, click 'like' and become members, this itself promotes a democratic process and space for all people.

In further analysing 'counter public spheres' Fraser (1993) draws our attention to the multiple public spheres, which appear when certain groups are denied access to the public sphere. As governments ignore the interests of people, subaltern *counter publics* appear. They are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (Fraser 1993). Facebook can form part of these subaltern counter publics and give space to youth who are largely marginalized from policy decisions and discussions. The Internet thus offers many benefits for youth activism and the creation of what Benkler (2006) calls the 'networked public sphere'. Networked public spheres emerge on the Internet and promote counter publics, which allow participation of the masses in a way that filters public opinion more effectively than ever before. Walton (2011: 48) however notes:

Enthusiasts for "Facebook revolutions" seldom ask who is excluded from the networked publics of Web 2.0. Similarly, Goldstein and Rotich draw connections between Kenyan blogs and the democratic promise of Benkler's "networked public sphere," but they leave the specialities of access in this context untheorized. Can the Internet really be counted as a "commons" on a continent where only 10 per cent of the population access online media?

Lim (2006) talks about cyber and physical urban civic spaces to explore the ways in which space and place have been bound up with the formation of (political) identities in the history of conflicts and struggles over political power. What is particularly important about her thesis is the understanding of space. She argues that successful manipulation of space is central to the exercise and contestation of power (politics). Lefebvre (in Soja 1989:80) argues that 'Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic'. Borrowing from Foucault, Lim (2006) notes that space is fundamental in any exercise of power. There is thus a linkage between

space knowledge and power which implies that structures of meaning which are implicated in the production and use of power are themselves implicated and produced in specific 'spaces' (Lim 2006:3). The Internet is one such 'space' which may begin as a physical construct; the organization and meaning of space is 'a product of social translation, transformation, and experience' (Soja 1989: 79–80). Cyberspace is thus itself a fundamental constituent of knowledge and power regimes. This thus helps us understand how the Internet, despite its 'freedom', is ultimately linked to power regimes.

Conceptualizing the power of new media and its influence on youth political activism requires nuanced discussions which outline how the adoption of information technology speaks to 'glocal' realities in Zimbabwe. We cannot assume that what occurred in the Maghreb region can simply be replicated anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Our academic endeavours in Africa are littered by instances of copying and pasting concepts foreign to our cosmology and existence. The power of social media is one such enterprise. We have seen the celebration of this powerful force in political activism without questioning how our communities have embraced and are using these platforms. Political activism does not just emanate because people have access to the Internet. It is rather fostered through years of work in the grassroots. As such, to understand the experiences of youth in Zimbabwe on social media, this study proposes to use a grounded theory. To demonstrate, describe and discuss youth political apathy in Zimbabwe we need to be guided by evidence from the field.

### **Social Media: Revolutionary or Anti-revolutionary?**

There is a fierce debate around whether social media such as Facebook is revolutionary or anti-revolutionary. In this section I outline these debates showing how social media contributes to my understanding of youth in Zimbabwe. On the one hand there are cyber-pessimists such as Malcolm Gladwell who dismiss social media activism as based on weak ties and therefore only demanding low-risk participation. Bennett (2008) however argues that the Internet not only provides useful tools for campaigning, but also access to greater political and social capital. Young people can express their political views through participatory new technologies, such as joining online single-issue groups, signing online petitions and engaging in digital media production such as creating YouTube videos. Fawdry (2012) notes that the Internet is a powerful resource with abundant information about local and national issues. The information however may be so much as to cause individuals to feel as if they do not have the capacity to enact change. As Fawdry (2012) puts it:

Although via the internet I can access the Facebook profile of a student at the University of Libya who I don't know, I would be more likely to accept an invitation to go and protest against political repression in Belarus, having stayed with a nice Belorussian I met through using the internet site Couchsurfing. The technology of the internet creates impersonal relationships which perhaps only become instrumental in evoking action if individuals meet one another.

The argument here is that the Internet cannot substitute physical connections. It is a brilliant planning and organizing tool but as an instrument of cultivating political interest and debate it is debatable.

Other critics such as Andrew Keen continue to note how the Internet is a form of false consciousness. They see little value in putting the Internet on a pedestal as a vehicle of enhancing social progress. Keen notes, 'What would I say to the people that are sitting in front of their computers believing in revolution, I would tell them that they are subjects or victims of false consciousness, that they're wrong, that they're believing in something that doesn't really exist, that they're dupes, they're exploited, particularly those that give away their labor for free so that young men in Silicon Valley can become infinitely rich'.<sup>4</sup> Wasserman (2012) however notes how early adopters of mobile Internet in Southern Africa increasingly use their mobile phones to browse news shared by their friends, deciding whether to pass on news-related links and occasionally sharing cartoons, videos and visual mash-ups with political themes. What is missing in this analysis however is an understanding of how political systems are instituted within Southern Africa to alienate youth from the decision making process. In the same manner then, how can social media be used to assist youth in ensuring their voices are heard?

To encapsulate this discussion we need to further dissect debates on technological determinism. Technological determinism is the theory that technology is an autonomous force that changes society. This provides explanations for many changes that can be observed in society, and has a very simple cause/effect form.<sup>5</sup> The question is whether technology shapes and controls social change. In the case of this article the question is reframed as: can social media shape social reality and society in Zimbabwe? The answer is more complex than the debates provided by proponents and critics of technological determinism. There is a symbiotic relationship between technology and social change bearing in mind that for Africans most of this technology is borrowed from outside. How we use it and adopt it to our contexts is highly contextual. In many ways, youth political agency online across the Maghreb is one such way local people can 'glocalise' social media. It does not mean that this is true in all contexts, as much as some scholars would want to create a similar picture in countries such as Zimbabwe.

Davis (2011) notes that the Internet has led to an increase of 'slacktivism' which includes signing Internet petitions, joining a community organization without contributing to the organization's efforts, the copying and pasting of social network statuses or messages or altering one's personal data or avatar on social network services. Such activities require minimal personal effort and may have no practical effect. Morozov (2011) uses Colding Jorgensen's experiment in Denmark to show how people easily join groups online without information. Jorgensen opened a group announcing the demolition of a historical fountain and over 27,500 joined up. Another term used to describe activists' activities online is 'clicktivism'. This is where groups keep track of the number of people who click on their petitions or notices. At times these are related to real life physical protests, but as with slacktivism, most people online simply click without following up on the causes. Ultimately social action is reduced to having members on an email list rather than engaged people.

## **Methodology**

This research employed a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative research methods. This was to ensure that evidence from multiple sources would be cross-checked and searched for regularities. The 'hard figures' produced by quantitative methods are crucial to building the case for addressing gender disparities, while qualitative methods enable a more in-depth examination of youth political apathy and other issues that are not easily 'counted'. The study thus utilized a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, desk review and observations of the Facebook site. Through triangulation I intend to analyse how ultimately social media is a form of false consciousness: an opium that lulls youth into political apathy as unquestioning subjects. The quantitative questionnaire was web-based. The respondents were asked to self-administer the questionnaire and return it via email. As such, out of a hundred questionnaires, seventy were returned and form the basis of this analysis.

Respondents were purposively chosen from among university students in Zimbabwe. University students were chosen because they have the means and access to the Internet through college computers, mobile phones and Internet cafes. Students are also knowledgeable and many are active in politics. They are urban-based and privy to many political debates and information through newspapers and informal discussions. They form part of a young generation of 'digital natives' interconnected through time and space in the cyber world. To augment the questionnaire, eight interviews were conducted with male and female students. The interviews provided context to understand the activities and experiences of Facebooking among students. While the study is not representative of all students or young people in Zimbabwe it

provides an important context in understanding the impact of Facebooking on youth political participation. In addition, I took up intensive observation of the Facebook patterns of youth, most of whom were part of my sample over a period of two months. This technique is a form of cyber ethnography by which the researcher is involved in online observation of the actions of participants as an observer. This form of netnography adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets 2006). Netnography as a method emphasises the cultural contextualizing of online data, thus it provided illuminating insights and corroboration of data collected by other methods.

### **The State of Youth Political Activism in Zimbabwe**

Youth in Zimbabwe are a heterogeneous group, differentiated by age, gender, class, race, ethnicity and level of education. As such the history of youth political participation has to be understood within a specific context in a spatial and temporal manner. In this section I will not dwell on historical issues around how young people were responsible for and involved in fighting colonial rule but rather focus on postcolonial spaces for youth. The post- independence government in Zimbabwe emerged as a paternalistic institution that sought to bring all dissenting voices under its wings. ZANU PF's youth wing, led by a sixty-year- old male, has emerged as an important vanguard of foot soldiers and perpetrator of violence since independence in 1980. With the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change post-2000 Zimbabwe, young people have been used by both parties to perpetrate horrific abuses. Youth are thus largely associated with violence in Zimbabwe.

The role of youth in politics has to be understood from a historical prism before we can begin to outline the ways in which social media can be used to shift perception and systems. Zimbabwe's political historiography highlights how youth have become cannon fodder for political parties leading to rampant youth-driven violence. Widespread unemployment, marginalization and poverty have left youth vulnerable to abuse by political parties. There are however some youth especially in urban spaces who are organizing and demanding their rights. Groups such as Youth Initiative for Democracy in Zimbabwe (YIDEZ) are working towards realizing youth interests but they remain urban and middle class, divorced from the majority of youth in rural and poor urban areas. Youth in Zimbabwe have thus largely been on the periphery of political decision-making and appear more as foot soldiers furthering certain political ideologies. Any analysis of youth activism needs to understand how this has evolved since independence, especially post-2000,

where during the economic and political crisis youth responded in various ways including undertaking short – and long-term migration.

Post-2000 Zimbabwe suffered a dilapidating political and economic crisis precipitated by land invasions by veterans of the liberation struggle and like-minded groups. Fast-track land reform was criticised both locally and internationally for its chaotic character and dire economic effects.<sup>6</sup> Such criticism, especially from Western donors, brought with it sanctions, suspension of balances of payments and supports, a reduction in direct foreign investment and decreases in humanitarian aid. This, combined with declines in agricultural productivity and subsequent industrial production in downstream industries, led to a rapidly devaluating Zimbabwean dollar, enormous inflation and high unemployment figures. With widespread political violence the crisis led to food shortages, dilapidation of service delivery, unemployment and widespread hardships. Young unemployed people without any qualifications carved out spaces for themselves through migrating to buy groceries in neighbouring countries and reselling them in Zimbabwe; dealing in foreign currency; and diamond and gold panning, amongst many other activities opened up by the crisis. In many ways the crisis was positive for the unemployed and unqualified youth as the salaries in formal employment became useless.

Within this context of crisis young people in different situations reacted differently. Whilst for educated and employed youth the crisis eroded their income base, it did offer spaces for entrepreneurial youth to make money in legal and illegal ways. Political violence during elections and various forms of repression by state agents, such as beatings by the army, unlawful arrests and fears of being an opposition supporter were part of this crisis. The argument here is that in Zimbabwe despite the prolonged hardships for the majority of the people, youth have responded in various ways. To simply think that in all countries where there are political and economic crisis, uprisings (whether initiated via the Internet or not) will occur is erroneous. We need to understand societies in their historical development. In the same way the Arab Spring was not an ahistorical process; rather it developed in a specific context, and technology is part of this.

### **Youth Facebooking Patterns and Interests**

Analysis of Facebook activities among research participants highlighted the importance of the site for communication and entertainment purposes. All the respondents spend an average of two hours daily chatting with family and friends (Table 1). Browsing through friends' pages and pictures is another favourite pastime of the research participants. In the interviews, respondents

noted that Facebook is a site to have fun. They log on to catch up with family and friends. One participant noted that, 'Facebook allows us know what is happening in the lives of people around us. It is a good way to keep in touch with those close to you but is far away'. Facebook has made it easier to communicate with friends and family who have migrated from Zimbabwe.

**Table 1:** What do you do on Facebook?

Activity	Percentage	Average hours per day online
Chatting with friends	100	2
Chatting with family	100	2
Browsing through friends' pages and pictures	100	2
Playing games	56	0.5
Looking for old acquaintances	64	1
Reading jokes	98	0.5
Looking for fashion tips	48	0.2
Following activities of famous people	68	0.2

To ascertain further what research participants do online I asked a question about what they comment on. It is important to highlight that when you comment on Facebook, the comments are out in public. Thus it was not surprising to see very few people commenting on political issues openly. Only 6 per cent (Table 2) commented on political issues though the interviews suggested that these political issues are perhaps complaints about service delivery. From the focus group discussion, participants gave different reasons for not engaging openly in political debates. One reason is that they are afraid of being arrested or victimized. Another reason is that most people do not believe Facebook is there for political issues. As a participant noted, 'Facebook is not a place for political slogans. If you want politics start a political party'. Some of the participants noted that political discussions are only done through inboxes where these can be private. Others claim that they are 'friends' with politicians on Facebook and a few participants claimed to post messages on their walls.

**Table 2:** What do you comment about on Facebook?

Activity	Percentage
Photos of friends	100
Religious issues	94
Events in friends' lives	100
Jokes	52
Sport	56

Fashion discussions	43
Popular entertainment discussions	54
Political issues	6

Table 3 shows that only 2 per cent of the respondents post political messages on their pages. As noted above, participants in this study are not inclined to post political messages on the Internet. This is not only out of fear but also due to the lack of privacy on Facebook as noted by a participant in an interview: ‘What you write on Facebook can haunt you for life. You have to be careful what write.’ A majority of participants (97 per cent) noted they post religious messages on their pages to profess their love and faith in God. What is interesting is that 93 per cent have at one time used Facebook to vent their anger and frustration. The site thus offers a space for people to vent and share their everyday experiences with friends and family.

**Table 3:** What do you post on your profile?

Activity	Percentage
Religious messages	97
Famous quotes	100
Events in my life	100
Sport messages	57
Jokes	65
School	98
Vent frustrations	93
Political messages	2

There are very popular pages followed by Zimbabweans from all across the world. These pages highlight the interest that many youth on Facebook have. What is interesting is how these sites lack engagement with political issues though some of them contain political satire. Whilst such political satire is in many ways a way of engaging with political issues, it remains trivial and focused on peripheral political personalities such as Joseph Chinotimba, an erstwhile leader of the war veterans’ movement. A page that parodies him called *Masasi achinotimba* (Chinotimba’s sayings) has 171,469 followers (see Table 4 below). Engagement in critical discussions about issues affecting youth is rarely done on Facebook. From the interviews and discussions with participants it is apparent that people still prefer to see whom they are talking to when it comes to political issues. One respondent noted that ‘Politics is a sensitive topic in Zimbabwe. You cannot just trust anyone with your thoughts, even your friends’.

Pages such as *DeMbare Dotcoms* opened by fans of a football club attract 44,885 followers, whilst the recent Big Brother Africa Show generated a lot of comments and discussions around the two Zimbabwean representatives who were removed from the house for fighting. The fight generated a lot of interest amongst Facebook users who had already been using the site to post comments about the show. One such page is the *Taneta NaManeta* (we are tired of Maneta) page which was opened by people who did not like one of the Zimbabwean housemates. Sex and relationships is also a big activity on Facebook with many pages emerging about sexual matters. The popularity and growth of such pages is interesting as people use the anonymity of cyberspace to discuss publicly certain issues that may be difficult to discuss with others. One such page on relationships is *Kuzeya Nyaya Dzese na tete Rose na sekuru Joe. Dzerudo, dzebonde nehupenyu* (Stories about love, sex and life with Aunt Rose and Uncle Joe), which has 120,331 followers. The page is described as 'the only open forum to discuss anything with us. sex, love, money, life and anything you may think of'. There is a plethora of such platforms discussing intimate sexual issues. One of the most interesting I came across was *Auntie Jenny's Lounge* which has over 14,000 subscribers. Table 4 below outlines some of the most subscribed pages online by Zimbabwean youth.

**Table 4:** Examples of popular pages visited by students<sup>7</sup>

Page	Type of activity	Number of people subscribed
Masasi achinotimba (Chinotimba's sayings)	Political satire	171,469
Dembare dotcoms	Sport	178,665
H-Metro real life drama	Gossip	202,716
Masasi aProphet Makandiwa (Makandiwa's sayings)	Religion	83,032
Prophet Uebert Angel and Spirit Embassy	Religion	236,642

Such issues and topics preoccupy many youth online. They are not looking to be recruited to a cause on the Internet. Asked whether they would accept a call to go onto the streets to protest over any issue via Facebook the majority said 'No', with those saying 'Yes' noting that they would only do so if they had previously met and organized in person with others. As one young man said 'You cannot trust that all the people online who say they are coming. It is easier to commit to something over the screen but in reality you need people you can trust.' Trust recurs as an important theme that is not built in the anonymity of cyber space but by foot soldiers in communities making converts to their cause.

Major political parties have pages on Facebook with many subscribers, for example ZANU PF Youth League has a page with 2,417 followers. One of several of Morgan Tsvangirayi's pages has 70,987 followers. The Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association has a page dedicated to sharing critical issues affecting women in Zimbabwe. Yet the overwhelming uses of Facebook by young people remain oriented towards self-presentation, entertainment and communicating with friends and family. Radicalization of Facebook will not happen automatically just because it is there and people are talking. Rather it is mainly a tool that allows organizing and assists people in networks of trust built over time to act. Through analysis of Facebook patterns of youth who participated in this research we begin to understand that constructing social media as an alternative public sphere needs to be contextualized. Young people in Zimbabwe utilize and understand social media as a space where they have to be careful about their political affiliations.

### **Class and Gender Dimensions of Facebook Access in Zimbabwe**

Facebook remains overwhelmingly an urban pursuit. Access is based not only on being physically present in spaces with access to mobile phone networks but financially being able to participate. Yes, we are building online communities but unfortunately not for all our citizens. The majority of youth in Zimbabwe are alienated from technology simply because they cannot afford it. With official unemployment at over 80 per cent, youth are concentrated in the informal sector with low incomes and difficult working conditions. Most parents can barely afford to ensure their own technological needs let alone their adolescent children's. Access to Internet cafes is only for those in urban centres who have to pay and at times need to travel to the city centres to access the Internet. In rural communities where the majority of the population is located (crucially adolescent girls who are the most marginalized group) people are largely shut out of Internet coverage and usage. Whilst mobile phones are increasingly penetrating the rural landscape, the Internet, and social networking in particular, are still largely unknown.

Information technology is in many ways increasing the class and gender cleavages already existent among youth in Zimbabwe. There is a technology divide that separates a growing number of Internet activists and the people at the grassroots in the country. Whilst the Internet has opened up space for young women of a certain class it remains out of reach for most poor urban and rural girls. The Internet offers a space for young women to meet, socialize and interact with little patriarchal surveillance. Online their voices are ideas and they can share ideas without fear of societal reprisal. From my

research, however, the majority of girls did not view social media as a platform for political ideas or discussions. Their view of social media is as a space for discussing everyday issues that affect their lives. As indicated many girls from poor backgrounds cannot afford access to the Internet. In urban centres girls cannot afford the cost of surfing the Internet and in rural areas the technology is not accessible. Gender also raises the question of how equal participants in discussions can be while gender inequalities exist. Men have been a dominating presence on the Internet: 'Make no mistake about it, the Internet is male territory. Considering its roots are sunk deep in academia and the military industrial complex, that's hardly surprising' (Spender 1995: 166).

### **Impact of Facebook on Political Activism**

There is a need for deeper analysis of social contexts to understand how Internet-based activities can aid or negatively impact on political activism among young people. We need to go beyond populist notions around the power of social media as a neutral forum without a centre that promotes the democratization project. In this study one of the key findings was how the impersonal nature of Internet-based relations often leads young people to vacillate in their responsibility for political issues affecting them. Most respondents noted how they thought that it was not their role to start political discussions or raise issues. They argued that they are not politicians and Facebook is for fun and not serious things like politics. Others claim that they are involved in politics by simply clicking and supporting certain causes. I have discussed the rise of this form of clicktivism where political participation has been reduced to simply 'liking' a page on Facebook. Fawdry (2012) argues that this leads to the normalization of political action as a minimal effort task played out in front of a computer screen and not taking to the streets.

Grassroots movement which involve the building of trust over time through face to face interactions with communities of young people remain important in cultivating interest in politics. Social media can only aid in organizing and making it easier to communicate for already existing movements in the same way that it can be used by authoritarian governments to counter and ensure surveillance of opponents. Linked to this is another very important issue amongst youth in Zimbabwe: the fear of being arrested or beaten up for being politically vocal online. On the Internet you do not know whom you are talking to as recent arrests in Zimbabwe show. As Mozorov (2011: 5) noted 'Yes, [social media] are affecting the world. But it also looks like the other side – the authoritarian governments – are getting empowered as well'. Chhiba (2011), on the other hand, warns us not to overestimate the role of social media as a revolutionary force, noting that :

This argument is however, made with caution, so as not to overstate the role of ICT's in the protests, which stem from two factors. Firstly, history provides records of many civilian uprisings that have occurred in the absence of ICT and secondly, due to the fact that the protests in Egypt gained momentum even once the Government cut off access to the internet. Hence, this rules out a direct causal relationship between ICT's and the uprisings in North Africa. However, we can say that while ICT's did not cause these protests, it played a significant role in enabling these protests to succeed.

My research further highlights the importance of context in understanding the impact of social media on political activism. We cannot simply expect to transplant experiences in the Maghreb to other parts of the continent.

Sokari Ekine (2009), in an edited collection of mobile phones and politics in Africa, shows that there is need for sustained work and ingenuity to embed technology in day-to-day activism. Political activism does not automatically appear because of Facebook. In many ways Facebook has appeared anti-revolutionary. As youth spend more and more hours on their computers and mobile phones chatting about the latest gossip, television programmes, fashion and mundane activities, they are not in the streets bothering anyone. Social media has sanitized our youth who are increasingly less interested in engaging in political discussions which are seen as topics for the older people. This is not to blame youth apathy on social media but rather to outline that cyber networks alone will not solve this historical trend, which is widespread across the world. In Zimbabwe young people were at the forefront of fighting the liberation war in the 1970s but post-independence have largely been seen as perpetrators of politically motivated violence.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has shown that social media, that was heralded as influential in the Arab uprisings, does not necessarily hold the same promise in all circumstances. It has explored how in Zimbabwe Facebook in particular has operated as an anti-revolutionary force. The argument is that with youth spending an average of three to four hours online, they are trapped on their computers and mobile phones thus are not in the streets causing mayhem. Facebook is a space that promotes discussions around mundane everyday activities that have little to do with critical issues affecting young people. Social media also leads to the rise of clicktivism by which young people increasingly feel that by just clicking online they are supporting a cause. In a country where only 12 per cent of the population has access to the Internet it is highly unlikely that a Zimbabwean Spring will come forth via the Internet. The article has also highlighted how trust

and face to face interactions are important in building political networks as youth are skeptical of discussing politics online.

## Notes

1. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>.
2. <http://globalpressinstitute.org>.
3. <http://globalpressinstitute.org/global-news/africa/zimbabwe/facebook-grips-zimbabwean-youth#ixzz22r9McqJ5>
4. <http://thetrichordist.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/andrew-keen-on-the-false-idealism-of-the-internet-video/>.
5. <http://rejon.org/media/cvsbook/cvsbook/src/determinism/determinism-goguen.doc.pdf>.
6. Critics included, among others, the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change, the Commercial Farmers Union, Western donors, the United Nations Development Programme, the Zimbabwe Farmers Union and NGOs.
7. Figures correct as of 16 October 2014.

## References

- Benkler, Y., 2006, *The Wealth of Networks How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Bennett, W.L., ed., 2008, *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Calhoun, C., ed., 1993, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Chhibi, P., 2011, 'ICT's as a Tool for Democratisation: Why Invade? Just "Poke!"', The North African revolutions, Consultancy Africa Intelligence Africa Watch Unit, [http://www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=690:icts-as-a-tool-for-democratisation-why-invade-just-poke-the-north-african-revolutions-&catid=57:africa-watch-discussion-papers&Itemid=263](http://www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=690:icts-as-a-tool-for-democratisation-why-invade-just-poke-the-north-african-revolutions-&catid=57:africa-watch-discussion-papers&Itemid=263), accessed 30 June 2012.
- Dahlgren, P., 1995, *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*, London: Sage.
- Davis, J., 2011, *Cause Marketing: Moving beyond Corporate Slacktivism*, <http://evidencebasedmarketing.net/cause-marketing-moving-beyond-corporate-slacktivism>, accessed 22 November 2011.
- Ekin, S., ed., 2009, *SMS Uprising: Mobile Phone Activism in Africa*, Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Fawdry, A., 2012, 'Young People in Internet Politics?', <http://www.thinkyoungeu/index.php/publications/75-young-people-in-internet-politics.html>, accessed 8 July 2012.
- Fraser, N., 1993, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Calhoun, C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J., 1989, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Kozinets, R.V., 2006, 'Netnography 2.0', in Belk, R.W., ed., *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Cheltenham (UK) and Northampton MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Lim, M. 2006. 'Cyber-Urban Activism and the Political Change in Indonesia', *EastBound Journal 1*, <http://www.eastbound.info/journal/2006-1/>, accessed 20 July 2012.
- Lynch, M., 2011, 'After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State', *Perspectives of Politics* 9 (2): 301–11.
- Manganga, K., 2012, 'The Internet as Public Sphere: A Zimbabwean Case Study (1999–2008)', *Africa Development* XXXVII (1): 103–18.
- Mudapakati, Y., 2011, 'Facebook Me: An Exploratory Study of Social Networking among Women's University in Africa Students', unpublished undergraduate thesis, Women's University in Africa.
- Morozov, E., 2011, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York NY: Public Affairs.
- Mzaca, V., 2012, *Social Networking and the Future of Political Reporting in Zimbabwe and Beyond*, <http://www.newstimeafrica.com/archives/22070>, 12 July.
- Spender, D., 1995, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*, Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Soja, E.W., 1989, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London: Verso.
- Thornton, A., 1996, 'Does Internet Create Democracy?', unpublished M.A. journalism thesis, <http://www.wr.com.au/democracy/index.html>, accessed 7 March 2010.
- Walton, M., 2011, 'Book Review: Mobilising African Publics', *Information Technologies and International Development* 7 (2): 47–50.
- Wasserman, H., 2012, 'Talking Politics: Young South Africans and Political Participation in Mobile and Social Media', paper presented at IAMCR2012 on 17 July, Durban.

